

Culinary Letter - Kathy Carroll



The Many Tastes of the Russian Empire

As an entity that stretched over three continents, it's not surprising the cuisine of the Russian Empire is very varied. The empire was surpassed in landmass only by the British and Mongol empires.

Brief History of the Empire



Tsar Peter I (Peter the Great, 1672-1725) officially proclaimed the empire in 1721 following the Treaty of Nystad, ending a war with Sweden. However, even before the proclamation of the empire, Russia controlled vast amounts of Eurasian territory. But the treaty added four provinces south and east of the Gulf of Finland to Russia, giving the country the access to sea it desired

and allowing Peter to build a new capital at Saint Petersburg. After that Peter increased Russian influence in the Caucasus and the Caspian Sea at the expense of the Persians.



Following Peter's death Russia added little territory until the reign of Catherine the Great (1762-1796). A successful war against the Ottoman Empire advanced Russia's southern boundary to the Black Sea. During the Partitions of Poland, she plotted with the rulers of Austria and Prussia to incorporate the territories of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, moving the western border into Central Europe.

Following Napoleon's defeat in Russian, the Congress of Vienna (1815) made Tsar Alexander I monarch of Congress Poland, giving Russia even more European territory.

After the Russo-Persian War (1804-1813) Russia acquired Dagestan, Georgia, and most of Azerbaijan. Another war against Persia in 1826 gave the empire gains of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Igdır.

Tsar Alexander II obtained Outer Manchuria from the Chinese by

1860 and sold Alaska to the United States in 1867. As a result of the Russo-Turkish War (1877-1878), Russia acquired the provinces of Batumi, Ardahan, and Kars in the South Caucasus.

From 1742 to 1867 Russia administered Alaska as a colony. The Russian-American Company had established settlements in Hawaii and as far south in North America as Fort Ross Colony in Sonoma County, just north of San Francisco

By the time of the revolution in 1917, the empire included the territory of modern Russia, most of Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Finland, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, most of the Baltic provinces (Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia), a large portion of Poland, Ardahan, Artvin, Igdır, Kars, and northeast Erzurum.

Exploring the Cuisine

Much of the cuisine in the empire started from Slavic peasant cuisine, including cabbage, bread, kasha (porridge), stuffed pies and soup. According to Gregory and Rita Plotkin in *Cooking the Russian Way*, "Food is very important to the Slavs, and they like it to be rich, filling, and, most of all, plentiful." Most discussions stressed the use of many appetizers as well as hearty entrees and desserts as part of a meal.

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Cooking in the Baltic states is similar to that of the Scandinavian countries. It includes an emphasis on potatoes, bread, dairy products, pork, and fish.

In the Caucasus region (including Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan), there is a Middle Eastern influence. Lamb is common in stews or on skewers. Stuffed grape leaves and baklava are particularly popular in Armenia. Other Middle Eastern products used include chickpeas, pine nuts, and cracked wheat.

In the southern region (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kirghizia, and Tajikistan), a trademark dish is



Lamb and Rice

plov, a mixture of rice, lamb, and spices similar to Middle Eastern pilafs. Fruits are plentiful and well used in the area. Uzbekistan grows over 1,000 kinds of melons.

Western Europe also influenced the cuisine after the reforms of Peter the Great. Swiss and French chefs traveled to Russia and introduced dishes such as soup Bagration (cream of veal over asparagus), saddle of veal Prince Orloff (veal layered with

mushrooms and onions), and Charlotte Russe.

Soups have always played an important role in the Russian meal. The best known is borscht, which



Borscht

by definition must include beets, but can include almost anything else. Shchi is a cabbage soup, also with many variations. Wikipedia divided soup into seven large groups: chilled soups based on kvass; light soups and stews based on water and vegetables; noodle soups with meat, mushrooms, or milk; soups based on cabbage; thick soups based on meat broth; fish soups; and grain- and vegetable-based soups.

Porridge is also a traditional dish. Cereals from grains are used, including buckwheat, millet, semolina oats, barley, and rice. These are often cooked in milk, especially for breakfast.

Meats are used in a variety of ways. Minced meats are used in a



Beef Stroganoff

number of dough-stuffed dishes, depending on the area where they made. Shapes and the basis for the dough also vary greatly. Jellied meats, meatballs, and skewered meats are popular in different regions.

While Russians are widely known for drinking vodka, another popular drink is kvass, a fermented bread-based drink, which is also used as a base for cold soups. It may be flavored with fruit and berry juices or with herbs and spices.

Tea was first introduced from China in the 17th century and is now the most popular drink in all parts of Russia. However, it was a luxury item until the 20th century. While some tea is grown in the southern areas, most is imported.

Some of the herbs seen most frequently in Russian recipes include dill, parsley, chervil, garlic, and tarragon. Dill originated in parts of Russia, as did Russian tarragon and sage.

