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Mastering the Craft

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MASTERING THE CRAFT

BY JULIA BLYUMKIN
To Babushka and Mom
I owe all my intuition to your crazy potions and spells
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For the last seven months, I have likely become UPS’s most valuable customer ordering heaps of books from sellers home and abroad. Without UPS delivery, I would be at a total loss and my research would be far from complete. And now that it is, I am pleased and most grateful to acknowledge all the authors, critics, and most importantly, my advisors and family members who have helped me prepare this gastronomic medley that shaped this thesis.

Initially, this project started off as any other humdrum food narrative, compiling lighthearted foodies for the flippant soul. After enough persuasion, hair pulling, nail biting, under-salting and overcooking, the project assumed a whole new level of complexity. I am deeply indebted to John-Michael Rivera for always pushing me far past my level of comfort, never backing down and never letting me settle on a single thing I wrote. I am beholden to Tatiana Mikhailova for providing me with unparalleled opportunities to pursue my research. Their expert advice and guidance with materials, including the infamous culinary bible *The Book of Tasty and Healthy Foods* (Книга о вкусной и здоровой пище), Marina Balina’s and Evgeny Dobrenko’s expertise on the text in their *Petrified Utopia: Happiness Soviet Style*, Joyce Toomre brilliant translation of Elena Molokhovet’s domestic manual *A Gift to Young Housewives*, Joanna Hubbs’ superior analyses of pagan archetypes in her *Mother Russia: The Feminine Myth in Russian Culture*, Marija Gimbutas and Mary B. Kelly’s study and expertise of Slavic embroidery in *The Language of the Goddess* and “The Ritual Fabrics of Russian Village Women,” Shiela Fitzpatrick and Yuri Slezkine collections of memoirs from *In the Shadow of Revolution: Life Stories of Russian Women from 1917 to the Second World War*, Lara Vapnyar’s consoling and comforting *Broccoli and Other Tales of Food and Love*, Isabel Allende’s aphrodisiac sensation *Aphrodite: A Memoir for the Senses*, to all the countless fairy tales provided by Heidi Anne Heiner’s extensive fairytale database *SurLaLune Fairy Tales* and to the folk tales compiled by Marina Balina, Helena Goscilo, and Mark Naumovich Lipovetski in *Politicizing Magic: An Anthology of Russian and Soviet Fairy Tales* that shaped my understanding of relationships. Special thanks to Susan Howe’s *Midnight and Singularities*, Anne Carson’s *Glass, Irony, and God*, and Ronald Johnson’s *Radi os*. Your mastery of expression and manipulation of form are an inspiration to all writers.

The influence of two extraordinary women, my grandmother (бабушка), Fanya Chernin, and my mother, Alla Meyer, permeates this thesis. Almost every single page bears witness to their endless pieces of advice, their stern directions, and lighthearted dispositions. Each an expert in two very different kitchens, I was flooded with stories, techniques, recipes, and culinary contradictions. After sifting through what seemed like an indissoluble batch, I found myself ingrained in their tangled roots. In return for their patience and support of my probing questions and inundation of far too many details, I offer them this thesis.
The windup key is turned once, and twice, and once more. A crick, a crank, and the house on chicken legs walks toward me. It rocks to-and-fro and flushes green. It lunges with its yellowed claws across the kitchen table. It trembles with every step, hesitating at the knee. Digging deep into the oak, grimacing at me. Then it halts. A static silence spreads. It permeates the soundless room and stagers, while it jests. The shingles plastered to its head flap. Shackled in their rooted follicles, they frown. Blind, the house approaches, reaching aimlessly for me. Just one more step and I would scream, but the spoon merges between my two quivering lips and ceases all the sound within. Baba Yaga is inside, do you hear? If you don’t eat, you will remain in fear. But if you oblige and swallow the broth, then you too will be able to clear the froth. It is about whittling the skins, and seeds, and pits, and rinds. The crusts stay. Do not poison your mind. Diagonal cuts doused deep in soup simply wrought the rotted in the stove. The stove is warm and a place for rest; beware, you must first digest. Bent and broken, you will find the ability to unwind and strike the board.

There, on the board, the ingredients splice, and I am left to pick up the knife. It is the very key which sets my transformation into motion, constructing the recipe to my process. The splice of soul and strife enter deep within myself and exude quickly into the inverted Ouija board below a mirror. A looking glass that reflects my temper. My boiling point is measured with the barometer in the broth. I remain the fairest of them all. Potential energy does not exist when I am left recreating their dishes with a tinge of curry and paprika and oregano and thyme. Time is passing and striking at a standstill. The kitchen timer is no longer critical when the board reveals my future punctured by nail bitten fingertips and blood droplets which sink into a doughy hue and bake out the spiral bound blueprint.

As Bluebeard’s key preserved the blood stain when his fair bride dared to turn his key in the forbidden lock, so too did my own key. It is the pain stooping over the counter top in my lower back that fuels the chicken legged house to keep wandering and circling and reminding and recollecting the force that propels the knife to chop; to chop away the fragments, to fragment the whole. The whole left to be dissected and bled and bound and baked and browned and seasoned well.

Soon thereafter, there is the stew, sloshing around the savory flavors of decades past and present. This is worth every nick and prick, burn and callous. These imperfections, these fragmentary bits, construct Baba Yaga’s menu of tea, appetizers, main course, dessert and a nightcap, within the tottering house. A top its ribbed chicken legs, the house dances and propels the spoon into the quivering frown, shackled inside the crusts.
VECHERINKA

EVENING TEA

*If We Were to Skip Dinner…*
Fanya and her three older sisters Polya, Olya, and Rahilya gather in the kitchen to discuss the impossibility of throwing a tea party.

Dearest, why do you insist on throwing a tea party?

Why, how would it look if I didn’t, Polya?

It would not be nearly as fashionable, Fanya.

But who is to say it should be, Olya. She will look back and think, remember when Fanichka threw a tea party, it was just grand, wasn’t it?

Grand?

Well, it could be grand. After all, would you just look at these photos, Rahilya.

Of course I can look at the photos. But where will you get any of this?

Dostanu. It is a different time.

You’ll get it, Fanya? Who do you know that has such fancy crystal china settings?

Well –

And which queue do you plan to stand in to get these pastries? And jams? And caviar?

My God, Fanya, this is not a matter of getting. No bottle of Vodka will get you these fruits. They are not in season, my dear!

Perhaps you could pickle some cabbage?

That is enough! I, your little sister, will arrange it and my efforts will not go unacknowledged.

Oy, Polechka, let us stand by our sister’s efforts. We will all bring a little something for the occasion.

Thank you, Olya.

Fanichka, do not forget how we had to replace your boots when the soles tore in the dead of winter. Penniless, we still spared the kopecks we had to. Dostali tebe tvoi sapogi. But “dostat” such extravagance is as unrealistic as that wedding gift from hell Stalin shoved into your kitchen. What are you trying to prove?

I haven’t forgotten Rahilya. I will never forget.
Mrs. Faina Borisovna Chernina
cordially invites you to

вечеринка
Monday the twenty-eighth of March

Enjoy an afternoon
of warm feelings
and frivolous conversation
over pirogues and stuffed blintzes.

vl. Minkaya, dom 80, kv.121
Bobruisk, Mogileovskaya Oblast, 213828
Belarus

Chernina, F.B.

Telephone: 7-22-41
Fanya walks out into the living room where her daughters Alla and Nina are playing with paper dolls.

Has the mail arrived?

Oh, the mail, Mama? Yes, it is right here, on the table.

Has it arrived?

It? You mean this letter, Mama? The one from Elena Molokhovets?

Why is it so important, Mama?

Nina, give it to me this instant.

Why are you all yelling?

Alla, stay out of it!

Don’t tell me what to do, Nina!

I’ll tell you whatever I want to tell you, Alla.

Nina! Alla! Stop at once! And Nina, give me that letter!

Dear Mrs. Faina Borisivna,

It will give me great pleasure to take tea with you on Wednesday the fifteenth, at four-thirty o’clock. I hope it will be of no inconvenience to you if dear Isabella Beeton joins us.

In the words of the wise Frances Thompson,

Suffer me at your leafy feast
To sit apart, a somewhat alien guest,
And watch your mirth,
Unsharing in the liberal laugh of earth,
Yet with a sympathy
Begot of wholly sad and half-sweet memory –
The little sweetness making grief completé

Sincerely Yours,
Elena Molokhovets
Is she coming, Mama?

Da! And she is bringing the fine Mrs. Isabella Beeton with her! Can you believe it?

Mama, that’s wonderful!

Oh Alla, quit being so excited. She’ll take one look at you and say, “little girl, haven’t you been eating too much?”

And then she’ll take one look at you and say, “look at that sickly child, what a pity.”

Girls, that is enough! We must get ready for our guests. Everything needs dusting. And the good china must be wiped. Oh, goodness, I have so much to do and so little time. Allochka, please put on your stockings. And Ninochka fix your collar. Girls you must look presentable. And please, be on your very best behavior.

We will, Mama.

*Polya, Olya, and Rahilya enter the house.*

Fanechka, I brought some kapusta.

And I brought some tvorozhnye blintzes and jam.

Did you wipe the china?

Yes, Rahilya, I wiped the china. And the silverware. And scrubbed the every corner of this house on my hands and knees. And made pirogi!

It will be just wonderful.

Grand!

*Elena Molokhovets and Isabella Beeton shuffle into the apartment, bustles in tow. Alla and Nina stare from afar, mesmerized by the two ladies’ dresses and mannerisms, while Fanya seats them.*

Nina, have you ever seen anything like it?

No, Alla! Where would I have seen something like that?
Would you just look at all those colors! And ruffles! And embroidery!

Girls, stop gawking. Let us sit with Mrs. Molokhovets and Mrs. Beeton. Ladies, allow me to introduce you to my daughters, Nina and Alla, and my sisters, Rahilya, Olga, and Polina. It is a pleasure to meet you all.

Yes, dears, a pleasure indeed.

What a small table! Will we all fit? And what kind of tea will we be having this afternoon?

Well, the only kind I have, madam.

In the purchase of tea, that should be chosen which possesses an agreeable odour and is as whole as possible, in order that the leaf may be easily examined. The greatest care should be taken that it has not been exposed to the air, which destroys its flavor.ii

Oh, yes! Though I do believe a bit too much air has reached this pot. Next time, dear, consider setting out small crystal plates with lemon slices, small carafes of rum, red wine, and cherry syrup, and bowls of sherbet, cream and sugar. On both sides of the table, place small stemmed crystal bowls of jam, to be added to the tea or eaten separately; on either side of the bowls, set out teaspoons and small crystal saucers for jam.iii

But we do not have crystal, miss –

“Allochka, do not meddle.”

Fanechka, you really must control your children. You must not have read my book. I wrote an entire chapter on children.

And also, consider investing in perhaps a longer table setting samovar on a small side table at one end. In the middle of the long table place a tall vase filled with fruit, such as apples, pears, oranges, mandarin oranges, and grapes; on each side, place stacks of dessert plates and next to them silver or bone dessert knives.iv It could be simply grand.

I am terribly sorry, unfortunately we just do not –

Mama, Mama, look at that! Can we really have grapes and apples and oranges?

Shush!
Tea has now become almost necessary of life. Linnaeus was induced to think that there were two species of tea-plant, one which produced the black, and the other the green teas; Chinese tea has frequently been adulterated. Adulteration by means of these leaves is by no means a new species of fraud; and several acts of parliament, from the time of George II., have been passed, specifying severe penalties against those guilty of the offence.\textsuperscript{v}

Right you are Isabella, but we shall not punish our dear host. In the future, dear, you must surround the bread tray with small plates of thinly sliced veal, ham, beef, breasts of hazel grouse, turkey or chicken, tongue, hare, Swiss cheese, Russian or homemade cheese, some grated green cheese. The tongue should be fresh. Also, hare cheese; cream cheese; assorted cheeses; lemon cider for tea (for those who like to drink tea while holding sugar in their mouths; syrups to accompany tea; liqueur for punch; dark and light cognac; dark and light rum.\textsuperscript{vi}

We simply cannot –

Now, now you must not interrupt. And the dessert certainly repays, in its general effect, the expenditure upon it of much pains; and it may be said, that if there be any poetry at all in meals, or the process of feeding, there is poetry in the dessert, the materials for which should be selected with taste, and, of course, must depend, in a great measure, upon the season.\textsuperscript{vii} What was it you were going to say?

Well, I, well –

Mama don’t cry. Mama, it’ll be okay. Maybe get a piece of the kolbaska from the ice box?

Yeah, Mama, fry it a little bit the way you always do for me an Alla. It’s delicious!

Oy, dochen’ki, there is so much for you to learn.
Babushka never actually threw a tea party. She was too busy standing in lines with food cards to receive shares of food. First, as a little girl, then, as a grown, married woman, and then, as a married women with children; she spent an eternity in these queues. Before that, she was too busy milking milkless cows in the dead of winter. She learned little in her mother’s kitchen. Kasha and bread were typical dishes of all meal times. Other products were not readily available. You simply had to find a way to get them. You needed connections. Getting goods from others was not generous. It was a trade off, a business interaction, where you were indebted to the benefactor. With my own trade off fast approaching, I began to jot down the recipe to life…
ZAKUSKI

APPETIZERS

How It All Started in Julia’s Kitchen
Blueberry Muffins

Ingredients:
1½ cups flour  ½ cup sugar
2 tsp baking powder  ½ tsp salt
¼ cup oil  2 eggs
½ cup milk  1 cup blueberries

Preparation:
7:30 AM

It all started with a recipe from Betty Crocker. Or maybe it was Julia Child. God knows which massive volume I decided to leaf through with my small, pudgy fingers. But I do know that I wanted to make some blueberry muffins with some sugary, sweet drizzle on top. Apparently, at age ten, making muffins is no easy feat. Yet at the time, I did not consider the challenge, but instead, focused on simply impressing Mom and Dad, Mom especially, when they would grace me with their presence Sunday morning.

I got up at the crack of dawn to make these. Terribly atypical for a ten year old, but seeing as Mom cut cartoons out of my life at age eight, Play House Disney and Cartoon Network were of no interest. I ventured to grab the mixing bowls, measuring cups, spoons, eggs, milk, flour, sugar, baking soda, oil, berries, the mixer, the twelve cylinder pocketed pan, and all the other kitchen trinkets. And let me tell you, it was not easy to get all these goodies. Mom always organized the kitchen, and nothing, I mean nothing was within the reach of a ten year old. I aimlessly pushed the, black leather, kitchen chair across the hardwood floors, leaving the tiniest scratches which would soon be filled with ants, collecting one crumb after the next.
They really are harmless, and it never made complete sense why Mom overreacted to the little critters. They munch on the tidbits that escape our hands or utensils and leave less to be swept up by the broom collecting dust bunnies on its bristles. She insisted on investing on all sorts of arsenic baits and sprays. She even bought some sort of earthquake device that sent tremors through the floors and shocked the figure eights to death. Rather than poison the protein crunchers, she could have simply doused them in some melted chocolate, added a little vanilla, nutmeg, and bravo! A delicacy that costs ten times more than a pound of meat in Mexico City.

Not only are chocolate covered ants a good source of fiber and protein, their flavor is reminiscent of crunchy peanut butter. In Columbia the culonas winged ants are hunted as persistently as children hunt fireflies with their open jars. They are swept into the house and dumped immediately into boiling water, grilled, and make a fine snack on a hot, summer afternoon.

These worker ants hadn’t arrived quite yet to help me in this tumultuous task, so I resolved to prayer. Never having gone to Hebrew school or been raised all too religious, before beginning this baking extravaganza, I clasped my hands like a good little Christian girl, as I had seen my best friend at the time, Katie, do before she went to bed. I prayed that this batch would turn out better than my make-shift clam-chowder, made from a similar consistency and shade, mushroom “soup.”

“Dad, c’mon, they’re both white…I thought I knew what I was doing!”

I’ve now repeated that line for the past eleven years after Dad, red faced and teary eyed, belly laughs these embarrassing stories of mine to anyone that steps foot in our kitchen. He’ll never let me live it down, especially after I tried to feed both him and Mom mushroom gravy, doused in milk. Should have prayed for that one too I suppose.
Just recently I prepared a mouthwatering Scallop and Mushroom Chowder provided by the Food Network. A buttery, creamy broth with a little white wine, bay scallops, and sliced mushrooms hit the spot. Maybe my gravy wasn’t all that horrible, and Mom and Dad simply could not appreciate a flourishing talent in the kitchen.

But prayer or no prayer, the muffins were a lost cause. I read through the recipe, I followed one instruction after the next. Preheated the oven. Cracked in the eggs. I even separated the yolks from whites. I was ten! My egg cracking skills, sadly, did not save me. **Fluff the whites; fold them in with the rest of the batter**, check. **Stir in berries**, check. All that was left to do – fill the pan and stick it in the oven. **Fill pan pockets halfway with batter**. I had always been good at algebra and geometry problems. Logic just wasn’t my cup of tea.

**8:10AM**

I poured that batter into the pan. I filled the pockets halfway, just like the recipe said. I put on the oversized oven mitts and stumbled toward the oven door, trying to gently place my 13 x 9 inch pan inside. I hung up the mitts, set the kitchen timer, and set to do the rest of my chores before Mom and Dad came down the spiraling, oak banister, white carpet staircase.

I got my allowance on Sundays, so I tried extra hard, at the end of the week. No, who am I kidding? I tried extra hard on Sunday to make up for every other day that week that I “forgot” to do my chores. So, I set the coffee maker and went out and grabbed the Sunday paper off the driveway. I separated the news from the ads and set aside the Daddy pile: two sections of the Funnies, the TV guide, and three booklets of my most dreaded portion of the Sunday paper: coupons.

In 1887 the Coca-Cola Company was the first to launch coupons as a means of advertising. Asa Candler, partner to Coca-Cola and the pioneer of the money saving initiative,
provided coupons in mail and magazines offering complimentary samples of the product. The results were jaw dropping as eight billion free Coca-Cola drinks were handed out in the United States. A decade and change later, in 1909 C.W. Post of Post Cereal ushered in the era of coupon clipping as we now know it today. ix

Dad knew coupon clipping like the back of his hand. He loved to clip coupons. Filing them was a different story. It somehow became my responsibility that after enough yelling and screaming was taken over by Mom. But at ten, I owned this mundane, laborious task. Dad insisted that I didn’t contribute to this household. He and Mom did everything for me and I could take care of a measly task like filing a few (hundred) coupons and throwing out the few (thousand) expired ones. Dad wanted the coupons organized for when he went triple coupon shopping on Wednesday at the five local groceries stores. Ten Progresso Soups for $10.00 and ten Chunky Soups for $9.99. Naturally, he came home with 20 soups. Around Thanksgiving, I was given yet another laborious task of shuffling through and boxing up the canned veggies, chili, Rotel, and hundreds of soup cans for the canned food drive, only to make room for the cases of cans bought at Costco the following weekend.

No matter how upset I got over these maddening chores, I could never stay angry for too long. I tried to pout, to twist up my face, to squint my eyes, but to no avail. Daddy took one look at me and would crack a joke that my hamster, and I were starting to resemble each other more and more every day.

Dad “killed” that hamster trying to feed it a dose of crushed Amoxicillin infused with chicken noodle soup when Hammy Bacon went blind in one eye and stopped eating because his teeth were too long. He then proceeded to throw him in a Ziploc bag and into the dumpster for trash pickup on Monday morning. So much for a formal burial in the backyard.
The muffins were almost done! I put away all the ingredients, threw the whisks and bowls in the dishwasher. Leaving dirty dishes in the sink was unacceptable. Mom always kept the house squeaky clean. She would get up at five o’clock and be out the door for an eight hour work day at six o’clock. Before she left, the pillows on the couches were fluffed, the glass table in the family room gleamed, the coffee was ready to drip with a touch of a button. Even the piles of mismatched shoes from the day before were lined up in pairs by the closet, everyday.

She expected me to pick up on these little habits. No matter how much I tried to escape my chores, my room remained spotless. I could not stand seeing messes and drove myself bonkers organizing and reorganizing cluttered corners, drawers, and closets.

Kitchens were the worst. Everything in a kitchen has its place. The dishes in one cabinet, the dish towels in a drawer. The wine glasses on one shelf, the everyday glasses on another. Dishes must be sponged clean before being placed in the dishwasher – except dishes with cheese remnants.

“Julia, no, no! You’re ruining the sponge.”

“Mom, it’s a sponge.”

“Just let the dish soak, Julia. Stop arguing. Put a little water in it.”

“I don’t want to put water in it.”
For about sixteen years, this argument reoccurred once every other week. When I saw dishes in the sink with cloudy water, with little bits of food swimming, floating, dog paddling, I got nauseous. What could possibly be so difficult about rinsing out a dish and putting it in the dishwasher? Ruining a sponge? I take my chances.

8:40AM

Bing-bing! The timer sounded. Again, I put on the mitts and pulled out the muffins. Holy Moses, I remember thinking, I actually managed to cook something for once in my life. It was a miracle. It is a real shame miracles are rare.

8:55AM

Let me tell you, nowhere on that godforsaken pan did it say that you must oil my hinges and baby powder my bottom. Nowhere in the recipe did it say that your pan is sixty some years outdated and is not a fancy-shmancy, non-stick pan.

Dr. Roy Plunkett didn’t send Mom a non-stick pan even though he discovered Teflon® coating (polytetrafluoroethylene), a substance with low coefficient of friction and high corrosion resistance in 1938. Sure, I’ll cut him some slack since he registered his Teflon® trademark in 1944 and didn’t form the Tefal Company until 1956 which began manufacturing non-stick pans; yet, it failed to reach Mom some forty-odd years after it was first released. Nowadays, other non-stick coatings have since been invented, but even those did not manage to touch this unfortunate pan.

I never ever watched Mom bake. Did Mom ever bake? She cooked, but baked? There were burritos and tacos, fried spaghetti, beef stroganoff, and occasionally tushonaya kartoshka - potato stew. But Napoleon cakes? Never. She baked one cake, one torte, “tortik” on special
occasions. Eight layers, bathed in rum, whipped with cream, and adorned in fruit. She baked it twice. Twice in twenty years.

But, at that time I was ten years old; a big girl; a big girl that lacked a little common sense Sunday morning.

9:00AM

“Juuuuuuuuuuuuu-lia” Mom called in her cheery, subtle Russian accent.

It is the only time I hear it. Yet, Mom would not be Mom if she did not call my name the way she does. It has a pleasant, homey-feel to it. The rest of the family, being in the states nearly as long, some longer, still speak like they just stepped off the boat. Mom went the extra few miles. Watched episodes of Full House relentlessly, working endless hours trying to pick up the language, and in time, remarrying an American, Dad.

“Hey Mom…”

“You made coffee? And set the table? Wow!”

She always had a way of making me feel like I had all the potential in the world.

“And you even got the paper,” called Dad, mockingly.

“Are those for us?” Mom chirped ecstatically when she saw muffins in the pan.

“They were…”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I can’t get them out?”

“You didn’t wipe the pan down with oil and put flour on the bottom?”

Yes, she may have told me once. Or twice. Probably a fair number of times. But I, like any other ten year old, let in one ear and out the other.
“Well no, but…”

“Juuuuu-lia! What were you thinking? This is not that difficult.”

She had the right to be upset. It is a waste of food. At the time, my efforts went unnoticed. At least initially. It is only that initial moment that counts. Just like first impressions. They are the ones that resonate with you most. I failed her.

If I really did get the recipe from *From Julia Child’s Kitchen*, I flunked out as it was Julia’s hope that each recipe would serve as a lesson from a private cooking school.

*And the great lesson embedded in the book is that no one is born a great cook, one learns by doing. This is my invariable advice to people: Learn how to cook – try new recipes, learn from your mistakes, be fearless, and above all have fun!* (My Life in France, Julia Child 2006).

Having tried this new recipe and with a hoity-toity demeanor, I put myself atop the pedestal. I figured I didn’t need potential. I had talent. I didn’t need to learn, I just need to master. With fear and disappointment setting in, there was nothing fun about it. Instead, I pompously defended my actions, only to be lashed by Daddy’s words drenched in belly laughs.

“I know, but the recipe didn’t say to do that.”

“My daughter, the honor student,” Dad called from the family room. Dad joked. That was Dad’s thing. He never let anyone or anything let him down. He did not grow up in communist Russia where food became a symbol of power and social triumph.

Against a milieu of political terror and food shortages, the government concocted an atmosphere of wealth and sanguinity where all texts, including cookbooks, supported the government. In 1950 the bourgeois *Book of Tasty and Healthy Food* (*Книга о Вкусной и Здоровой Пище*) was at the height of Stalinism when it was introduced into people’s diets. It
demanded people to buy into a façade of splendor and sumptuousness, where family prosperity originated in the imaginary kitchen abundant in delicacies, spices, and grandiose cuisines.

In his *Red Bread: The Culinary Story of Soviet Power*, acclaimed literary critic and essayist Aleksandr Genis refers to the text as:

_An encyclopedia of the Soviet way of life, where the process of preparing food became the symbol of a world transformed according to a recipe-plan. Each dish described in the book is a metaphor of the plenitude and variety of socialist life, expressed in a tightly considered menu*.xii

A menu that lacked in existence, but instead provided hope and determination to humble households to better themselves and support the party’s socialist ideals.

It became the modern day version of Ivan the Terrible’s 16th century manual *Domostoi*, the text outlining the proper conduct of the people toward the church, state, and family where domestic instruction ran parallel to the precepts of religiosity and morality.xiii From how to maintain a clean kitchen and how to pickle mushrooms to how husband and wife should pray and act toward each other to how to discipline children by the 13 “do-nots,” the book established, but more importantly maintained familial structure as the basic unit for building a structured society.

How could I live up to that? I was bulldozing this structured household with my muffins. There was nothing left to do than pull the muffin tops to shreds like Godzilla rising from the ocean depths to pulverize every structure in Tokyo. Sure, I am not growing up in a communist country either, but Mom did and as the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, my guilt set in. There were only five or six more bags of flour and sugar and boxes of baking soda wedged between the fifty-plus packets of Orville Redenbacher’s microwave popcorn, Kelloggs Frosted Flakes and Rice Krispies cereals boxes. That was only on the shelf I could reach. There very well could have been another couple bags on the top shelf of the pantry.
“At least I didn’t broil the garlic bread!”

“Oh Lee, Julia, stop it!”

“God, I’m never cooking again!”

I have a temper, and sometimes, a poor sense of humor. Especially when I work as hard as I do. In the end, I accomplish nothing but disappointing others. While Julia Child accounted for human error by passing off disastrous quenelle paste as a delectable fish mousse, there was no way in hell that I could pass off my dome-scraggly muffin tops as blueberry crumb cake.

9:15AM

So I stomped to my room and cried a little. Then, just like Alice after chugging the “Drink Me” bottle, my tears lowered me from my much too proud, lofty altitude to Mom’s yummy breakfast of scrambled eggs, bacon, and fried potatoes, made complete with my muffin tops.

Yield: Makes 1 Dozen
NAPOLEON

METHOD

1. Preheat the oven to 350°F. To make dough, stir the sour cream and butter together in a bowl. Add the flour and mix until the dough comes together. Turn the mixture on to a lightly floured surface and knead until smooth.

2. Divide the dough into seven parts and roll each into a rectangular slab onto a nonstick baking sheet. Bake each 2-3 minutes, or until golden.

3. Meanwhile bring milk to a boil. Turn milk down to low heat, whisk egg yolks, sugar, butter, and flour. Remove from heat once cream thickens.

4. Spread cream on six slabs of pastry and layer alternating. Crush last slab and sprinkle pastry on the top and sides of torte. Refrigerate at least 4 hours or overnight.

5. When ready to serve, gently slice pastry into squares and serve with cake server.
GLAVNOYE BLYUDO

MAIN COURSE

Subsistence of the Clever & Cunning
“Ruslan and Lyudmila”

DEDICATION

For you, queens of my soul, my treasured
Young beauties, for your sake did I
Devote my golden hours of leisure
To writing down, I'll not deny,
With faithful hand of long past ages
The whispered fables.... Take them, pray,
Accept these playful lines, these pages
For which I ask no praise.... But stay!
For my reward—I need not seek it—
Is hope: Oh, that some girl should scan,
As only one who's lovesick can,
These naughty songs of mine in secret!

PROLOGUE

On seashore far a green oak towers,
And to it with a gold chain bound,
A learned cat whiles away the hours
By walking slowly round and round.
To right he walks, and sings a ditty;
To left he walks, and tells a tale....

What marvels there! A mermaid sitting
High in a tree, a sprite, a trail
Where unknown beasts move never seen by
Man's eyes, a hut on chicken feet,
Without doors, without windows,
An evil witch's lone retreat;

The woods and valleys there are teeming
With strange things.... Dawn brings waves
That, gleaming,

Over the sandy beaches creep,
And from the clear and shining water
Step thirty goodly knights escorted
By their Old Guardian, of the deep
An ancient dweller.... There a dreaded
And hated tsar is captive ta'en;
There, as all watch, for cloud banks headed,
Across the sea and o'er a plain,
A warlock bears a knight. There, weeping,
A princess sits locked in a cell,
And Grey Wolf serves her very well;
There, in a mortar, onward sweeping
All of itself, beneath the skies
The wicked Baba-Yaga flies;
There pines Koshchei and lusts for gold....

All breathes of Russ, the Russ of old
There once was I, friends, and the cat
As near him 'neath the oak I sat
And drank of sweet mead at my leisure,
Recounted tales to me.... With pleasure
One that I liked do I recall
And here and now will share with all...

- Excerpted from the poem by
Alexander Pushkin, 1820

xiv
**Babushka Standard Time (BST)**

I have always loved food and I have always loved the idea of preparing food. And in more recent years, I have been successful. It was a journey, as can be plainly understood from the muffin incident. These ideas are generally concocted from one experience or another. For me, this experience happened to be at Babushka’s house, in Babushka’s kitchen, with Babushka.

Her kitchen is the size of a closet. No more than twenty-five square feet, narrow enough for one person to feel crowded, it is easily my favorite kitchen that I have cooked in. Before it was remodeled, there were brown, wooden, knobless cabinets, mismatched pots and pans and towels, cacti and onions growing from pickle jars on the sill beneath the small, floral curtain blanketing a little window above the sink. Drawers on either side of the kitchen could not be open simultaneously, and, finding matching silverware inside was unfeasible.

But Joseph R. Provey assures me that nothing is impossible:

*You may design a kitchen so that every single utensil, pot, or box of cereal is stored without wasting a single cubic inch. But that doesn’t necessarily mean your kitchen will be well organized or an efficient place in which to work. To perform all of the daily tasks that take place there, quickly and easily, everything will need to be optimally stored in places that result in optimal organization.* -1001 Ideas for Kitchen Organization

Babushka could have invested in kitchen organization literature, but she secretly preferred the dysfunctional setting as no one but she could navigate it. She used every cubic inch and from her clutter came the most scrumptious dishes. She performed all her tasks with ease without Feng Shui.

39°40′43″N, 104°52′19″W

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MASTERING THE CRAFT 27
The treasures Babushka hid inside drawers and cabinets were no match for all the rubies, diamonds, and pearls in the world. The infamous meat grinder is the most precious gem of all. It has an iron body, a table clamp, a manual handle that churns and spurts out worms of ground beef. A golden nugget, that no one in this day and age has.

Karl Drais, the inventor of this meat mincer, would be as proud as I was watching Babushka. Her arm rotated as fast as the wheels of a steam engine as she roiled that meat into a red and white polka dot mixing bowl, tarnishing about the edges.

Tying her hair in a platochek, a white and red kerchief, she never broke a sweat. She was the modern Rosie the Riveter manning the kitchen on her riveting machine.

All the day long,
Whether rain or shine,
She’s a part of the assembly line.
She’s making history,
Working for victory,
Rosie the Riveter.
Keeps a sharp lookout for sabotage,
Sitting up there on the fuselage.
That little girl will do more than a male will do.
Rosie’s got a boyfriend, Charlie.
Charlie, he’s a Marine.
Rosie is protecting Charlie,
Working overtime on the riveting machine.
When they gave her a production “E,”
She was as proud as she could be.
There’s something true about,
Red, white, and blue about,
Rosie the Riveter.

-Rosie the Riveter, Redd Evans & John Jacob Loeb, 1942

vii
It might be more appropriate to compare her to the legendary Stakhanovite Pasha Angelina, who in 1930 formed the first Soviet all-female tractor brigade. She is the most celebrated female labor hero in Soviet history. Pasha took the future of her country into her own hands, fearlessly establishing the kolkhoz in her village Staro-Beshevo. Her brigade plowed fields endlessly and surpassed set quotas and crushed any and all competition.

*Our life was not yet happy in those days. We, the ordinary people, did not yet realize to what pinnacles of wealth and joy our government, with its collectivization and industrialization, would lead us. But the party and Stalin could already perceive those pinnacles behind the mountains of hardship that stood in our way.*

*We trusted the party and the Soviet government. We were all following Stalin.*

-*Pasha Angelina, 1947*

As Stalin was the most celebrated leader of Russia, Babushka is the most celebrated woman in the family. With or without the meat grinder in hand, she is both the head of the family and the neck that turns it. From holiday celebrations to family gatherings to mandatory weekly visits, Babushka bands cousins, sisters, aunts, uncles, great aunts and uncles, and so forth filling her one bedroom townhome way past capacity and in total violation of the fire marshal. Most importantly, Babushka’s authentic dishes surpass any cuisine served up by five star restaurants and any relative who competitively tries to perfect her menu.

Aside from the grinder, I cannot possibly forget the wooden spoons with intricate black, red, green, and gold designs, suspended from perfectly leveled nails, twinkling alongside the samovar. While this corner of sparkles and shimmers is arranged merely for decoration, they are instruments of power, wisdom, and perhaps even witchery. Babushka is a sort of kitchen sorceress. In theory, every object in her kitchen, be it appliance, dish, container, or décor,
enhances the cooking experience which in turn heightens the senses and places you in the most
euphoric trance. Like any sorceress’s inventory, hers contained myriads of jars oozing with
bubbly greens, scraggly reds, and vile oranges filling the cabinets and refrigerator shelves. She
just did not believe in Tupperware. Instead, she collected one banka after the next. Pickle jars,
olive jars, marinated red pepper jars, big jars, small jars, sour cream containers, cottage cheese
containers, the range of bankas was endless. Potato latkes, buckwheat with cutlets, rice pilaf with
lamb disguised in recycled containers. Babushka always kept four or five jars of Kapusta,
Russian sauerkraut, marinating in the fridge for both her daughters. There was no leaving
Babushka’s hungry.

“Babushka, I am not hungry.”

“Have an apple.”

“Babushka, really, I am not hungry.”

“It is not food,” she argues, “Prosto perekusi. It is just a little something to quench
whatever hunger might come up.”

Didn’t Snow White’s evil stepmother mutter the same thing when she was disguised as
an old peddler woman? Babushka is far from evil, but when she brings out a succulent, ruby-red
apple and hands it to you after telling you about its fleshy and juicy bits, there is no resisting.

A sorceress, however, is never without a book of spells. Babushka just happened to own
the Book of Tasty and Healthy Foods. She just never cracked the spine until she came to
America. She received the book as a wedding present as most young blooming sorceresses did
from their husbands. The book itself was inspired by Elena Molokhovet’s Russian homemakers’
bible, Classic Russian Cooking: A Gift to Young Housewives (Подарок молодым хозяйкам,
1861). It was the gastronomic standard for Russian households. The text offered not only a
compendium of recipes, but also advice on household management. From how to maintain the idyllic image of a Russian household, to how to supervise servants to the appropriate menus at meal times, Molokhovets wrote it all. She is the Russian counterpart to England’s household management expert Isabella Beeton or America’s Fannie Farmer. Together the three could have ruled the world. Instead, Babushka was left with an abridged version of Molokhovets’ egg shell pages bound in blue leather containing countless palatable spells – all of which required ingredients that were not readily available in stores or markets during Stalin’s reign. There is always substitution for spices and excessive salting to bring out the flavor, but proxies are of no use when the chicken, lamb, and beef are nowhere to be found.

The spell book was an imaginative gesture, feign in its depiction of joyous society enjoying the bounty. The Communist Party even prefaced the text with the recipe of life:

_Under the direction of our glorious Communist Party, its Central Committee and the Soviet government, the people of our immense and powerful socialist Motherland, through heroic and creative labor, are erecting the majestic edifice of communism, creating in life mankind’s age-old dream of building a communist society and an abundant, happy, and joyous life._ – _The Book about Tasty and Healthy foods, 1953_

The vibrant illustrations were advertisements for an abundance of bounty when really these products were scarce. The text directed, reeducated citizens to regress from their once primitive state, overcome resistance, and embrace progressive socialist conduct. There was no “majestic edifice,” only the blueprint sat collecting dust along with the empty pantry shelves. It was a veneer of an advancing nation, slowly getting chipped away to its total stagnant society.

So Babushka did not make much progress in her craft until she immigrated to America where Mom had already begun to master her own craft. She, like Babushka, could place you into
a hypnotic trance when she served her mouthwatering dishes. Unfortunately, unlike Babushka, she never needed any help cooking. The kitchen was her realm, and any invasion of this space was punishable by starvation. Sometimes, while she cut vegetables for the salad, she would pawn off extra slices to me while I kept her company. I became the family pet poodle who scrapped up the leftover veggies. Alas, never having eaten ice cream or any real sweet for that matter before the age of four, Mom still had to prop me up on the couch with pillows on either side.

“You were not fat, just round. A little chubby baby,” she says in my defense, struggling to catch her breath after having laughed incessantly with tears welling up in her eyes. Of all our differences, I somehow managed to acquire the same sense of humor and her high cheeked smile. No matter how many times she tells it, no matter how old I am, this story never ceases to amuse me.

Mom is in limbo between the nurturing, kind, protective soul, but slowly but surely is turning into the sly and scheming spirit. She started collecting a particular dish set. Gorgeous cups, bowls, plates, serving trays and the like in vibrant blues, reds, and yellows. Fashionista figures in large, magenta and burgundy, floppy hats caress lime and sorbet-orange cups with their slender ivory, scarlet painted fingertips. We never used them. They were all for show. Dinnerware as poster advertisement, like the ones in the *Book of Tasty and Healthy Foods*. I could look and admire their beauty from afar, but God forbid if I poured a coffee into one of those luxuriant, porcelain cups, I would face Mom’s wrath. Her sing-song voice dropped down an octave and roared as threateningly as a German shepherd’s bark on a stormy night. Her eyes burned with a fiery passion and by some smidge of control, she did not burn me to a crisp with the glare that burned Vasilisa the Beautiful’s wicked stepmother and stepsisters after Vasilisa brought back the glowing skull from the witch Baba Yaga per her stepmother’s request for light.
In a kitchen where no real treasures were to be found and no messes were to be made, Mom took pride in her china. In a spacious room with sterile white cabinets and gold knobs, hardwood oak floors, an island in the middle, complete with high tech stove top, built in convection oven, and matching appliances, the china was the last thing to make a model home kitchen complete. I must mention that there was never a crumb, never a spot, never a goddamn thing out of place. It was orderly. Just like Mom’s cooking. “Scrubbed, sponged, and scoured” might as well have been engraved above the kitchen sink.

When I cooked with Babushka in her kitchen, it was phantasmagorical. Standing atop one of the dining room chairs in the corner of the kitchenette, leaning up against the off-white countertops and tarnished sink, in my small apron that matched Babushka’s identically, I watched the magic unfold. Deda, my grandfather, cut up raspberries, strawberries, apples, and plums. Babushka, with the flick of a wrist, ushered the fruit into the pot and stirred them into a thick burgundy with her wooden staff. Boiling and bubbling, steaming and sizzling, water blisters hissed condensing on the pot of kompot. Stewed and stored, holodnik takes its place with hard boiled eggs drifting atop a seedy burgundy swamp. Blended with sour cream, fog overlays the marsh and the brew seethes over the fuming pot. As phlebotomists wheedle out blood, Babushka drains the chilled and stilled fluids into her jars.
Плов из баранины
Rice Pilaf with Lamb

Makes 4 servings
Prep 15 min * cook 40 mins

INGREDIENTS

1 lb boneless lamb, cut into 1 in cubes
2 onions, thinly sliced
2 cups white rice
1 large carrot, shredded
Salt and freshly ground pepper
Vegetable oil, for frying

METHOD

1. Season the lamb with salt and pepper. Heat 1 tbsp of oil in a large, heavy-bottomed frying pan over high heat. Cook the lamb for 3-4 minutes on each side, until browned. Stir in onion and shredded carrots.

2. Meanwhile, bring a large pot of lightly salted water to a boil. Add rice, reduce heat to low and cover. Stir in lamb, carrots, and onions.

3. Simmer until the lamb and rice are very tender, about 30 minutes. Season with salt and pepper. Serve immediately.
Blood runs through her veins and my veins and vainly flushes my cheeks and her cheeks and her cheeks. High cheek bones require blood to spill into a larger surface area, especially when they crowd the eyes and crinkle the nose. It is warm and gushy, like borsch, steaming and boiling in a pot.

Burgundy, beet-red blood cells swimming in bubbly soup and sweating a stuffy odor. Cabbage swarms about the red fluid among the sprinkled dill like her age spots and the spots that have yet to show up for her daughter and her daughter.

But her blood is no longer gushy and supple. It is runny and silky from the small white tablets she pops in her mouth like the sour cream dollops that trickles into the borsch.

Everything must be in equilibrium. Too gushy and it gets stuck. And the heart cannot pump the gush through the grates to the pipes for circulation. Instead the beet falls apart and disintegrates into the broth that gets slurped, digested, and expelled.

High blood pressure is the equivalent of borsch erupting out of a pot like lava from a volcano. It is the boiling point. It is blood.
plunging into the heart, soaking and swamping it full with fluid, preventing purgation. But it cannot be silenced as her roots are intertwined with her daughter and her daughter. Chiming vocal chords forever tangled.

Her heart is forever good.

It is the mallet that beats the blood red beef and churns it through the grind. She pumps her soul into all things good that are inevitably consumed by all things bad. But, this way all things have a little good left in them. The blood-red seedlings of a pomegranate burst goodness into your mouth and then acidify into your stomach to burn the heart. There are white dollops for this, though sour cream works just as well. But her daughter and her daughter echo the chime, stringing the roots, one-by-one.

Low blood pressure is the equivalent to holodnik, the chilled beet bisque enriched with cucumber, onion, and hardboiled egg. A lighter consistency, but still, cabbage aside, the dill trickles in aging the root with time.

Maybe by then there will be dollops to cure my spots and her spots.
Blood thin yet plentiful it skids down the throat, into the stomach and out like the water beneath the moat. The heart is refreshed with a drink of cold soup, steadily beating like her daughter’s.

But the inconsistency remains. The capillaries squeeze the blood, and it does not steadily pass from one root to the next. For now it innocently dribbles down my jowls, but not my mother’s. My heart pumps and spits childishly. Her heart is mature. Her mother’s heart, however, is neither childish nor mature. It is weak and without fluidity. It is pinched and nerved. No squirt of sour cream heals this heart. It is borsch trying to impersonate holodnik for the sake of survival.

Fifteen years later and we are just now catching on.

At least blood is thicker than water.
Селедка под шубой
HERRING SALAD

METHOD

1. Place beet into saucepan of lightly salted water over medium-high heat and boil for about 40 minutes, or until tender. Drain, rinse under cold running water, drain well, and pat dry with paper towels. Peel and grate coarse chunks into a bowl.

2. Meanwhile, place the potato and carrot into two separate saucepans, cover with lightly salted cold water, and bring to a boil over high heat. Reduce the heat to medium and cover. Simmer the carrot for 3 minutes and the potato for about 10 minutes or until tender. Drain, let cool, and dice each into separate bowls.

3. Simmer eggs for 12 minutes. Rinse briefly under cold water and soak in ice water until cooled. Peel and slice eggs lengthwise. Remove yolks and slice whites.

4. Slice the herring and layer ¼ lb in a deep ceramic dish. Layer ¼ cup of diced onion, cover with half of the potato chunks. Add layer of ¼ cup carrots and cover with sliced egg. Repeat layering herring, onion, potato, and carrots.

5. Add layer of grated beet to top and sides. Smear mayonnaise until stained pink. Sprinkle with egg yolk. Serve chilled.
ХОЛОДНИК
COLD BEET SOUP

METHOD

1. Place shredded beet into saucepan of lightly salted water over medium-high heat and boil for about 40 minutes, or until tender. Squeeze half a lemon into the broth. Season generously with salt.
2. Turn off heat and let cool at room temperature.
3. Chill in refrigerator for at least 1 hour.
4. Meanwhile, in a separate bowl mix cucumber, onion, and eggs.
5. When ready to serve, ladle broth into individual bowls. Add vegetable mixture and garnish with fresh dill. Top each serving with a dollop of sour cream.

ГРЁНКИ
FRENCH TOAST

METHOD

1. In a bowl crack egg yolks and whisk with milk.
2. Cut French bread in thick slices.
3. Meanwhile, heat enough oil to come ¼in up the sides of a large frying pan and heat over medium heat.
4. In batches submerge each bread slice in the egg mixture until just saturated but not soaked. Add to the frying pan and cook, turning once, until golden on both sides. Transfer to a covered container and keep warm while cooking the remaining slices.
**Винегрет**
**Vinaigrette**

**METHOD**

1. Place the potatoes and carrots into two separate saucepans, cover with lightly salted cold water, and bring to a boil over high heat. Reduce the heat to medium and cover. Simmer the carrots for 3 minutes and the potatoes for about 15 minutes or until tender. Drain, let cool, and dice.

2. Meanwhile, in another sauce pan of lightly salted water over medium-high heat, boil the beet for about 40 minutes, or until tender. Drain, rinse under cold running water; drain well, and pat dry with paper towels. Peel and dice the beet.

3. Mix the potatoes, carrots, beet, pickles, onions, and sauerkraut with olive oil in a bowl.

4. Spoon into a serving dish, add the salt. Serve chilled.
Гоголь-моголь
GOGOL-MOGOL

Makes 1 serving
Prep 5 mins

INGREDIENTS
1 egg
1 cup of milk
1 tbsp sugar

METHOD
1. In a bowl crack egg yolks into a glass and whisk with milk.
2. Whisk sugar with egg until thick like syrup.
3. Heat milk in saucepan over low heat for about 3 minutes and pour into sugar and egg mixture, stirring.

борщ
BORSCHT

Makes 6 servings
Prep 15 mins * cook 1½ hr

INGREDIENTS
1 potato, diced
1 medium beet, scrubbed but unpeeled
½ head cabbage, shredded
1 tomato, sliced
½ onion, sliced
½ carrot, grated
1 tsp dill (dried)
Sour cream, for serving

METHOD
1. Place beet into saucepan of lightly salted water over medium-high heat and boil for about 40 minutes, or until tender. Drain, rinse under cold running water, drain well, and pat dry with paper towels. Peel and shred coarsely.
2. Place potato and shredded cabbage into a saucepan, cover with lightly salted cold water, and bring to a boil over high heat. Reduce the heat to medium and cover. Simmer for about 15 minutes or until tender.
3. Meanwhile, add 1 cup of water to a large frying pan and heat over medium heat. Add the onions, tomatoes, carrots, and beets, and cook, stirring occasionally for 15 minutes or until just softened. Pour vegetables into saucepan with potatoes and cabbage. Stir in the dill. Season generously with salt and pepper. Simmer for 20 minutes.
4. Top each serving with a dollop of sour cream.
DOSTATOCHNO

PLENTY

Over Eating
Tick-Tock

We are all sous-chefs, the sorceress’s apprentices. Be it beet burgundy vinaigrette with bloody stains on pickles, potatoes and eggs, or claret shuba with herring and egg, the blood runs thick through all our veins. Rather than the red blood cells, however, I chose white as I stood over the sink, shelling eggs, peeling carrots and potatoes, and singing in Russian about the green grasshopper that was as green as a cucumber and faced the unfortunate death when he was eaten by a toad. And Babushka would sing along. We were making Olivier, potato salad.

In the 1860s, French Chef Lucien Olivier created this signature spellbinding salad at the Hermitage restaurant in Moscow. It was an instant hit with the public and quickly spread to menus across Europe. Little did I know, this salad would wind up being one of the many potions by which I would charm my lover.

Lara Vapnyar, the Russian émigré writer, wrote the fictional version of the trance I placed on the apple of my eye. In the short work entitled “Salad Olivier,” mother demands daughter, Tanya, to lure a boyfriend into her captive. According to her mother, it can be done as easily as chopping up ingredients for a salad and mixing them up to the point of no return – Marriage. According to Tanya, she would rather drop dead. According to Babushka, at present, I am already an old maid at age 20. But neither she nor Mom were ever so persistent in my finding a boyfriend. I was my own driving force. Finely chopping away and looking forward rather than back at the schmucks Tanya, I, and most every other girl has had the privilege of knowing, brought me power and happiness. A year and some change later, I still have him wrapped around my pickled finger.
САЛАТ ОЛИВЬЕ
POTATO SALAD

METHOD

1. Place the potatoes and carrots into two separate saucepans, cover with lightly salted cold water, and bring to a boil over high heat. Reduce the heat to medium and cover. Simmer the carrots for 3 minutes and the potatoes for about 15 minutes or until tender. Drain, let cool, and dice.

2. Boil the hotdogs for 10 minutes. Drain, let cool, and dice.

3. Simmer the eggs for 12 minutes. Rinse briefly under cold water and soak them in ice water until cooled. Peel and dice the eggs.

4. Mix the mayonnaise, potatoes, carrots, hotdogs, eggs, pickles, onions, and peas in a bowl. Season generously with salt. Refrigerate and serve chilled.

INGREDIENTS

- 5 medium russet potatoes, peeled and diced
- 1 carrot, diced
- 3 eggs, diced
- 2 pickles, diced
- 1 onion, diced
- 6 pork hotdogs
- 1 cup peas
- 4 tbsp mayonnaise
- Salt

Makes 6 servings
Prep 20 mins *cook 20
Tick Tick

It took practice. My chopping skills were never completely up to par. Both Babushka and Mom never refrained from scolding me when I did something the wrong way, especially, when I peeled, and by peeled, I mean hacked, half the potato with a knife. Russian women do not believe in peelers.

One would only think that Elena Molokhovets, a woman just as enthusiastic about culinary gadgets as she was about the food, would take interest in a potato peeler. From the modern ice cream maker with interior paddles to churn the cream, to the meat grinder with eighteen removable blades to the portable samovar, Molokhovets obsessively boasted about them all.xxii With a potato peeler, Russian women would not hunch over the sink scrutinizing over the careful stripping of potato or cucumber skins.

I remember when Babushka snatched the potato and knife away from me yelping her cursed wail, “Ay-yay-yay! Look at how much you are cutting off!” She picked up a piece as though it were a severed limb. “Yulechka, let me show you.” And she did. I still cannot peel a potato or any vegetable to this day with a knife. So, maybe it is more than scrutiny. It is technique, but at some point she and Mom had to stop beating the dead horse.

Cooking, however, is a ritual. Many see it fit that rituals be passed on in their most authentic, traditional sense. Without the mastery of technique there is no room for modification if there is not an initial understanding of the original. The same is with embroidery. It was imperative that the spinning techniques were preserved when they were passed on from mother to daughter to her daughter and so forth. Embroidery became a language, a means of communicating the sacred, the divine. Russian women were embroidering the Great Goddess since antiquity until the onset of Christianity.xxiii The Great Goddess is the female deity who is in
her many incarnations the spinner of life and death, the virgin temptress rusalka, the mother, and
the wise elder woman Baba Yaga within Slavic folklore. Typically, she is depicted with her
hands raised in the orante position with a womb of the earth for body as the tree of life. The
plants are fertile at her feet and the heavens swirl about her head haloed by the sun. She holds the
reins to horses or lions and all of earths creatures emanate from her. She is Babushka with her
hands flung up in the air, exasperated at how awful the rest of us conduct ourselves in the
kitchen. Steam comes out of her ears, the gingery hair on her head stands up on end, and she
stands their wringing a towel in her hands as the rest of us look up at her wide-eyed waiting for
direction.

With Babushka, however, you cannot rely on direction. It is all a matter of intuition. Somewhere
between shelling eggs and peeling vegetables, there are tests of womanhood. It is an
initiation where I had to recognize the value of cookery, the sacrifice of time and taste for the
pleasure of others. Baba Yaga initiated children into adulthood from her hut which stood on
chicken legs, facing the forest from a fence of spiked human bones, crowned with glowing eye
socket skulls. Babushka’s home was not much different. She lured me into her kitchen where
onions grew plump from their jars and fish eyes ogled you and the cleaver with fear. With the
stove always hot and the oven scorching it is shocking to think that after all my mischief she did
not throw me into the oven and gobble me up. Perhaps the comparison to the great Baba Yaga is
a bit too threatening and vindictive. Babushka has neither iron teeth nor breast and does not drive
out in a mortar, propelling it with a pestle, and sweeping away her tracks with a broom after
smothering you with chores. Babushka knows how to nurture and how to cast a spell, especially
when her cleverness works to her favor.
**Tock goes the Biological Clock**

At age four, Babushka introduced me to the neighbor’s grandson who lived down the street. His was name was Barry. He was six months younger than I was, but Babushka insisted that he was mature for his age. So, we had play dates at Babushka’s and his Babushka’s houses everyday in the summer. What he looked like then, is rather blurry, but if my memory serves me right, at age nine, right around the time I started wearing a training bra, and he and all his friends would tease me, he was one good looking kid.

In fact, it was love at first sight. I worked my short, frizzled afro and he rocked the Jew fro. He resembled a rather amusing looking insect. With his long, skinny limbs, a small potbelly, and big, bulging eyes, resultant of the obnoxiously large, magnifying eyeglasses – gosh, he was just dreamy! I, unfortunately, looked no better. I bore a resemblance to a rabbit after having gotten every baby tooth on my upper gums pulled besides my two front teeth. The tooth fairy didn’t even spot me a nickel for my milky whites.

Mom insisted that the tooth fairy did not exist. I should just get past this figment of my imagination the same way I did Santa Claus. At age six on Christmas Eve, Mom spoiled my all-nighter because Mommy wanted to stay up kissing Santa Claus underneath the Christmas tree. In any case, it was time to grow up. Mom said to throw my teeth away, like she had done when she was little. She threw them into the fire, into the garbage, into anything. Why? She hadn’t a clue. Mom should have known about the tooth mouse. She never paid her respects either. The tooth fairy had all the time in the world to help the good Queen defeat the evil king by transforming into a mouse, hiding under his pillow and knocking all his teeth out. \(^{xxv}\) Yet, she just did not have the decency to pay me a visit when I had ten baby teeth pulled out in one day. The tooth mouse
didn’t even grant me sharper canines like rodents were expected to do when we sacrificed our milky baby teeth. Then again, I am not so sure I would want those either.

**Stop Watch and Waterproof**

Toothless and bloated, Barry and I were a funny looking pair, but by some miracle we never noticed. He was my partner in crime when we tried to prank our grandparents. If we played hide-and-seek, he always let me get away with hiding in the closets and cabinets we were forbidden to play in. He even put up with my imaginary scenarios where I played the role of Princess Jasmine, and he pretended to be Aladdin, though he never did let me kiss him.

Coloring came to be a mandatory, daily activity. Babushka to this day insists on keeping the doodles where he drew two awkward, horribly unattractive figures holding hands with the words *I Love You Julia* written in the corner of the page.

It’s not that I was heartless; I was just a little tomboyish. Besides Barry, there was my cousin Dima and Barry’s cousin Jeff and their friends Igor and Roman and another five or six boys whose names escape me. I was the only girl, and took pride in being a part of their company. Every summer we all got together to play Monopoly and baseball. I never finished a game of Monopoly and I never managed to hit the baseball with the bat. Though there were a couple hits with my nose and mouth, none were hard enough to score a homerun for the team. I persisted to play for one reason: Jeff. I thought Jeff was my very own, life size Ken. When he came up behind me, wrapped his lanky, twelve year old boy arms around me, intertwining his fingers with mine, swinging a bat suddenly took on a whole new level of adrenaline rush. Jeff was six years my senior and I couldn’t muster up a single thing to say to him most the time. Somewhere down the road that led to cooties and later tween years, I put up with the childish chant about Julia and Barry sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G. Little did these tormenting carolers
know, royalty, rarely if ever, stoops low enough to kiss a frog; though it is still unclear who the frog is.

Of course, there is the Brothers Grimm’s legendary *Frog Prince* where the princess transforms a frog into a handsome prince with true love’s first kiss to break his curse. The folkloric tale of *The Frog Princess* is much more interesting and much less misogynistic. Princess Elena is not a frog as punishment, but is instead an instrument of wisdom to test the devotion and sensibility of Prince Ivan when he forced to wed her after she brings back his arrow. While Ivan’s two brothers fiancés are women, of the three brides to be, Elena still manages to bake the most beautiful bread and sew the finest clothes as a frog. The kingdom marvels at her talent and sorcery as she dances spilling wine and bones from her sleeves creating a mirage of glorious meadows with animals frolicking left and right. Yet, after all Elena did for Ivan in the eyes of the kingdom, he departs from the ball and selfishly burns her frog skin.

*You had waited a bit longer. I’d have been yours, but now God knows! Good-bye!*

~*The Frog Princess*

So Prince Ivan comes to his senses and sets on a journey visiting three different Baba Yagas to seek out his Elena. At the third hut, he finally finds Elena’s spirit trapped inside a spool wound with gold thread. He breaks the spool and lo and behold Princess Elena stands before Prince Ivan.

Why couldn’t Barry just break the spool? Or why couldn’t I just burn his skin? We played in the meadow inside the courtyard of our grandparents’ neighborhood. There was even a hut! Why didn’t one of us consult Baba Yaga when we were climbing the roof? It was probably because no consultation was necessary when Babushka spellbound us with her perchiki. At first gaze, at first taste, at first drool, it was meant to be.
Long, red and green, juicy slices soaking in a retired pickle jar. Salty and crisp to the tongue. Swimming in a seedy swamp-like liquid, our fingers were always ready to take a dive and fish out the best catch.

Babushka, fussing in the kitchen, would yell over *Clifford* or *Wishbone*, “Deti, perchiki hotite?”

Did we want them? Was that a trick question? Of course we wanted them! We didn’t think twice. We leapt off the turquoise fabric couches and bolted into the kitchen shoving each other to make it into the kitchen first.

“I want some!”

“Me too!”

Pleased, Babushka handed us the jar.

“Thank you!” he chimed in his high pitched, squeal.

“Thanks, Babushka.”

“Na Zdorovye!”

That was Babushka’s response to anything she cooked and we consumed. How healthy could these salty delights have been, there is no telling, but the pleasure endured from eating them, is what really counts.

So, we would sit at the round kitchen table, drawing 10 x 10 battleship boards on grid paper numbered 1-10 vertically and A-J horizontally, staining our sheets with our vinegary fingertips.

“A-2,” he calls mid bite.

“Mimo!” I cheerfully croon, fishing out another from the jar. My turn. “E-6.”

“Ranila,” he mutters, slipping a red sliver into his mouth.
“E-7.”

“Ranila!”

I drop a green one into my mouth. “E-8.”

“Ubila!” he shouts as he fishes for another slice with his pudgy fingers.

I sunk his battleship! And all the perchiki were gone.

Without the perchiki, our friendship soon withered away. Romantic comedies, nail polish and slumber parties with no boys allowed. Barry no longer fit into the picture. Careless, childhood fun shared by one boy and one girl simply did not have the right chemical reaction, especially when I came to realize that he came to be a distant cousin of mine when his uncle and my aunt married. We did, however, make a darling couple at the wedding where I was the flower girl and he was the ring bearer.

Babushka always says that our oldest friends are golden. I was learning some song in Girl Scouts at the time. Holding hands and singing off key, we all pledged to Make new friends but keep the old, one is silver and the other gold. Somewhere between a Slim Fast brown vest and an aqua vest with pleated shorts, I let my pledge slide to the sidelines. No one wants gold when you can have platinum. What happens to the silver friends? Do they upgrade to gold? When does this happen and what is it exactly that makes a friend golden? Babushka would argue time is the answer. Friendships need to brew, age like a good wine. While Babushka still had plans for the two of us, this friendship boiled over and put out the fire. It spoiled. Whether she believed that he and I were soul mates, in my mind, he was a disease, an infection, contagious; one, big cootie.

Ne na zdarovye.
Малосольные огурцы
PICKLES

METHOD
Makes 8 servings
Prep 1.5 mins, plus 48 hrs marinating

INGREDIENTS
8 cucumbers, scrubbed
4 cups water
1 tsp salt
1 tsp pepper
1 tsp dill
bay leaf

5. Bring a pot of water to boil
6. Stir in salt, pepper, dill, and bay leaf
7. Soak cucumbers in brine and marinade for two days in airtight jars or containers
8. Refrigerate and store for up to one month.

Малосольные перцы
MARINATED PEPPERS

METHOD
Makes 6 servings
Prep 1.5 mins, plus 48 hrs marinating

INGREDIENTS
1 green pepper, sliced
1 red pepper, sliced
1 garlic clove, chopped
6 black peppercorns
1 tsp dill
1 tsp salt

1. Bring a pot of water to boil
2. Meanwhile, in an airtight jar, mix peppercorns, garlic, dill, and salt with peppers.
3. Soak pepper mixture with brine and marinade for two days.
4. Refrigerate and store for up to one month.
Turbo Time Machine

While Babushka may be clever and cunning with her failed matchmaking romance, she became no wiser than Mary Poppins. Poppins made the children take their medicine by pairing it with a spoonful of sugar to make it go down. Babushka made her own medicine: Gogol Mogol. This God awful sounding concoction, tastes no better, especially when it lathers your sore throat. I remember her cracking egg yolks into a glass, whipping them stiff with sugar, dousing it with hot milk, and adding a spoonful of honey. Sure, it doesn’t sound too bad; in fact, it almost sounds like cookie dough minus the flour and baking soda. Maybe even a sort of eggnog. Either she didn’t add enough sugar and honey or substituted the milk for buttermilk or maybe sour cream. It was revolting and Deda had to hold my head back and pinch my nose while Babushka poured the lumpy white substance down my throat.

The original version of this drink required goat milk and rum (which will make practically anything taste good) as per the instruction of the revered writer and “true gastronome,” Nikolai Gogol. It all makes complete sense since the alcohol would kill the bacteria in the throat and lather it with honey and sugar while preventing heart burn with the milk. How could Babushka possibly have forgotten the rum? In Serbia, you eat a cube of sugar to attract bacteria, then take a shot of plum brandy to kill it, and then at ease sip an espresso without worry. If it works for the Serbs, it should work for the Russians.

As Baba Yaga brewed her stews with the help of severed hand apparitions, I helped Babushka with my little hands to transform this yucky liquefied batter for all that ails you. When mixed with flour and baked, Gogol Mogol transforms into the most delicious pastry: teiglach. Teiglach is a traditionally Jewish dessert, some deem it to be confections, whereas others simply recognize it to be “little dough” balls, from the literal Yiddish translation. The pastry is typically
served on Rosh Hashanah to ring in a happy, healthy, and sweet New Year. But, in our family, Babushka makes slabs of them four or five times a year. They are death by sugar. You can only imagine what a sweet death it would be. The first time Babushka let me help her make these, I couldn’t resist. From the sugar to the honey to the poppy seeds, we beat the ingredients together with an enormous spoon. Then, Babushka reached into flour, threw down a handful onto the countertop and plopped down the dough. Bewildered, my eyes grew wide, my jaw dropped, a little saliva started collecting at the corner of my mouth. Babushka, looking up from the mess that she was making took one look at me and callously tore off a chunk of dough, grasped my hands in hers and smothered them in the powdery white. Still speechless, I looked up at her star struck.

“What are you waiting for? Start rolling balls, like this,” she said tearing off a small piece of dough and rolling it into the pan.

I rolled those balls for what seemed to be a fortnight. There were easily 300 doughy balls. Babushka dumped them all in a pan and let them tumble into a boiling bath of honey and sugar and nuts and poppy seeds and other Babushka deliciousness. This process started at day break and was not finished until night fall. How Babushka did it, why she toiled endless hours in the kitchen, is still beyond me. But as the wise Baba Yaga advised, it is best to accept fact, rather than to question it.

Not every question has a good answer; if you know too much, you will soon grow old...I do not like to have my dirty linen washed in public, and I eat the overcurious.

– Vasilisa the Beautiful
After baking in her oven and cooling on the window sill, it was time to break into the slab. It took one doughy ball. I was sold. From that very moment I knew Olivier had been replaced and baking would soon consume my life eternally.
Teiglach

METHOD

1. To make the dough whisk eggs with sugar. Stir in the olive oil and vodka. Gradually add the flour to make a soft dough that pulls away from the side of the bowl.

2. Knead on a lightly floured surface until smooth and elastic. Roll dough into ½ inch thick ropes and slice ½ inch pieces.

3. Meanwhile, to make the glaze bring water, honey, and sugar to a boil in a covered saucepan. Stir in doughy pieces and cook over low heat for 20 minutes. Continue stirring over low heat uncovered for 30-40 minutes, or until golden brown.

4. Immediately spread the confections evenly on a damp wooden cutting board. Sprinkle with chopped walnuts and poppy seeds. Let cool for 5 minutes.

5. Slice the confections diagonally into rhombuses. Cool completely and store in an airtight container.
**Eternal Bliss**

As my taste in food matured, so did my taste in men. I was ready to leave the comfort of my fantasy fairytale romance behind, convinced that Aladdin by no means exists. Like any little girl, I still adored the Walt Disney modified tales of *Cinderella, The Little Mermaid, and Sleeping Beauty*, but these women were not empowered and completely dependent on men for guidance and protection. These women had nothing going for them besides their beauty, compassion, and their obedience. So the Cinderella Complex was born. Young girls aspired to become Cinderella, Ariel, and Aurora and thus waited for some external force to transform their lives rather than taking control of it themselves.

If only they were more fixated on tales like *The Princess and the Pea*, where a nameless, disheveled princess wandered into a castle of a nameless prince and made a name for herself. She quickly escalated to the top of the suitor list after the prince was bored to tears with the rest of his courters. It was not her beauty or charm that allured him, but her sensitivity and strength. The princess in the most temperamental fashion announced how awful her slumber had been the previous night after someone had the audacity of placing a pea beneath twenty mattresses and twenty down comforters. A measly pea would be felt only by a real princess who could feel the weight bearing down on her spinal column. Bearing a bruise of knowledge, the princess was much too clever to be distracted by pampering. So, the prince resolved to marry her.

If only these girls had Babushka around, they would know better. Rather than admire these floozies, they would revere the clever and independent Vasilisa and Elena. Internalizing these tales of sorcery and female empowerment, the Yagas and princesses became my idols. I modeled my own life after them, but most importantly, after my own Baba. Babushka has always held the reins, but in more recent years, she let me jerk them from time to time.
Slowly but surely, I grew into the heavy, wild ebony curls that spilled down my back like rusalka’s. She controlled the weather and seasons, and I had mood swings. The peasants tiptoed around and feared her aggression and somehow I managed to take on an air of intimidation. The power of independence ran through my veins and electrified my heart and mind. I spun. I spun my fate and everyone saw and surrendered their looms. Baba Yaga had taught me well. She taught me that my happily ever after is within reach of my fingertips.

_Davnym-davno…_

Once upon a time, on a dreary October evening, where an oblique, charcoal sky melded into the concrete pavement, a princess left her cozy apartment in a scarlet crewneck sweater, skinny jeans tucked into fur trimmed, brown suede, platform boots for a ball. She was reluctant going with the Amazonian 6’1’’ model that would later abandon her for a Hercules lookalike and leave her with the pudgy, luckless cherub. But, after enough persuasion, she set out on her journey with the other two fates climbing to the Kingdom of Hill.

There she was met by a bacchanalian atmosphere, where towers of light and dark beers alternating lined the walkway to the palace. She entered and saw the dessert buffet with a grand bowl fizzing orange with a bulb shaped glass bottle pouring the contents down a silver funnel. There were glass shooters with Jello liquors and double fudge brownies with icicle green ivy. And the symphony roared and the couples danced, and there, in the center of the crowd, stood her votary, Michael.

He was poised and handsomely dressed. He looked to her with a revered gaze and lowered his eyes as she approached him. He bowed his head, looked into her eyes with a fiery passion and asked her to dance. She shook her tangled mane and began to spin their fate.
Amazonian and cherub in tow, the three women perched inside a crimson chariot. Michael, bewitched by the princess’s mystifying air, drove the spinners to the cove with his two comrades. Upon their arrival the maidens surveyed their surroundings. It was a typical bachelor pad, complete with black leather couches, plasma screen television. They ventured into the kitchen where there was nothing to be found besides a fertility project: eggs, bread, and milk.

Cracking the eggs, splitting the yolk, whisking with milk
Cracking the eggs, splitting the yolk, whisking with milk
Sprinkle of cinnamon
Touch of sugar
Cracking the eggs, splitting the yolk, whisking with milk
Cracking the eggs, splitting the yolk, whisking with milk
Sprinkle of cinnamon
Touch of sugar
Dip
Dip
Dip
Dip
The bread soaks in a syrupy slime
A sizzle and cackle invoke the divine

French toast has the ability of enlivening any palate. Buffing the teeth, blanketing the tongue, sugar coating the roof of the mouth, the eyes roll to the back the head irresistibly in ecstasy. The consorts devoured these slices and gaped into the goddesses succulent mouths as they cooed their sweet, enchanting song.

Bellies full and frenzied, the six sprung into the hot spring with bubbling geysers inside, luring their consorts into a swirling trap. The Amazonian had her fair share of naïve men that week and proceeded to ally with the princess and spellbind the votary while the cherub entertained the other devotees.
For one reason or another, the princess resolved to not drown this one. He was not enticed by the sound of her voice, but by the words that she spoke. Not only did he follow the discourse, he contributed to it as well. But most importantly, he resisted all temptation. So, the princess did the only thing she could think to do: reward her consort for passing her initial test. Forewarning the other two maidens with a wink, the two slipped out of the spring and pulled out the other two consorts. The four rushed away into the cove with the sound of shrill laughter trailing behind them.

The princess gazed into the acute blueness of Michael’s eyes. He furrowed his eyes brows in anticipation of what was to come next. As she placed her silk smooth fingers to his temple, and let her hand glide along his soft cheeks and sharp jaw, his bottom lip began to quiver. She slowly ran her thumb over his lip and like biting into a soft peach, she placed her lips on his, and remained there into the wee hours of the morning, beneath the spiraling snowflakes of a powdery white sky. As the gold thread spun out of control, the spool whirled and twirled and gyrated like the hips of a shimmying dancer. To this day, the swiveling has yet to stop.
Incessant Exuberance of the Body

Barechested –
They were impressive.
suddenly
One quarter this
One quarter that
One quarter him
One quarter her.

Against his body
I felt green.
magnificent, firm, yellow flesh.
exotic flavor as I pounded deep
I felt that it was –

I lift
She accepts,
I pervade

Despite all his faults
Nevertheless,
in a universe containing nothing,
I crave him,
his density

I tell her compromise.
Let’s talk counterintuitive victories –
Earth-man-heaven
Rabbi, Buddha, Jesus
Vishnu-Shiva-Brahma.

We align
the powerful
endorphins.
Chocolate.

Few weeks pass
He waits, his skin firm
collecting the scraps of
intangible benefits,
complications.

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MASTERING THE CRAFT 62
Bliss at a Standstill

After that magical night, I gave in to serendipity. Having left Babushka’s and Mom’s kitchen, I entertained my learned recipes of the heart. I stopped trying to conceal my passions and drive. I had had enough of men who felt intimidated by my nose-stuck-in-a-book-I-don’t-use-the-word-“like”-every-two-seconds-nor-drink-like-a-fish disposition.

“I read and I write. That is what I do,” I told him right off the bat.

Sure, I speckled a few feta white cheese crumbs about how much I love to ski and how incredible I am, but Greek salad has many other ingredients besides the cheese, like green olives.

Normally, you would expect uncomfortable, awkwardness between two new lovers. Yet, when the aphrodisiac kicked in, nerves were eased and we were both consoled by the presence and conversation with the other. He whisked me away in his Red Jeep Wrangler into the foothills for a first date. There was, of course, plenty of blushing and over compensation with compliments, but the flirtation escalated. Climbing rocks and ducking beneath branches, we reached the peak and gawked at the hang gliders jumping from the adjacent peaks. There was no shredding of any white provolone, just an embrace, the perfect charm by which to bait and catch my fish.

From that day, I swore to never grate more cheese than necessary. Though he claims I tricked him. There is no room for boxed macaroni and cheese after you have made four cheese Monterey Jack-Cheddar-Parmesan-Swiss pasta from scratch. Though prince charming and I often saved our pennies and cooked up some Kraft Macaroni & Cheese, which really is not half bad when you are sappily gleaming into each others’ eyes feeding each other cheese powdered noodles from the sauce pot.
Babushka and Mom warned me time and time again that the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach. My childish stubbornness of never cooking for a man, and better yet, having him cook for me did, not get me very far. There was no defying fate. Serendipity flooded my future. I tried Babushka’s apron on for size and sure enough, the shoe fit. I turned into the sorceress Babushka always knew I would become someday.

I told myself, however, not to be too ambitious in the beginning. We had to work our way to that critical point, the deserving platform. Call me crazy, but I lost myself in the comfort of reality and fell in love with my prince in a matter of a few short weeks. This love was the pea, piercing my heart. Though it took me much longer to cook up the nerve to tell him, letting it simmer for best taste, I could not take another morning of plain, instant, watered down oatmeal. So, I made Mom’s scrambled eggs.

Best scrambled eggs you have ever tasted. Salted, seasoned, veggie-up. He licked the plate clean. I was pleased. It became a once a week ritual for a few weeks, until he decided to join me in the kitchen. Displeased that the eggs were cooking in a frying pan with olive oil, I was joined by my very own Julia Child advocating to use butter instead. It was harmless to use a tablespoon of olive oil for three eggs and much healthier than butter, but I could not challenge a world renowned chef. So, I promised him from that day forth to always use butter when making his scrambled eggs.
Garlic Salt

I shred your backbone, undressing the cervical, thoracic, lumbar vertebrae with my piercing nails. These shift beneath my finger tips, whitened in ecstasy. Sheathed in a strong embrace, I cling to you as if time does not expire, but instead it ends at sunrise. I yearn for you, you are my knife, but I am uncertain that you are sharper than the others. You have not given me a reason to doubt, but I am the evil that lurks in your arms, undecided by your blade, reluctant to slash the onion into the scrambled eggs and cinnamon toast you swallowed this morning after sunrise.

Rather than leave you with a happily ever after, I leave you with a thread; a thread being forever spun into a hearty appetite.
NA POSOSHOK

ONE FOR THE ROAD

A Final Toast
It is a Russian custom to end a dinner party with a final toast. So, allow me to propose a toast to the most incredible women in my life. Without you, I would be forever lost. Your guidance in the kitchen and beyond has made me the woman that I am today.
I have my mother’s hands
who has her mother’s hands. Mine are less swollen than hers and
hers are less swollen than hers. I have different finger nails. They
are somehow always dirty, no matter how many times I wash my
hands. I always have a faint grimy line of dirt beneath my nail
beds. Maybe her acrylics hide her dirt. And maybe her
uncontrollably trembling hands
shake away
the faint line of grime beneath her nail beds.

But my nails are pillowed
into the soft down comforter skin. The same skin that lolls across
the evenly spaced knolls, blanketing posterity.
As with any baby blanket, the fibers dwindle and become like hers.
A bit looser.

Loosest.

No matter how much baby oil she rubs, the coarse comforter is
reduced
to its duvet cover. But sometimes she looks to her and she
massages olive oil into the lulls of the knolls. But even she knows
the fineness of the thread can do little to tighten serrations.

The fleshy, red pimento pepper fills the supple green olive.
If only the olive oil could soak into the flesh. Maybe then her joints
would anchor the weight of her fragile fingers.

I knead the dough the same way she does and she does. Standing
bow legged, pressed over the counter top. It offers her stability.
And her a receptor of thought. And me
a lumpy knot
to sift through. Roll the dough in a thin layer of flour to prevent it
from sticking to the counter. Yet, I am the yeast that sticks and
cannot rise
past the trembling digits.

She just bought a duvet cover. A 720 thread count luxury set,
pleated. Years ago she threw away the one she brought from
Russia. Her mother has a duvet cover. She brought it from Russia.
She hasn’t thrown it away. It is green polka-dotted and stuffed with
a vile,
Amazon green, woolen blanket.

I clutched the edges of the blanket with my small hands, clutched
by her small hands back then.

Knuckle up.
They are going to puff out the same way puff pastry does for Napoleon. Baking soda makes it rise.

Balance it out with vinegar. Bring it to equilibrium. How many walnuts should be chopped away to cramp her hand and my hand that has comparatively chopped nothing? One day I will be given the knife with which my hand will carve her to her very core.

Talentless, my fingers curl and caress the cutting board. Smooth and unscarred.

Hers were the same.

Hers were the same.

Getting lost among the knolls and valleys can happen only so many times before the dough flattens out into a plane.

The pain that screeches through the joints is subconsciously repressed and left for the final glaze of olive oil. She slops to the counter, slouching over the stick with her daughter and her daughter.
So a tousled princess arrived at the palace gates. She too went to the mattresses. Proving the Old Queen wrong, she climbed atop twenty mattresses and twenty eider-down beds, and bore the same weight that my mother and her mother bore.

She was still swallowed into the pits between the springs, lolling atop a stale green pea.

The thick-skinned, pod-striped orb left the same stiffness lingering at the small of her back and her back and my back.

Curling and whirling in blueness and black, it spirals into the doughy flesh. Had she a rolling pin, she could have smoothed out the bulge, the contusion, the lump, the vein that my mother and her mother had popped.

There is a small vein that runs from the ring finger to the heart.

Fittingly, the finger bore the pledge of love.

A small branch of the artery and not of the nerves, as Gellius thought, is stretched forth from the heart unto this finger, the motion whereof you may perceive evidently in all that affects the heart in women, by the touch of your fore finger. I used to raise such as are fallen in a swoon by pinching this joint, and by rubbing the ring of gold with a little saffron; for, by this, a restoring force that is in it passeth to the heart, and refreshen the fountain of life, unto which this finger joined. Wherefore antiquity thought fit to compass it about with gold. – Levinum Lemnius, 1658
But with what direction does this band of gold provide when the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach. She stripped her fingers of rings and so did her daughter and her daughter.

Pinching the joint strips the screw.

Jimmying the key in the lock only rattles the conscious knead and preparation of dough.

Spicing with saffron enhances the taste, but kneaded and rubbed the calluses come and rise on the flesh like the yeast in the flour.

Her artery withstood the pressure and pain and instead prepared her daughter and her daughter for the harsh truths of life that remain.

With every wrinkle and split the fingers keep lolling from one fold to the next where smoothing and tightening is not within her reach.

Uncork the pimento from the olive and grate it into the dough.

My mother has her mother’s hands and I have my mothers’ hands.
Гречневая каша с котлетой
Buckwheat with Beef Cutlets

Makes 8 servings
Prep 30 mins *cook 50 mins

INGREDIENTS

For the buckwheat
1 cup buckwheat
2 cups water
1 tbsp olive oil
½ tsp salt

For the beef cutlets
1 lb 93% fat free ground beef
¼ cup French bread crumbs
1 medium onion, minced
2 cloves of garlic, minced
1 egg
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
½ cup water

*Prepare ahead Rinse the buckwheat in a colander and drain any excess water.

METHOD

1. Bring a large pot of lightly salted water to a boil. Reduce heat to low and add the buckwheat. Stir in the oil and cook, stirring for 40-50 minutes, or until softened.

2. Meanwhile, combine the ground beef, French bread, onion, garlic, and egg in a mixing bowl. Season generously with salt and pepper, and mix well with wet hands. Shape into 8 cutlets, about 3 in in diameter and cook on medium heat in frying pan with water for 30 minutes.

3. Strain the buckwheat and spoon into individual bowls. Top each with a cutlet.
Potatoes and carrots and burgundy beets, my fingertips stained, my blueprint no more, but a house, triangular atop two legs. Babushka in the attic, Mom on the right, I finally broke through the door and stepped to the left with all my might. Now, three women under one roof commanding the stove. The hand cranks the key and the clock silences the tick. The shingles rattle and the chicken legs creak. My tummy is full and I wander away, pondering whether I will threaten my own children and grandchildren one day.


iv. Ibid.114.

v. Beeton Chapter 36.

vi. Molokhovets 114.


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Ibid. 96.


Ibid. 25.


Balina 39.