

# Soups: memories are made of these

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I have fond memories of soup and still find there's no food better for soothing body and soul.

Simmering a big pot of it on a frigid day warms up your kitchen as you putter about, chopping, stirring and awaiting the moment you sit down with family or friends to savour big spoonfuls while munching on crusty bread.

As a child, I would almost enjoy being ill in the knowledge that my doctor dad, a curmudgeonly fellow when we kids were healthy, would gently squeeze the glands in my throat, look at my tongue, tap my stomach and then – joy of joys – bring me a bowl of chicken soup as I languished in bed with flu or, on occasion, something slightly psychosomatic that would elicit this welcome dose of TLC.

When my daughters were young, soup loomed large. In Kensington Market where both grew up, Vietnamese pho – that beautiful clear broth brimming with paper-thin beef, rice noodles, beans sprouts and fresh Thai basil – was de rigueur when they felt under the weather or simply blue.

I regularly visit Miss Saigon on Spadina for its yummy version loaded with lamb chunks and spiked with chillies.

If I'm downtown, I head for Holt Renfrew's subterranean café where giant vats of three luscious soups are served daily.

Here in Stratford, chef Charlotte Hands of Bentley's is a soup-maker par excellence.

And last summer, my mother, who was born and raised in Riga, Latvia, came bearing a beloved recipe for Russian Cabbage Soup while visiting me. She insists this is the ultimate version. I recently tried it and agree.

Both this recipe and the one that follows are for hearty, meal-in-a-bowl soups with a Slavic twist. Both make a lot and require a large stockpot. Both have a sweet/sour flavour and taste better after mellowing for a day or two. Watch this space for more soup recipes.

## Russian Cabbage Soup

Called shchi in Russia, where it is a staple.

**8 to 10** dried mushrooms (porcini or shiitake)

**6 tbsp** butter or vegetable oil

**4 cups** shredded cabbage

**2 cups** sauerkraut (preferably vacuum-packed), rinsed, squeezed dry

**2 tbsp** tomato paste

**12 cups** vegetable, beef or chicken stock

**1** carrot, coarsely chopped

**1** large onion, chopped

**1** stalk celery, chopped

**1** medium rutabaga, peeled, chopped

**2 cups** canned tomatoes, coarsely chopped

Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

**1** garlic clove, peeled, minced

**1 cup** sour cream

**1/4 bunch** fresh dill, chopped

In small bowl, soak mushrooms in 1 cup hot water for 1 hour or until soft. Drain; squeeze mushrooms dry and slice thinly.

In large saucepan, over medium heat, heat 3 tablespoons of butter. Add cabbage and sauerkraut; cook, stirring often, until cabbage is softened, about 15 minutes. Add tomato paste and 2 cups of stock. Cover, reduce heat to low and cook for 40 minutes.

In large stockpot, over medium-high heat, heat remaining 3 tablespoons butter. Add mushrooms, carrot, onion, celery and rutabaga; cook until soft and slightly browned, about 15 minutes. Add cabbage, sauerkraut, tomatoes, remaining stock, salt and pepper. Bring to boil over high heat; reduce heat to low and simmer, covered, about 20 minutes. Add garlic; cook about 5 minutes.

In small bowl, combine sour cream and dill. Serve on side as garnish.

Makes about 8 servings.

#### Meat and Beet Borscht

I spent three weeks studying Russian at Moscow University in my youth. I'll never forget the borscht served in the cafeteria – a hunk of meat surrounded by broth and veggies. Here's my version. Peel beets if skin seems thick. Substitute parsnips, turnips, etc., or extra carrots for cabbage, if desired.

**6** medium beets, scrubbed, quartered

**4 tbsp** vegetable oil

**2-1/2 lb/1.25 kg** beef shank or short ribs

**10 cups** cold water

**1** large onion, peeled, coarsely chopped

**4 cups** red or green cabbage, cut in large dice

**5** medium carrots, peeled, cut in chunks

**3** medium potatoes, cut in small cubes

**8** garlic cloves, chopped

**28-oz/540 mL** can tomatoes, broken up with fork

Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

**1** cup sour cream

**1/4 bunch** fresh dill, chopped

Preheat oven to 400F.

Place beets in baking dish; cover tightly with foil. Bake in oven 50 to 60 minutes or until just tender when tested with fork. Cut in bite-sized chunks. (Peel if necessary).

Meanwhile, heat 2 tablespoons of oil in large stockpot over medium-high heat. Add beef; cook, turning once, until browned, about 4 minutes.

Add water. Bring to boil over high heat; reduce heat to low and simmer, partially covered, 1-1/2 to 2 hours or until meat is tender.

Transfer broth to large bowl. Place beef on plate; cut into bite-sized chunks, discarding bones, gristle and fat.

Add remaining oil to stockpot over medium heat. Add onion, cabbage, carrots, potatoes and garlic. Cook, stirring, about 5 minutes. Add beef broth.

Bring to boil over high heat; reduce heat to low and simmer, partially covered 15 to 20 minutes or until carrots and potatoes are tender. Add tomatoes, cooked beets and reserved beef.

Bring to boil over high heat; reduce heat to low and cook 5 to 10 minutes or until heated through. Add salt and pepper.

In small bowl, combine sour cream and dill. Serve on side.

Makes about 8 servings.

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