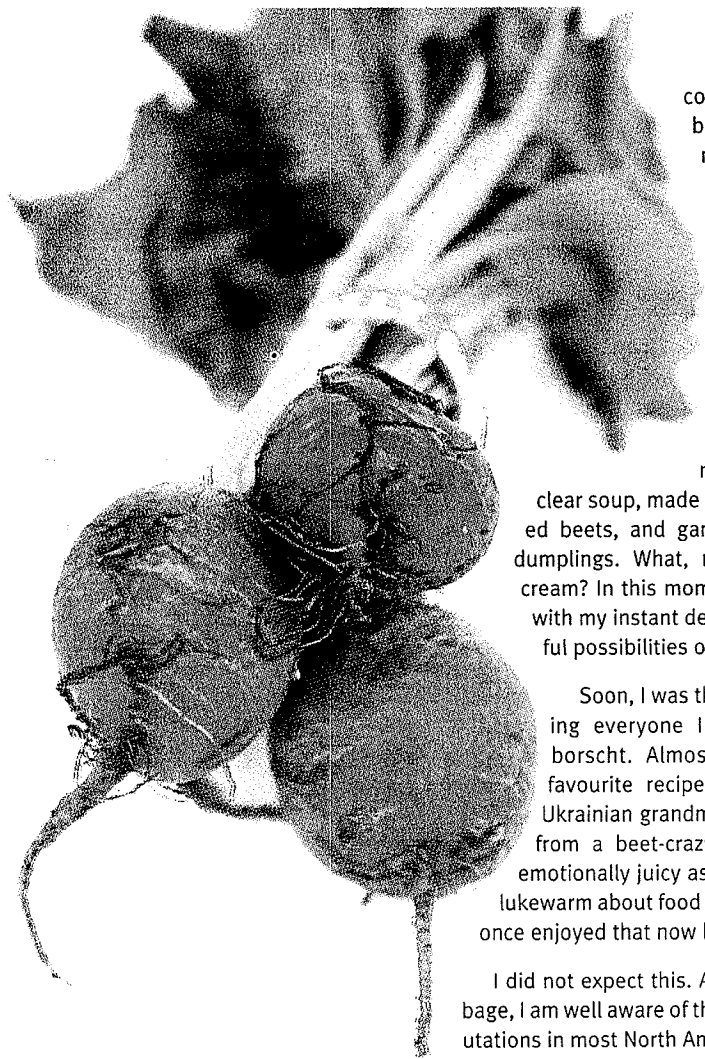


cooking *discovery* →

a SOUP *with a* THOUSAND FACES

Heidi Fink goes forth to research the myth of the “true” borscht and discovers that as long as the soup is cooked with beets and love, you can call it borscht and enjoy every last spoonful.



Unexpectedly, I spent this summer conducting urgent research. As the beets reached their peak of sweetness, I was consumed by a single question. What makes a real borscht?

I have always assumed borscht to be a hearty soup, chockablock with delicious morsels of sweet earthy beet, cabbage and potato. But a backyard food conversation with my Polish neighbour sent my calm assumption for a tailspin. My neighbour's standard borscht is a clear soup, made with wild mushroom broth and roasted beets, and garnished with tiny mushroom-stuffed dumplings. What, no cabbage, no potatoes, no sour cream? In this moment of revelation, I surprised myself with my instant desire to learn more about the wonderful possibilities of borscht.

Soon, I was the plague of summer barbecues, asking everyone I met about their experience with borscht. Almost every person I cornered had a favourite recipe to discuss, handed down from a Ukrainian grandmother, from a neighbour's mother or from a beet-crazy roommate. The discussions were emotionally juicy as well. People who otherwise seemed lukewarm about food talked of some tasty borscht they had once enjoyed that now lives on in their memory.

I did not expect this. Although I adore both beets and cabbage, I am well aware of these vegetables' less-than-stellar reputations in most North American kitchens. And borscht is hardly a byword for comfort food, the way chicken noodle is. Nevertheless, I hit a nerve with my probing research. The nostalgic love of borscht knows no social boundaries.

As thrilled as I was to find myself part of an extended clan of borscht lovers, I was even more excited to learn that there are actually hundreds of different kinds of borscht. They range from clear ruby broths, to hearty beefy stews, to vegetarian dairy-rich soups, to cold sweet-sour fuchsia purees. Which one of these, I wondered, has the most claim to authenticity?

Many of the people I talked to are quite opinionated about what constitutes a real borscht. But depending on the recipe's origins, whether Ukrainian, Russian, Polish, Doukhobor or Jewish, each so-called “real” borscht will be unique. Even recipes from the same country can be drastically different. My friend Anna Mataganova, a fabulous home cook recently moved to Canada from a former Soviet state, claims her borscht recipe is the “real thing” handed down from her Ukrainian babushka. She swears borscht should be a hearty beef soup with an accent of beets, cabbage and tomato.

“I wouldn't call a meatless borscht a real borscht,” she says firmly. “If there is no meat in it, Ukrainians will not eat it!”

However, another friend, equally passionate about her Ukrainian family recipe, brought 100 years ago from the old country, is horrified by the idea of adding shredded meat to borscht. “Beef broth, yes, but meat, no, never!” she exclaims.

To confuse matters more, I heard some declare that borscht must be made with chicken, while others say sausages, and still others say that borscht is best as a fresh vegetarian soup. Any other potential ingredient is up for serious debate as well. Cabbage, tomato, potato, carrot, dairy products or spices can be added or not, as the cook chooses. The variation in cooking techniques is boggling. To

top it off, there seems no clear consensus as to whether borscht should be served hot or cold, and with sour cream or without. And I have not even mentioned the potential for caraway seeds, dried white beans, mushrooms, fresh fish and dumplings!

The only thing anyone seems to agree on is the presence of beets, and even that is a very tenuous connection. Sometimes, beets are the star of the soup; other times only a bit player. The beets can be either cubed or grated, simmered directly in the soup, or cooked whole and then peeled, chopped and added to the pot at the last minute. I even ran into several different kinds of borscht recipes where beets are used for colour only and not eaten with the soup at all. Finally, as far as my research can determine, the original borschts were not made with beet but with cow parsnip (variously known as borsch or barszcz in Eastern Europe), a sweet-sour weed that was a universal soup ingredient in the early Middle Ages. Beets were probably not added until the 10th or 11th century.

Nevertheless, beets are now the unifying factor. But further similarity among borschts does not exist. If the recipe has Ukrainian or Russian roots, it will probably feature beef, cabbage, potatoes and tomatoes. If Jewish, then most likely the recipe will make a cold, sweet-tart soup comprised mainly of beets and sour cream. A Doukhobor borscht is totally vegetarian, loaded with cabbage and tomato, rich

with heavy cream (never sour cream) and uses a single beet only for its colour. Polish borscht can be either a clear burgundy broth or a refreshing and intensely ruby-red soup made with sour fermented beet juice and precooked beets. Of course, I submit these loose categories with a caveat. Individual cooks and their authentic borscht recipes defy all classification.

Walter Bonderoff, the owner of Souped Up, a busy downtown Victoria café, agrees that there can be no simple way to determine a real borscht. While he still continues to make his borscht according to the Doukhobor traditions that he grew up with, he makes concessions for customers who are expecting something different.

“When I moved away from my home,” he reflects, “I realized that what some people call borscht is completely different from what I grew up eating.”

Despite the many variations of beet soups I encounter, I frequently hear the word “Ukrainian” as a descriptor for “real” borscht. And indeed, Ukraine could very likely be the home of the original borscht. The largest beet-growing region of Europe for many centuries, Ukraine apparently has the biggest variation of borschts going. And many of the cookbooks from surrounding nations contain recipes for a special Ukrainian borscht. Does this mean that I have found, in Ukrainian borscht, the “real thing”?

While Anna might agree, my Jewish friend, Ruth, does not.



photos by Caru Hynes

From front to back:
Long-simmered Borscht, Intensely Beety Summer
Borscht, Hearty Winter Borscht

"That type of soup is 'big soup.' Borscht is best sour, it should be cold, and always served with a hot boiled potato and lots of sour cream," she insists.

When I quiz Anna about the possibility of a cold borscht or a sour borscht, she says, "Yes, in Russia we have those kinds of soups, too. They are called summer beet soups, but they are not borscht."

My Polish neighbour, Jarek Gwiazda, agrees with Anna. "In Poland, cold beet soups with sour cream are called chłodnik, cold soup. For me, barszcz is definitely a hot soup." However, he goes on to say that most of the Polish borschts he has eaten have been clear soups, with few or no "bits of stuff lying around in the bowl."

But another famous Polish borscht in town is definitely loaded with "stuff." Elizabeth Gurgul, the Polish chef and owner of Touch of Europe Deli, makes what is considered by many to be the best borscht in Victoria. Although she refuses to divulge her secret recipe, she generously invites me down for a bowl and answers all of my questions.

Her borscht is vegetarian, made with plenty of fresh dill and summer vegetables, but absolutely no tomatoes. Most important, the beets are cooked whole in their skins and then peeled and grated into the soup at the last minute.

"This helps keep the taste and colour," she says. Sure enough, her borscht is richly coloured and fresh-tasting.

Gurgul believes borscht should be a bit sour, but never through the addition of vinegar. "Someone who is using vinegar is cheating," she says.

Her preferred souring agent is fermented beet juice. This traditional borscht ingredient is made by placing sliced raw beets and water into a crock with a piece of rye bread and letting it sit in a warm spot for a few days. The resulting juice reminds me of a good sourdough starter, refreshingly tangy, but not too tart. The juice also tastes intensely of beet.

Although Gurgul is the first person I have spoken with who actually uses sour beet juice in her borscht, I am no stranger to this unusual ingredient. Ever the tireless researcher, I have read of its necessity for borscht in many older Polish, Ukrainian and Russian cookbooks. But most modern cooks have never heard of sour beet juice and rely on vinegar if they want a sour soup. At this point, since sour beet juice has such an old-world feel and rich beet taste, I begin to believe that it must be the key to a real borscht.

But before I can get too self-assured, I hit a glitch. Should borscht even be sour in the first place? Modern Ukrainian and Russian borschts are rarely sour, at least according to

Anna, and Doukhobor borschts certainly never are. And if I am tempted to think of sour borscht as a traditional Polish twist, my neighbour Jarek is quick to burst that bubble:

"With barszcz, you want something that tastes of beet and the underlying stock. You don't want to achieve sourness."

So I am left with only one possible conclusion. This intense round of research and interviews has led to a certain measure of confusion, but mostly elation. I could eat borscht every day for the rest of my life and never eat the same soup twice! Happily, every borscht is a real borscht. And despite my many opinionated friends, most people accept that there are as many borscht recipes as there are cooks. As Gurgul so succinctly says: "Every country has developed their own traditions and they call this borscht."

In the end, that is what I love most about borscht: its flexibility. You can throw any number of vegetables into the pot, cook it with meat or without, serve the soup chunky or clear, hot or cold, garnish it with sour cream or with chopped cucumber or with dumplings. As long as the soup is cooked with love and beets, you can call it borscht and enjoy every last spoonful.

RECIPES

Hearty Winter Borscht

This soup is the kind of thick, satisfying, warming soup that I tend to think of as the standard borscht. Similar in style to a Ukrainian or Russian borscht, this soup can be made either meat-based or vegetarian. Both versions are delicious, flavoured with a generous amount of browned cabbage, tangy tomatoes and sweet beets, and thickened with mashed potato. Do not be intimidated by the many steps and separate pots involved. The steps are all easy and can all be streamlined to happen at the same time. The recipe doubles very easily. For a vegetarian version, eliminate the beef or chicken and the quartered onion, skip the first step and use water or vegetable stock for cooking.

2 lbs of meaty beef short ribs OR 2-3 lbs of chicken thighs and drumsticks

1 yellow onion, peeled and quartered

2 bay leaves, each broken in half

10 cups water, or more

Salt

4 Tbsp butter, divided

1 medium yellow onion, peeled and diced

3 cups packed, shredded green cabbage, divided

1/2 tsp dry dill or 1 tsp minced fresh dill

2 cloves minced garlic, divided

2 or 3 potatoes, peeled and cubed (2-1/2 to 3 cups)

3 or 4 beets, peeled and diced fine, or grated (3 to 4 cups)

1 carrot, peeled and diced fine, or grated (3/4 cup)

28-oz can whole peeled tomatoes, pureed with juice (use less if you like a less tomatoey borscht)

Tangy full-fat yogurt or sour cream for garnish

Chopped fresh dill for garnish

Put the beef or chicken into a large soup pot and cover with the 10 cups water. Add about 1/4 tsp salt. Bring to a boil, skimming off any foam that rises to the top. Add the quartered onion and bay leaves and simmer until meat is well cooked, about 2 1/2 hours for the beef and 40 minutes for the chicken. Remove the meat or chicken pieces to a plate and let cool. Remove the onion and bay leaves from the pot and discard. Skim as much of the fat as you can off the top of the broth in the pot. Keep broth warm.

Heat a good, heavy sauté pan over medium heat. Add 3 Tbsp of the butter and heat until the butter foams. Add the diced onion (add broken bay leaves now if making a vegetarian borscht) and sauté until the onion is fully cooked, at least 10 minutes. The onion pieces should be fully translucent and turning golden brown in spots.

Add 1 cup of the cabbage along with 1/2 tsp of salt, 1 clove of the garlic and the dry dill. Stir to coat well with butter and onions. Sauté, stirring occasionally, until cabbage is partially wilted. Turn the heat down to medium-low, and let the cabbage cook gently until completely wilted and brown in spots. Add bits of water to the pot from time to time to prevent burning and to help the cabbage cook. The cabbage should be ready in about 20 minutes. Cooking cabbage gently with relatively dry heat in this way brings out its sweet, nutty characteristics and adds a fabulous flavour dimension to soups of any kind. Meanwhile, put the chopped potato in a small pot and cover with some of the stock or water. Add a pinch of salt. Bring to a boil, reduce heat and let simmer, covered, until potatoes are completely soft. Remove from heat and mash the potatoes with a potato masher right in the cooking water until smooth.

Meanwhile, bring the remaining stock back to a boil (if making a vegetarian soup, bring about 8 cups of vegetable broth or water to a boil in a large soup pot). Add the beets, and the carrots (vegetarian: also add another 1/2 tsp salt). Bring to a boil, reduce heat, cover and let simmer for about 10 minutes, until beets and carrots are tender (this will take longer if you have diced, rather than grated, the veggies). Add the remaining 2 cups of cabbage and simmer another few minutes.

Meanwhile, heat remaining tablespoon of butter with remaining clove of garlic in a small saucepan until fragrant. Add the pureed canned tomatoes and simmer for about 5 minutes.

If you have timed all this correctly, the browned cabbage, the tomato sauce, the mashed potatoes and the boiled vegetables should be going all at once and should be done at approximately the same time. While all this is going

on, remove and discard the bones and skins from the beef or chicken and shred the meat up with your fingers.

Now add everything to the soup pot with the boiled vegetables: the mashed potato (and its cooking water), the simmered tomato sauce, the browned cabbage and onions and the shredded beef or chicken, if using. Add more water if the soup is too thick. Simmer the soup for another 10 minutes to meld the flavours and fully cook the cabbage. Taste and adjust the seasonings. Add more salt if the soup needs it, and some fresh ground pepper if you like. A lot of traditional recipes will add fresh raw garlic at this point as well.

Many people like a very tangy borscht, but I like one more earthy and beety, so I don't usually add any vinegar or lemon. Use some or not, as you prefer. Serve the soup with a large dollop of good full-fat yogurt or sour cream stirred into each bowl. Also sprinkle each bowl with chopped fresh dill, if you have some around in the dead of winter.

This soup is a meal in itself served with toasted dark bread.

Intensely Beety Summer Borscht

A beautiful deep burgundy colour, this borscht can be served hot or cold. This Polish-style soup has a lighter, fresher flavour than winter borscht. Cooking the beets whole separately and grating them into the soup at the last minute helps preserve their intense flavour and colour. The beet greens give a special taste and the combination of borscht concentrate and pomegranate juice approximates to the best of my ability the "sour beet juice" that is traditional to old-world borscht.

Other garnishes to consider, especially if serving this soup cold: hard-boiled egg quarters, chopped cucumber or radish, sliced chives or scallion.

5 medium beets, scrubbed

2 carrots, peeled and grated

1 medium yellow onion, diced

2 medium potatoes, peeled and diced

1/8 small green cabbage, cored and shredded

1 bunch beet greens, stemmed and sliced thin

Several tablespoons of minced fresh dill

1 Tsp butter

1/2 tsp salt, more to taste

Freshly ground black pepper

1 clove garlic, peeled

3-4 Tbsp bottled borscht concentrate (optional), available at European delicatessens

1-3 Tbsp unsweetened pomegranate juice or unsweetened raspberry juice

Sour cream and chopped fresh dill, for garnish

In a medium pot, place whole, unpeeled beets and cover with water. Bring to a boil, reduce heat, cover and simmer for about 40 minutes, until beets are easily pierced with a fork. Remove from cooking water and place on a plate to cool. Save cooking water. Heat a large soup pot over medium heat. Add butter. When the butter is melted, add the onion and sauté for about 10 minutes, until well-cooked. Add the beet-cooking water, leaving behind the last inch of water (this usually contains particles of dirt). Also add 1 Tbsp of the dill, 1/4 tsp of the salt, the potatoes and the carrots. Bring to a boil, reduce heat, cover and let simmer for about 10 minutes, until the potato is mostly cooked. Add about 3 or 4 more cups of water, some more salt and the cabbage. Bring to a boil, reduce heat and let simmer for 10 minutes.

(Note: For a cold borscht, eliminate the butter and "sauté" the onion in a few tablespoons of water until well-cooked. Proceed with the rest of the recipe as written.)

Meanwhile, slip the skins off the beets. Grate the beets on the large holes of your box grater.

Once the cabbage has cooked for 10 minutes, add the beet greens and another tablespoon of fresh dill. Cook for 2 minutes and then turn off the heat. Press the clove of garlic into the soup with a garlic press. Add the grated beets, the beet concentrate (if using) and the pomegranate or raspberry juice. Stir well, cover and let sit for several minutes. Now taste and adjust the seasonings. Add some ground pepper, more salt and juice if needed. This borscht should taste of sweet earthy beet, with just a hint of refreshing tartness from the juice.

Serve with dollops of sour cream and chopped fresh dill in each bowl. Use any of the optional garnishes as desired.