

Russia and Ukraine are siblings and the histories of these two countries are interwoven so tightly that at times, they have been one and the same. They share a point of origin: the site of present-day Kiev. Now they share a common border, and it is said that Ukraine has been defined from the periphery, its name meaning “near the edge” (u, near, krai, edge). The threads linking them aren't only historical, they're cultural -

A BRIEF HISTORY OF RUSSIA & UKRAINE

and numerous. And so dishes like borsch and golubtsy (stuffed cabbage) have a shared ancestry and no clear birthplace (although, as many online forum posts can attest, Russians and Ukrainians continue to debate the ownership of these dishes as a point of national pride).

So while their geopolitical boundaries shifted, while influence and assimilation colored both countries, their shared cuisine was slowly brewing into something rich, recognizable, potent, but something that belonged equally to Russia and Ukraine.



Our creation myth begins on the Dnieper River. On the river, a boat, and in the boat, three brothers – Kyi, Shchek and Khoryv – and their sister Lybid. They chose a site along the river that struck them with its particular, hilly beauty and named it after the eldest brother, Kyi. And so Kievan Rus – the embryo of what would eventually grow into a preeminent world power – was born.

Though mythologized in art and monuments, the siblings likely never existed. So how did it really all begin?

Prior to the 9th century, the region was made up of a patchwork of tribes: East and West Slavs originating around the area that is now Western Ukraine, Avars, Khazans, Baltic and Finnic hunter-gatherers. These groups suffered regular incursions by steppe nomads

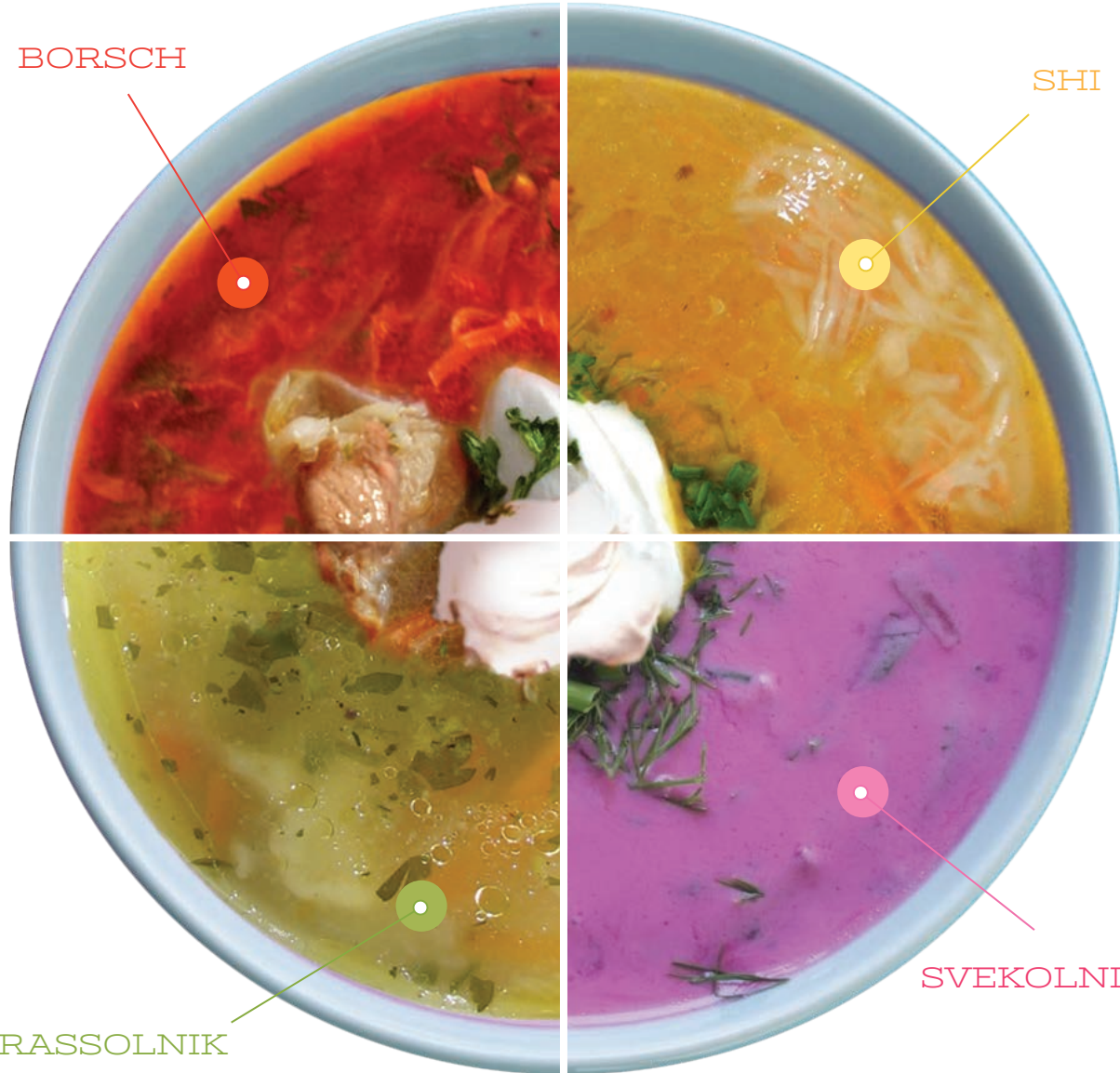
from the southeast and Scandinavians from the northwest. The region was intersected by major waterways and, later, trade routes so it has been from the very beginning exposed to varied and various cultures.

The first East Slav state was, in fact, Kiev and its location was deliberately chosen. It lies between the steppes and a broad forested region, wooded but easily cleared, with good, fertile soil. Unfortunately, constant attacks by steppe nomads which continued on a regular basis all the way through to the collapse of the Golden Horde in the 14th century, made this fruitful region unsafe and forced many to migrate northeastward, where Moscow would eventually originate.

The region was organized first into the Khazar khaganate, ruled by a seminomadic Turkic

BORSCH

SHI



RASSOLNIK

SVEKOLNIK

Soups - the first course - are represented in Russian cuisine like in no other. No meal is complete without soup, considered filling and healthful, recommended to old people and those with a “dry countenance” as soup was thought to protect from dehydration. Soup was simply imperative and to skip it was (and is) unthinkable.

Soups are the face of Russian cuisine, they are plentiful and varied, and one of the most ancient dishes in the culinary tradition. In fact, the spoon appeared in Russia 400 years before the fork, due to their ubiquity. However, the word “soup” didn’t enter the vocabulary until the time of Peter the Great.

SOUPS



Before that, soups were called pohlebka (stew), hlebovoi, ukha, yushka, or simply by their name. These names referred to first dishes made with doodles, grains and vegetables, served in ceramic or iron pots and eaten only with wooden spoons.

BORSCH

Borsch – the most famous and beloved of all Slavic soups – nay, all Slavic food, period! Though there are many variations throughout Eastern Europe, the exact birthplace of this culinary gem is unclear. It likely originated within the territory that is now Ukraine, in the ancient Kievan' Rus. However, one visit to any Russian or Ukrainian forum will tell you that this is a contentious theory with no clear answer.

The etymology behind the name is unclear as well. One linguistic theory is that the word borsch can be broken down into two parts: bor and sh. The first part, bor, is related to the word buriy, a reddish-brown color, like the coat of a brown bear, called buriy medved in Russian. The beet, which gives the borsch its signature red color, is called buryak in Ukrainian, also from the same root.

The second part, sh, comes from shti, another ancient Slavic soup (today called shi). This was a cabbage soup cooked in a meat broth – practically borsch without the beets. Thus bor (reddish) + shti (a cabbage soup) = red cabbage soup = borsch!



Another theory is that borsch is named after borshevik, hogweed, since originally borsch was the name of a soup made from hogweed, before it turned into the beet and cabbage soup we know today.

A note on the letter T in the conventional spelling: the word “borscht” was introduced into English via Slavic and Jewish immigrants, speaking Yiddish, in which this soup is called borscht, with a T. Since we are using the transliterated and not the translated name, we will refer to this soup as borsch, no T.

SOLYANKA

Solyanka is a hearty soup made with cured meats, sausages, olives and pickles – essentially, whatever you have left over from your last get-together – and it is a traditional Russian dish. The word solyanka comes from the word “salt” (sol), though when this soup originated, in 17th century Ukraine, it was called selyanka, from the same root as selskoye, meaning rural or country. It was a dish eaten by the Christian peasant population and at that time, it was made with fish.

Soon after, tomatoes came on the scene, and



to this day, it's impossible to imagine this hearty, spicy, aromatic soup without them. Solyanka entered the repertoire of the fanciest restaurants in Russia and became their litmus test for quality. But while the higher-end version of the soup may have contained more high quality ingredients, solyanka remained a perfect food for the masses: versatile, made with any scraps or left overs available, rich, hearty and delicious.

OKROSHKA



Okroshka is another versatile soup, an improvisation and not for perfectionists or the anxious. If an ingredient isn't available, no problem!

Anything within arm's reach is good enough for okroshka. The only ingredient you can't do without is kvas – the fermented bread drink is poured over all the chopped and mixed ingredients before serving. Unfortunately, the history of how this soup came to be has been lost. The only thing that's certain is that it must have been around for at least a thousand years, based on the first writing found about kvas, in the year 989. Back then, it was likely made with turnips. Two turnips, an onion, a

pinch of salt and some refreshingly sour kvas were all the ingredients needed. Over time, ingredients came and went, based on their availability in fields, cupboards and refrigerators all across Russia, making this another ideal people's dish.

RASSOLNIK

Rassol is the salty brine used for pickling and the inspiration for the name of this soup, whose defining ingredient is pickles. But strangely enough, when we first encounter it, a hundred years ago, it is referred to as a pie. Nikolai Gogol describes it in one of his diaries: “Rassolnik is a pie with chicken and buckwheat. To the filling you add rassol and chopped eggs.”

It turns out that what we think of as rassolnik was around since ancient times under a different name: kalye. It was prepared – by those who could afford such delicacies – with caviar, meat, chicken, kidneys and not only brine, but also lemon juice, and served with pies and pastries.



RUSSIAN & UKRAINIAN LITERATURE FOLK TALES STORIES POETRY

The value of literature is very clear: it distills a complex narrative down into a succinct and vivid image of a time period, a life, a culture, an event that would otherwise be impossible to understand as deeply - or at all - without having lived it yourself.

Russia has a very rich literary history, from ancient folk tales to dissident literature during the Communist era, and, unsurprisingly, a lot of it revolves around food. Here is a sampler of the myriad writings on one of Russia's favorite topics.



Anton Chekhov

SILLY FRENCHMAN



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A clown from the Gintz Brothers circus, Henri Pourquoi, stepped into the Moscow restaurant, Testova, to have breakfast.

“Give me a consommé!” He told the waiter.

“Do you want it with a poached egg or without a poached egg?”

“No, it’s too hearty with a poached egg. Two or three pieces of toast, perhaps...”

While waiting for his consommé, Pourquoi busied himself with observation. The first thing he noticed was a rotund, stately gentleman sitting at a neighboring table and preparing to eat blini.

“Oh, but how much they serve in Russian restaurants!” The Frenchman thought, watching as his neighbor poured hot butter over his blini. “Five blini! Can one person really eat so much dough?”

His neighbor, meanwhile, slathered the blini with caviar, cut them all in half and swallowed them in less than five minutes.

“Boy!” He turned to waiter. “Give me one more plateful! And what kind of portions are these? Give me ten or fifteen of them at once!

And give me smoked sturgeon, or salmon, perhaps.”

“Strange,” Pourquoi thought, contemplating his neighbor. “He ate five pieces and still asks for more! However, such phenomena are not so rare. I myself had an uncle, François, in Brittany, who ate two bowls of soup and five mutton cutlets on a bet. They say that there are also diseases when people eat a lot.”

The waiter placed a mountain of pancakes and two plates of sturgeon and salmon in front of his neighbor. The stately gentleman drank a glass of vodka, ate a bite of salmon and started in on the pancakes. To the great surprise of Pourquoi, he ate them fast, barely chewing, like a hungry man.

“Obviously sick,” thought the Frenchman. “And does this guy really think he’s going to eat this entire mountain? He’s not going to eat even three pieces, and his stomach will already be full. And then he will have to pay for the entire mountain!”

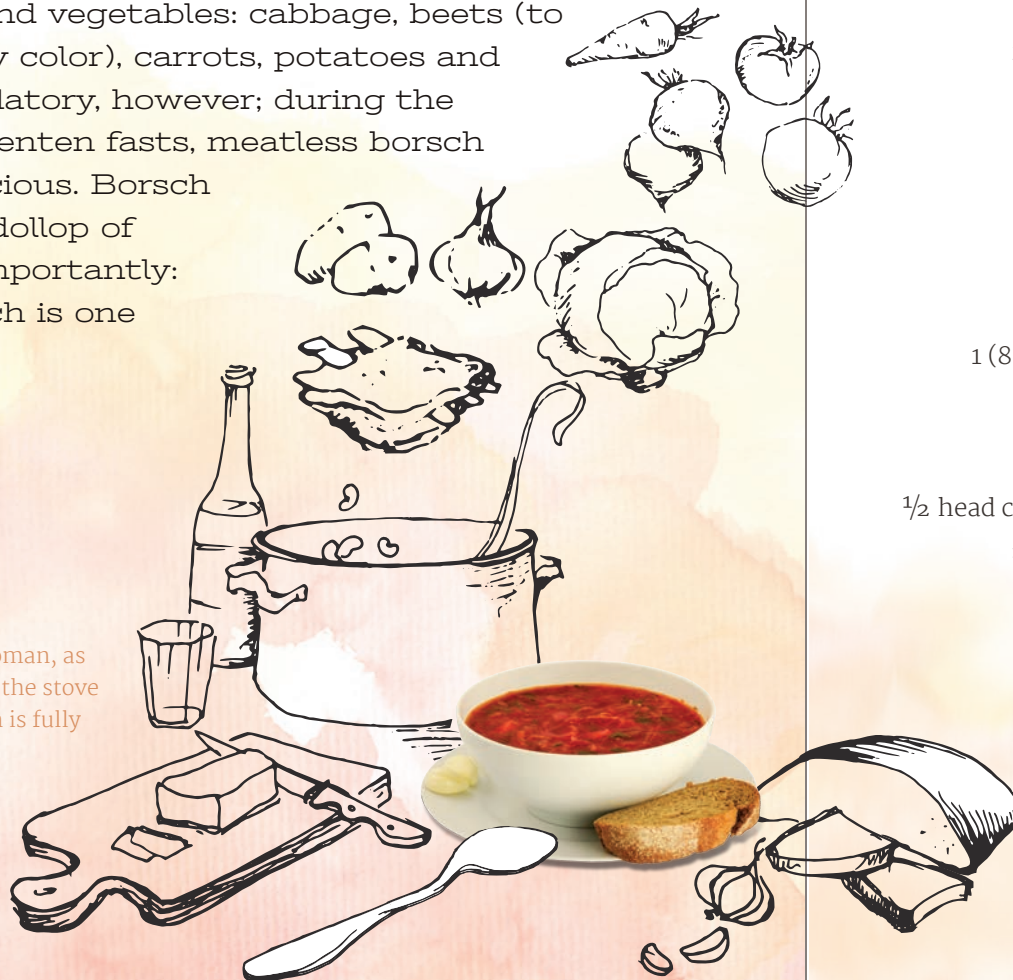
“Give me more caviar!” Yelled his neighbor, wiping his greasy lips with a napkin. “Don’t forget the scallion!”

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BORSCH Borsch is the first thing that most people think of when they think of Russian and Ukrainian food, and it's no wonder. For the Slavs, borsch isn't soup, it's borsch. There are hundreds of recipes, some quite different, some very different. Traditional red borsch is prepared with meat and vegetables: cabbage, beets (to give it its signature ruby color), carrots, potatoes and parsley. Meat isn't mandatory, however; during the Christmas and Easter Lenten fasts, meatless borsch is just as filling and delicious. Borsch should be eaten with a dollop of sour cream, and most importantly: the most delicious borsch is one made yesterday.

RUSSIAN HUMOR

Borsch recipe for men: Take one woman, as many lbs as desired, place her near the stove and leave her there until the borsch is fully cooked.



INGREDIENTS

1 to 1½ pounds of beef (or pork or chicken), diced into approximately 2-inch squares
 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
 2 potatoes, diced
 2 small onions, diced
 2 teaspoons salt
 1 large carrot, diced
 1 cup beets, thinly diced
 1 (8-ounce) can tomato paste
 1 tablespoon sugar
 3 tablespoons vinegar
 ½ head cabbage, coarsely chopped
 ½ teaspoon dill, chopped
 Sour cream, for topping

PREPARATION

1. Make broth: add meat to 5-quart pot about 2/3 filled with water. Bring to a boil and simmer, covered, for about 1½ hours. After the broth is done, remove meat from soup; set aside.
2. Add one tablespoon of vegetable oil to a large skillet, add potatoes and onions and sauté over medium heat until the onion develops a light golden color, about 10 minutes.
3. Add about ½ cup of broth, salt, carrot and beets and cook over a low flame, covered, about 10 minutes.
4. Add tomato paste, sugar and vinegar. Cook, covered, about 10 minutes, stirring occasionally.
5. Add cabbage and cook, covered, another 10 minutes, stirring occasionally until all the vegetables are tender.
6. Transfer the vegetables from skillet into the pot with broth, cover, turn heat to medium-low, and simmer about 10 minutes. Add meat.

VEGETARIAN AND VEGAN ALTERNATIVE

Prepare borsch with water or vegetable broth, without meat (try mushrooms!) and do not top with sour cream.