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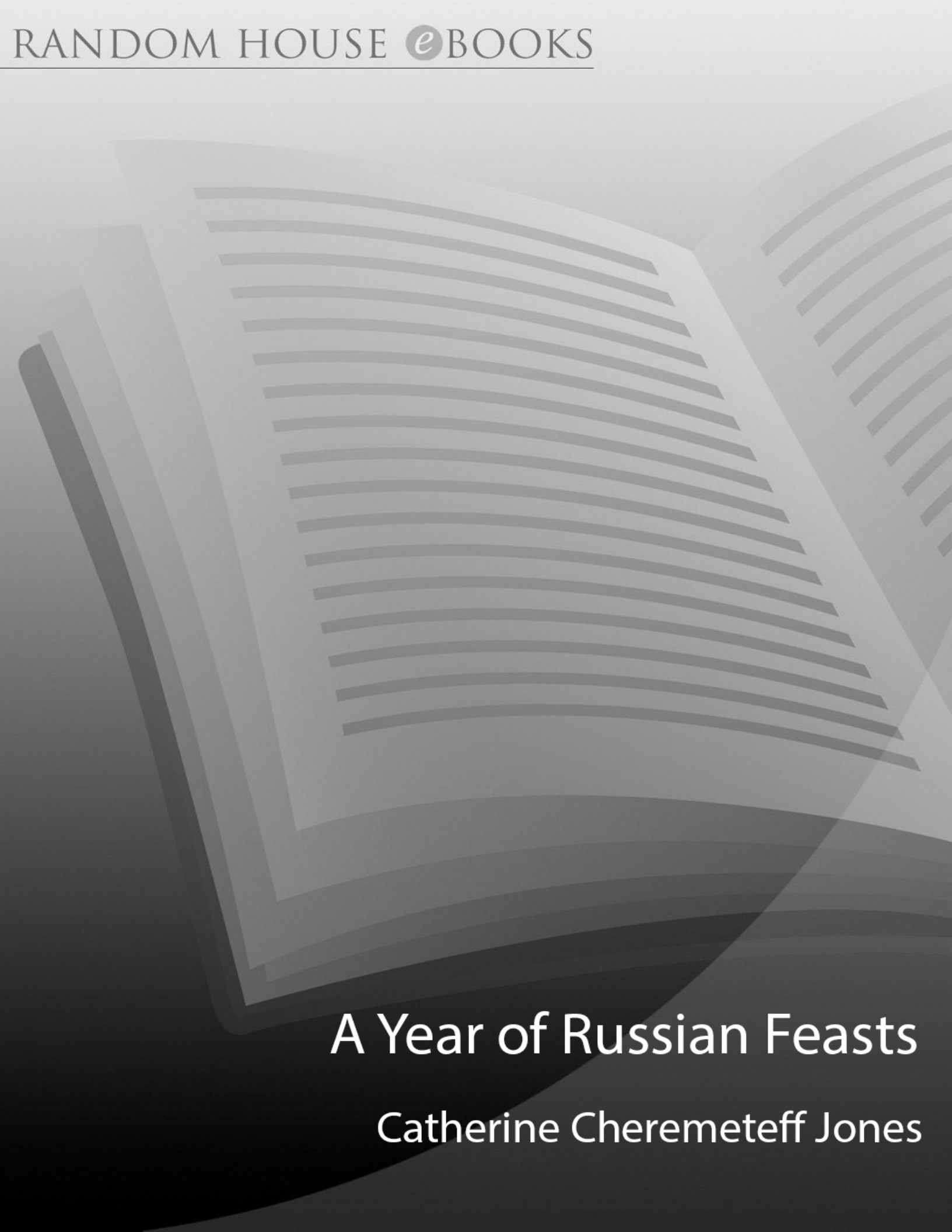

A Year of Russian Feasts

Catherine Cheremeteff Jones

About the Book

‘Foreigners who spend time in Russia soon learn that there are actually two Russias – one public and the other private. The public Russia is typically cold and dark, backward and wary. The private Russia – the Russia of tea at a friend’s kitchen table or of sautéed mushrooms in a village *dacha* – is almost unfailingly cosy and kind.’

Travel to the author’s ‘private’ Russia on a journey that takes you to a springtime *bliny* festival and Easter feast, to a small Russian village to discover and preserve nature’s bounty, on a mystical quest for autumn mushrooms, and to Red Square for New Year’s and Christmas celebrations. Stop along the way for a vegetarian dinner in a communal apartment, a birthday party, a baptism, a tea party and a Russian wedding.

A fascinating behind-the-scenes view of Russia and its people, Catherine Cheremeteff Jones’ quest to rediscover her family’s cultural heritage also reveals how forty of Russia’s finest dishes have been preserved and passed down through the feast days of the Russian Orthodox Church and the gentle rhythm of country life.

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A Year of Russian Feasts

CATHERINE CHEREMETEFF JONES

Illustrations by Barbara Stott McCoy

FOR MY GRANDMOTHER AND MOTHER

Acknowledgments

My greatest debt of gratitude goes to all of my Russian friends who shared their homes, meals, recipes, and hearts with me. Their names fill the pages of this book and without them there simply would be no book. Anna Kourakova, Antonina Malinina, Lena Mesnikova, Natalya Ryadnova, and her son, Pavel (Paul) Lebedev, embraced me like family. I thank them all for their love and friendship over the years.

Closer to home, I am grateful to my mother, Marie Abernethy, and my grandmother, Katherine Cheremeteff, for teaching me the pleasures of the table and the kitchen. It is a special gift to have grown up in a kitchen of loving cooks. The generosity and encouragement of my stepfather, Bob Abernethy, are as fresh today as when I started this project in Moscow. I would also like to thank my father, Brandon Grove, Jr., his wife Mariana, my mother-in-law, Evelyn Jones, Paul and Martha Grove, and my brother Mark for their tremendous support.

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My family, Paul, Aleksandra and Hale, are my constant sources of strength, inner peace, and joy. There are no words to thank them enough.

Love without slinking doubt
and love your best,
And threaten, if you threaten,
not in jest,
And if you lose your temper,
Lose it all, and let your blow straight
from the shoulder fall;
In altercation, boldly speak
your view,
And punish but when
punishment is due;
With both hands forgiveness give away;
And if you feast,
Feast till the break of day.

—Aleksey Konstantinovich Tolstoy

Introduction

FOREIGNERS WHO SPEND time in Russia soon learn that there are actually two Russias – one public and the other private. The public Russia is typically cold and dark, backward and wary. The private Russia – the Russia of tea at a friend's kitchen table or of sautéed mushrooms in a village *dacha* – is almost unfailingly cozy and kind. It is this Russia that I discovered through my Russian friends, who invited me into their homes and took me into their confidence.

From 1991 to 1994, I lived in Moscow with my mother, Marie Cheremeteff Abernethy, a descendant of the Sheremetev clan of the Romanov dynasty, and my stepfather, Bob Abernethy, who was on a five-year assignment for NBC News. Those three years were some of the most exciting and turbulent times in recent Russian history. Communism was on the verge of collapse and Yeltsin was trying desperately to convince his fellow citizens that democracy was the path of the future. Gorbachev's ideas of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, loosely defined as 'openness' and 'restructuring,' did in fact create a more accessible Russia, one that allowed me to make Russian friends, enter Russian homes, and explore Russian traditions and culture—all things that would have been difficult, if not impossible, under Communism.

As I pursued my culinary journey, I began to unravel the strings that connect Russian cuisine to country life, history, the Orthodox Church, and the changing seasons. The deepest roots of contemporary Russian cuisine lie in the foodways of village life, which have always followed the rhythm of the seasons. Spring is the time for planting;

summer for preserving fruits and salting and pickling vegetables; autumn for gathering and drying mushrooms; and winter for relaxing around the fire with simple food and good company.

Whether in a village home or a city apartment, Russian kitchens showcase the same dishes, although somewhat refined, as they did centuries ago. Soups and stews simmer for hours in onion-shaped pots called *chaguns*, sweet and savory pies are baked for special occasions, and an endless array of potato, beet, and cabbage dishes tells the story of a people who live at a latitude of long winters and short growing seasons.

Atop these centuries-old traditions, Russia's nineteenth-century aristocrats layered a sophisticated, French-influenced cuisine that lasted as long as they did. In contrast to the simple yet tasty everyday meals of the common people, the uninhibited opulence of the Russian aristocracy had no limits. Following Catherine the Great's lead, every noble family who could afford one had a French chef. Food costs at imperial balls were of no concern, family fortunes would be squandered on a single feast, and tables literally buckled from the weight of their splendor. 'A single goose was too much for one person and not enough for two,' an old saying went.

This short-lived era of imported fancy foods and exotic hothouse produce left almost no lasting mark on contemporary Russian fare, except perhaps outside Russia's borders. During three years of dining in Russian homes, I was never served a Charlotte Russe, Strawberries Romanov, Beef Stroganov, Chicken Kiev, or any of the other typically European-influenced Russian dishes that seem to be more popular on Western menus than on Russian ones. What I did eat in Russian homes was delicious food lovingly prepared by skillful cooks.

Communism wiped out the Russian aristocracy and its opulence. Communist ideology denigrated all taste and

style and promoted the industrial canned goods highlighted in Soviet-era cookbooks. The scarcity of fresh ingredients in stores and markets made preparing good meals a challenge. Dingy restaurants in Intourist hotels reserved for foreigners produced a ghastly assortment of barely edible dishes from processed meats and canned vegetables, notably anemic peas and carrots. Desserts were nondescript and the service was notoriously rude and inefficient. Most visitors to the Soviet Union left with a deservedly bad impression of Russian food.

But despite the extravagance of the nobles and the hardships of Communism, good Russian home cooking survived. Two bedrocks of Russian life keep its cuisine alive—the *dacha* and the Russian Orthodox Church. The word *dacha* refers to a plot of land in the countryside, with or without a house on it. The more symbolic definition is a place of retreat where Russians go to re-energize their bodies and souls by being part of nature's growing cycle. Tending their gardens, eating the fruits of their labor, and storing some for later are traditions that sustain the Russian table.

Feast days of the Russian Orthodox Church have kept Russia's finest and richest celebratory dishes intact despite history, despite hardship, despite everything. Easter's *bliny* (Butter Week pancakes), *kulich* (Easter bread), and *paskha* (Easter cheesecake) are religiously prepared in homes every year, as they have been for centuries. And the Russian Orthodox Church continues to determine menus in many homes—during the one hundred or so fast days and the numerous feast days of the liturgical year.

The forty recipes in this book are the best from my Russian collection. I can say without reservation that these dishes taste as good away from Russian soil as they do in the coziness of a *dacha* or beside a soul-warming samovar. They come from the yellowing pages of notebooks of my Russian friends, from cooks whose memory is their only

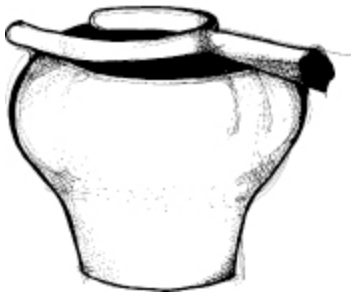
guide, and from my mother's and grandmother's kitchens, where recipes call for a pinch of this and a handful of that. There is a good story behind every one of them.

My mentors in the Russian kitchen were Natalya and Antonina. Natalya, a retired journalist who devoted her time to her choir group and her grandchildren, taught me the joys of the Russian Easter table as well as everyday meals. Antonina, a retired nurse who filled her days with cooking for family and friends, shared with me the art of making fruit preserves and introduced me to the spiritual ritual of tea. A native of Siberia, she also taught me how to make real Siberian *pelmeny* (meat-filled dumplings) and how to eat them.

Anna included me in her family's festive New Year's Eve celebrations and invited me to a Russian civil wedding ceremony. Galina, a cook at Danilovsky Monastery, gave me a behind-the-scenes tour of Easter traditions in the monastery kitchen—I was the first American ever to be invited backstage. Viktor, a fun-loving retired baker, included me in his family's birthday celebrations. Lena chose me to be her daughter's godmother, and Mark and Masha prepared memorable vegetarian dinners in their communal apartment.

Natalya's husband, Yevgeny, invited me to his childhood home in the village of Kosilova, where I experienced the mystical ritual of mushroom hunting. He introduced me to his lifelong neighbor, Mariya, who lived off her land as her family had done for centuries. Mariya welcomed me into her home and showed me firsthand how a Russian villager provides for the winter.

It was through these people and experiences that I discovered the timeless world of Russian cuisine, customs, and traditions. My Russian friends introduced me to the real Russia, the private Russia, the Russia that enters the heart and warms the soul.



Vegetarian Dinner in a Communal Apartment

> As soon as he noticed that a guest had only one piece left on his plate he helped himself to another, saying as he did so, ‘Without a mate neither man nor bird can live in the world.’ If the visitor had two pieces on his plate, he helped himself to a third, saying, ‘Two isn’t much of a number is it? God loves trinity.’ If the guest ate all three, he would say, ‘Have you ever seen a cart with only three wheels? And who builds a cottage with only three corners?’ For four he had another saying, and for five, too.
>
> —Nikolay Gogol, *Dead Souls*

AS ALL VISITORS to Russia learn, usually to their delight, sometimes to their distress, the Russians are people of extraordinary extremes. A cold, expressionless exterior can mask a warm, generous heart, and the sacrificial hospitality of the poor, even in hard times, is legendary. Within the few crowded rooms of a Russian apartment, away from the ugliness and cold of the street, a Russian family somehow turns a simple visit into a feast at which guests, uninvited as well as invited, are overwhelmed by the abundance of the table and the sincerity of the talk.

Refrigerators, cupboards, pantries, and balconies will be all but emptied to produce a single meal for a visitor, and Russians make a joke of the serious fact that their preparations for that one feast will require a diet of bread and tea for the week to come. A Russian hostess always dreads running out of food, so the dishes on a table set for four could easily feed eight or more. According to an old Russian saying, ‘There is never enough food on a table, but always more than enough.’

After climbing up nine flights of decrepit stairs in a once-impressive downtown building, erected in the 1930s and

seemingly not tended to since then, my American friend Paul Jones and I caught our breath and rang the doorbell. We could hear giggles and the patter of feet scurrying to the door. Paul's friend Masha, a young, obviously tired mother who volunteers at a theater for disabled children, greeted us. Her two older girls, ages five and seven, hid behind her legs, while her chubby six-month-old baby wriggled in her arms. After presenting our gifts of wine and flowers, we removed our coats and changed out of our boots into slippers kept by the door especially for guests.

This was my introduction to communal apartment life in Moscow. Clothes, junk, and paintings were piled high on both sides of the long, wide hallway. The shared kitchen and dining rooms were off to the right, and the rest of the rooms appeared to be combined living rooms and bedrooms. Because Masha's husband, Mark, an artist, was born in this apartment, the young couple had claim to two of the four large bedrooms. Two single men lived in the other rooms, but they were out for the evening.

Laundry, mostly cloth diapers, hung from a clothesline strung the length of the kitchen. A delicious aroma of vegetable ragout gently simmering on the gas stove filled the air, and I could see a single large red beet boiling in another pot for the classic beet salad with walnuts and garlic.

Meanwhile, the two little girls who had greeted us at the door had changed their clothes, and they came galloping into the kitchen looking like dolls in colorful flowered smocks. Masha explained to us with an innocent, shy smile that tonight was a celebration, not only because we had come for dinner, but because another American friend, Mary, who had also been invited to dinner, had brought them a box of Pampers. It was a banal event by Western standards, but to this Russian family, having Pampers for their baby girl, Anya, was a cause for celebration.

Masha and Mary, friends for several years, had long ago developed a nonsensical, ritualistic exchange to overcome the embarrassment and shock of the striking differences in their living standards that a gift like Pampers revealed. Adopting a line from a poem by Mikhail Lermontov, Mary's response to Masha's involuntary question, 'Where did this come from?' was '*Ot verblyuda*,' 'From a camel,' deeming any attempts to find or afford that particular item ridiculous if not impossible.

We sat down to dinner. Fresh cilantro added the perfect punch to the ragout of vegetables. The shredded beet, walnut, and garlic salad, one of my favorites, and a fresh cabbage salad with vegetables and herbs were exceptionally good. Vegetarian by choice or necessity, this young family had managed to create a tasty and ample meal.

As a worn, scratchy Ella Fitzgerald tape played in the background, I sipped my tea and ate store-bought cookies and Russian chocolates for dessert. The girls were intoxicated by the presence of dinner guests; their parents just wanted to sit and talk all night. Before leaving, Paul and I read, and did our best to translate, Dr. Seuss's *The Cat in the Hat* to the girls, who curled up on our laps.

Brushing off our snow-covered car to go home, I was reminded that a Russian dinner is not just a bounteous meal, but a celebration of companionship, generosity, and the little things in life that bring great joy.

Beet Salad with Walnuts and Garlic

[SALAT IZ SVYOKLY S OREKHAMI I CHESNOKOM]

For centuries, Russians have believed in the healing qualities of red beets. In *The Calendar of a Cook's Garden*, published in 1810, V. A. Levchin writes that the roots and leaves of beets reduce fever, soothe a sore throat, and alleviate headaches. Beets were, and still are, believed to

relieve constipation, cure tuberculosis and leukemia, and beautify the skin.

This traditional Russian salad is on the menu of just about every Russian restaurant, but the tastiest versions are to be found in private homes. One of my friends, Lyudmila, whose blond hair and sparkling blue eyes match her cheerful character, cuts her cooked beets very fine instead of grating them, which she insists improves the flavor. She also adds grated dill pickles to give the salad more of a bite. I add a splash of lemon juice.

Many Russians claim that the key to the success of this salad is to use only one very, very large round red beet. Russian beets come in all sizes, from tiny new beets to enormous ones the size of small melons. I have never seen such large beets in the United States, but smaller ones seem to work just as well. For a tasty lunch, I like to serve this salad on a bed of baby greens dressed with a light vinaigrette and garnished with chunks of goat cheese and roasted walnuts. Warm crusty French bread completes the meal.

SERVES 4

1¼ pounds (about 2 large) red beets, washed but not peeled
Sugar
¼ cup chopped walnuts
1 small garlic clove, minced
3 tablespoons high-quality mayonnaise
½ teaspoon fresh lemon juice (optional)
Salt

Place the beets and 1 teaspoon sugar in a saucepan, add enough water to cover, and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to medium and simmer, covered, until the beets are tender, about 45 minutes. Drain and cool completely.

Peel the beets and coarsely grate into a medium-sized bowl. (Be careful not to stain your clothing with the beet juice.) Add the walnuts, garlic, mayonnaise, and lemon juice, if using, and mix gently. Season to taste with salt, then add a pinch of sugar and mix again. Cover with plastic wrap and let sit at room temperature for 1 hour before serving.

Masha’s Vegetable Ragout

[RAGU IZ OVOSHCHEY]

Although we had Masha’s vegetable ragout on a snowy day, it is usually prepared during the summer months, when local markets are teeming with fresh produce and fragrant herbs. Treat this adaptation of Masha’s recipe as a blueprint – feel free to add or substitute your favorite vegetables and herbs. Vegetables that require a longer cooking time should be added with the eggplant; those that require less cooking with the zucchini. The fresh cilantro, called *kinza*, gives the dish an unexpected kick and should not be omitted.

The ragout can be served hot as a side dish, or at room temperature as a first-course dish. It is lovely over rice or pasta, such as penne or capellini, with freshly grated Parmesan cheese and chopped fresh basil. Thinned with a little tomato sauce, the ragout turns into a delectable base for vegetarian lasagna.

SERVES 8 TO 10

⅓ cup olive oil or canola oil

1 large onion, finely chopped
2 large garlic cloves, minced
3 large carrots, coarsely grated
1 large red bell pepper, cored, seeded, and cut into ¼-inch dice
8 ounces button or cremini mushrooms, cleaned, trimmed, and sliced
1 medium (1 pound) purple eggplant, peeled and cut into ¼-inch dice
4 medium-sized ripe tomatoes, seeded and coarsely chopped, or two 14.5-ounce cans diced tomatoes, drained
1½ teaspoons sugar
Salt
1 cup tomato juice
1 medium zucchini, scrubbed and cut into ¼-inch dice
3 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley
3 tablespoons chopped fresh dill
5 tablespoons chopped fresh cilantro
Freshly ground pepper

Heat the olive oil in a 6-quart heavy-bottomed nonreactive saucepan over medium-high heat until hot. Add the onion and sauté until translucent, about 5 minutes. Add the garlic, carrots, bell pepper, and mushrooms and continue to sauté for 5 minutes, stirring frequently.

Add the eggplant and cook for 3 minutes, stirring constantly to keep the eggplant from sticking. Add the tomatoes, sugar, 2 teaspoons salt, and the tomato juice, mixing well, and reduce the heat to a very gentle simmer. Cook, covered, for 30 minutes. Add the zucchini, stir, and cook until the vegetables are soft and the sauce is slightly thickened, about 30 minutes.

Remove from the heat and add the parsley, dill, and cilantro. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Serve

immediately, or let the ragout cool to room temperature, cover, and refrigerate. Bring to room temperature before serving.

Two Russian – Style Cabbage Salads

Cabbage salad *(salat iz kapusty)* is a staple on most *zakuski* spreads (the first course of a Russian meal) and restaurant menus, and there must be hundreds of recipes for it. Salted cabbage (akin to sauerkraut, but slightly less sour than the popular brands in American grocery stores) is sold in large plastic-lined barrels in produce markets, usually next to the pickled vegetables. Many Russians make their own salted cabbage in early fall, using a piece of black bread to start the fermentation process. Russians embellish salted cabbage with carrots, fruits, or nuts, and serve it as a cold salad, or they use it as a base for a popular cabbage soup called *kislye shchi.*

The first of the following two fresh cabbage recipes calls for combining cabbage with carrots in a vinegar-and-oil, or lemon dressing (most Russians use vinegar), while the second mixes cabbage and apples in a sour cream or mayonnaise dressing. Both are simple, tasty side dishes for fish, meat, or poultry. The most important thing to remember when making fresh cabbage salad is to gently crush the cabbage and salt by hand to release the juices and bring out the flavor.