

East and West Meet Over Borshch Deliciously

Beet green and brinza phyllo triangles are the perfect accompaniment to borshch

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I love soup season, and where I live, this lasts about nine months of the year. As you may imagine, borshch is in heavy rotation in our household, but as I've written before, no two pots of borshch are ever the same. There is no hard and fast recipe for borshch; it varies depending on region, available ingredients, and family traditions. In pastoral landscapes, lamb is the preferred meat base, while arable folk prefer beef or pork.

I love borshch made with duck breast, but I've also seen it done well with bison, quail, and venison. There are those who abhor putting apples in the mix, while still others argue that potatoes or beans just take up too much room in the pot. Tomatoes, carrots, and parsnips are

common, but in parts of the world, so too is ginger, pomegranate syrup, and lovage. Borshch is usually purple or red, but it can also be green, particularly in early spring when peppery sorrel heralds the welcome return of tender shoots and fresh herbs.

I come to borshch blessedly free of ethnic, or familial predilections — both my grandmothers were far more adept at mixing cocktails than concocting beet soup, and neither would have dreamed of ruining a good manicure by peeling two pounds of beets. Sometimes I yearn for an inherited cache of soup-splattered recipe cards, written out in an old-fashioned copperplate hand in sepia ink, but the flip side of this is that I feel very free to improvise, experiment, and even go off piste a bit. Over the years, I've done just that, to create a borshch that comprises basic ingredients, but the final flavor and texture of each batch will depend on the weather, my mood, and what lurks in the refrigerator crisper, or what looked too good to pass up that week at the farmer's market. Recently, I've discovered dill and fennel pollen, which are welcome additions to the pot, as is quince, an apple-like fruit, which is happily in season. I've also tried persimmon (you should too), lemongrass (an acquired taste), and Thai basil (which alas did not work well at all). The lesson here is that you will never know until you try!

Two ingredients I always include in my borshch are raw beet leaves with their stems, and this has raised many eyebrows in certain conservative borshch quarters. I cannot think why: beet greens are dense in nutrients, with high levels of nitrites, Vitamin A, Iron, Vitamin B6, calcium, magnesium, Vitamin D, and Vitamin K. One cup of beet greens contains high percentages of the RDA for each of these important nutritional elements, so it is sheer insanity to consign them to the compost. But I also use them because they look marvelous and add a lovely peppery flavoring to the borshch.

Savory stuffed pastries or rolls should accompany borshch; garlic-infused sweet yeast rolls called pampushki are popular in Ukraine, and classic piroshki filled with cabbage, mushrooms, or meat, are the norm across Eastern Europe. But both these delicious accompaniments require a bit of planning, since yeasted dough requires several rises.

Phyllo dough to the rescue!

You may find the concept of phyllo dough daunting, but it is remarkably easy to work with — pliable as long as you keep it covered with a damp tea towel, and so forgiving! All you need is a little melted butter to deal with any rips or tears. It doesn't need a complicated set of risings, kneading, or any kind of special tools. This makes whipping up a batch of these little triangle pastries blessedly straightforward, and they come together in about 90 minutes, which is about the time it takes for borshch to simmer (see recipe below).

The inspiration behind these triangles is Greek spanakopita, the layered spinach, feta, and phyllo pastry pie and the popular Moldovan pies made from beet greens. Instead of a large pie, I've used sautéed beet greens and their stems, brinza (a feta-like cheese), and Russian tvorog to make smaller, individual phyllo triangles, which take less time to cook and are a lot easier to dunk into a bowl of borshch. Alongside a bowl of soup, they make a perfect autumn lunch, but can work equally well as an hors d'oeuvres, or (as my household discovered after multiple recipe development sessions) an accompaniment to grilled meat or fish. Served with a salad, they make a delightful light lunch, the kind you can enjoy *al desko*, as Work-At-Home becomes a semi-permanent way of life.

Ingredients

- 2 lbs. (1 kilo) lamb shanks or short beef ribs
- 4 Tbsp (60 ml) olive oil
- 6 medium-sized beets with their greens and stems removed
- 4-6 carrots peeled and cut into matchsticks
- 3-4 parsnips, peeled and cut into matchsticks
- 1 large yellow onion, peeled and finely diced
- 2 Tbsp tomato paste
- 1 Tbsp dill seed
- 2 Tbsp caraway seed
- 1 Tbsp fenugreek
- 1 Tbsp sumac
- 1 large thumb of ginger, peeled and finely grated
- 6 garlic cloves, peeled and finely grated
- 4 quarts cold water
- 2 cups (900 ml) sauerkraut with its juice
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 1 large bunch dill, finely chopped
- Sour cream to garnish

Instructions

- Pat the meat dry and season well with salt and pepper. Heat 2 Tbsp of oil in a large soup pot or Dutch oven until it shimmers. Sear the meat on each side until well browned — do this in batches to avoid crowding the pot.
- Remove the meat from the pot and add the tomato paste and 1/2-cup of water. Use the back of a wooden spoon to scrape up all the bits from the bottom of the pot.
- Return the meat to the pot, reduce the heat, and add enough cold water to just cover the meat. Add a generous pinch of salt. Bring to a low simmer, cover, and let braise on the lowest possible heat for 2-3 hours until the meat falls off the bones.
- While the meat is braising, preheat the oven to 400°F (220°C) and line a sheet pan with parchment paper. Scrub the beets, then wrap them in a foil pouch and roast on the sheet pan for 45 minutes until the tip of a knife slides in easily. Let the beets cool to room temperature, then peel and cut them into matchsticks.
- Strip the beet greens from their stems and wash them thoroughly under cold running water or in a salad spinner to dislodge any grit. Rinse the stems under cold running water and slice them into matchsticks and set aside. Pat the beet leaves dry, then roll them into a tea towel and store in the refrigerator.
- Remove the meat from the braising liquid and strip it from the bones. Cut the meat into slender, bite-sized pieces and set both the bones and the meat aside. Decant the braising liquid into a separate container*, wipe out the pot and return it to the stove.
- Heat the remaining 2 Tbsp of oil in the pot, and when it shimmers, add the diced beet stems, onion and garlic and sauté until translucent (about 5-6 minutes). Return the meat and the bones to the pot. Add the remaining water, braising liquid, sauerkraut and its juices, sliced beets, carrots, parsnips, grated ginger, and spices and bring to a gentle simmer. Cover reduce the heat, and simmer for 1 hour.
- While the soup is simmering, chiffonade the beet greens by creating a stack of several

similarly sized leaves; roll them into a tube then slice the tube on the horizontal plane into thin strips. Add the sliced beet greens to the pot and let simmer for an additional 10 minutes.

- Leave the bones in the soup pot — they have a ton of flavor but try to avoid them when dishing up the soup. When the soup is ready to serve, add the fresh chopped dill and garnish each bowl with a generous dollop of sour cream. The flavor will improve if the borscht sits for 24 hours.

***Recipe Note:** both lamb shanks and beef ribs produce a lot of fat and although this contributes greatly to the flavor of the soup, the final amount may be more than you wish to have glistening on the top of your borscht. To reduce this, chill the braising liquid until the fat rises to the top and creates an easily removed layer. Alternatively, use a fat strainer to separate the fat from the braising liquid.

Ingredients

- 1 package (1 lbs./450 grams) phyllo dough thawed in the refrigerator overnight
- 6 cups washed beet greens and their stems, leaves separated from stems.
- 4 cloves garlic peeled and grated
- 1 lbs. (450 grams) brinza or feta, cut into small cubes
- 1/2 cup (125 ml) tvorog or ricotta cheese
- 1/2 cup (125 ml) grated hard cheese such as cheddar, Parmesan or Asiago
- 3 eggs, lightly beaten
- 1 tsp nutmeg
- 1 tsp dill seed
- 1 cup (450 ml) chopped fresh herbs with a heavy emphasis on dill, parsley, and mint.
- 1/2 cup (125 ml) olive oil plus 1 Tbsp for sautéing.
- 1/2 cup (125 ml or one stick) clarified butter or ghee*
- 1/4 cup (60 ml) Nigella or caraway seeds to top (optional)

Instructions

- Strip the beet greens from their stems and wash both thoroughly to dislodge any grit. Pat dry. Slice the beet stems in to small 1-centimeter pieces.
- Heat 1 Tbsp of olive oil over medium heat in a large skillet. When the oil is simmering, lower the heat to medium low, add the grated garlic and sauté until it turns slightly golden.
- Add the beet stems and a pinch of salt and sauté for 6 minutes until they become limp. Add the beet greens in batches, stirring occasionally until the greens wilt. Remove the mixture from the stove and cool to room temperature. Once the mixture is cool, squeeze it through a colander to get rid of as much liquid as you can.
- In a large mixing bowl, combine the brinza, tvorog, grated hard cheese, spices, eggs, and 4 Tbsp (60 ml) of the clarified butter and toss to combine. When the beet greens and stem mixture has cooled completely add it to the cheese mixture with the fresh herbs. Toss well to combine.
- Preheat the oven to 350°F (180°C) and adjust the rack to the middle of the oven. Line a large baking sheet with parchment paper.
- Unroll the phyllo dough and lay it on a baking sheet and cover it with a damp towel.

Combine the remaining clarified butter with the olive oil in a jug.

- On a clean work surface, lay out one sheet of phyllo and brush lightly with the oil and butter mixture, then top it with an additional sheet. Remember to keep the phyllo dough you aren't working with covered with the damp towel.
- Place 2 Tbsp of the filling onto the lower right-hand corner of the sheets of phyllo dough, about 2 centimeters from the edge on both sides. Brush a vertical line of butter and oil down the right edge of the phyllo dough.
- Fold the 2-centimeter edge at the bottom of the phyllo up to cover the filling. Then fold the sheets of phyllo in half along the vertical plane. Next, fold the bottom left-hand corner in a diagonal movement towards the right vertical edge, creating an isosceles triangle. Brush the dough just above this with the butter mixture, then fold the dough in the opposite diagonal — from lower left up to the right edge. If you have ever seen a flag folded at a formal ceremony, this is the sequence of events you are trying to imitate.
- Repeat these movements from the bottom of the phyllo sheet to the top, folding as you go, until you have a tight triangle — use the butter mixture to smooth down any rough patches. Place the completed triangle on the prepared baking sheet and brush the surface with the butter mixture and sprinkle with Nigella or caraway seeds if using.
- Bake the tray of triangles for 45 minutes, rotating it from back to front halfway through to ensure the triangles are evenly cooked.
- Let cool for 10 minutes before serving.

*To clarify butter, melt the amount of butter you require plus 1 additional tablespoon. Allow the melted butter to cool slightly, then use a flat spoon to scrape off the collected milk solids, which will rise to the surface.

Variations

- Mushroom and Leek: Sauté mushrooms and leeks in butter and salt, and substitute gruyere for the brinza and use 1/2-cup of parsley and thyme for the fresh herbs
- Crumbled Sausage and Sharp Cheddar: Sauté and drain 1 lb. of loose sausage and combine with sage, fennel seeds, and chopped scallions. Use brinza, feta, or a creamy cheese such as havarti.
- Smoked Fish and Feta: finely dice smoked fish such as salmon, trout, or mackerel, and combine with brinza or feta and use a combination of citrus-y herbs such as lovage, celery leaves, dill, and tarragon.

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