The book of the Book of Tasty and Healthy Food

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Today a trip down memory lane for someone who wasn't even there.

Anna Kharzeeva runs a cooking school in Moscow. One of the ex-pat mothers who brought their children to learn about Soviet food and culture suggested that Anna write about some of the recipes in The Book of Tasty and Healthy Food. The book was first published in 1939 and for a long time it was the only cookbook available in the Soviet Union. It contained everything you might need to know, not only what to cook and how to do it, but also how to set out a table, how to hold your fork and serve dishes, all the important details. It was a fixture of Soviet life, if not exactly of the kitchen.

Anna agreed, but she also insisted that there had to be more to it than cooking her way through the book. She wanted to involve her granny. Unlike Anna, who was born in 1986, Granny had lived through the Soviet era and had plenty of stories to tell about food and about life.

Anna Kharzeeva: Yes. It's funny because I was already very close to my grandmother and I had already heard the Lord of the stories. Whenever she told her stories, I was always listening and I was actually interested in what she had to say. But this project made me ask her questions I'd never asked before, and then write it down. And that's been really wonderful. Some things she told me, I never even thought of it, and I'm so glad I've done it while she's still healthy enough to share. There's more actually still to write about her and other people of her generation.

Jeremy: Well, I think that the oral history aspect of it is absolutely fascinating because of the contrast between what you write about, what your grandmother says, and what you write about what The Book of Tasty and Healthy Food says. Tell me about the book. Did Russian people like your grandma, did they use it as a cookbook?

Anna Kharzeeva: Well, that's a good question. So yes, they did use it as a cookbook. And also they used it as reading material, viewing material, because the images portrayed in the book were so unrealistic. I know people who grew up in Armenia, for example, who say, “we just looked at it as some fancy magazine type images”. Like the way I might look at Vogue and say, “Oh, that's a nice haircut”. You know, I'm never going to get it, the look.

Because it was so unrealistic. But the book is so big and it has so many different recipes that you could find recipes in it that you would actually use. And my grandmother did use a lot of the recipes too. But some of the recipes, I would speak to her about it and she would say, “What? You would never find that ingredient” or “I've never heard of this ever in my life. No one has ever made that.”

So it's amazing just how many recipes the book contains. And there are recipes that I hated, but there were also recipes that I loved and that I actually have introduced into my life.

Jeremy: Okay. Tell me, tell me the one you love the most.

Anna Kharzeeva: Well, I really liked that recipe with fried eggs. It's very simple, but the idea is you fry some onion first and then you cut up bread or croutons, you fry them and on top of that you put eggs and tomatoes and you cook it together. I just really liked the croutons in the fried eggs. Or the bean paté, you just crush up some beans and … I did add some of my own spices as well.

But it's great. And I have served it at parties and it was always well received. So it was like, well, yeah, here you go. It's a Soviet recipe.

Jeremy: For me, of course, I think that the national drink of Russia is vodka, but, you say the national drink of Russia is tea. Really?

Anna Kharzeeva: Well, I think they sort of exist in a parallel universe really tea and vodka.

I mean, not everybody drinks vodka, obviously. There's lots of people who just don't touch it at all. But as for tea, yes, it's huge. The traditional samovar, it’s a tea urn and the traditional Russian way of having tea is that you sit around the samovar, which has a lot of water in it, 10 liters, maybe five, 10 liters, and you just keep adding, topping up your tea. And so it can take hours, ‘cause everyone loves tea. It's just a thing. It's what you do when someone comes over and you just put on the kettle and you can sit there for hours. I remember as a kid, if somebody would come over and we would spend hours drinking tea.

Jeremy: Your grandmother had a tea mushroom. And I read that my thought kombucha, which now is incredibly groovy. Older Russians had this kombucha going in their kitchens?

Anna Kharzeeva: Yeah, absolutely. When I was a kid, we had a jar of this mushroom tea, kombucha, on our window sill, and it had this — it sort of looked like jellyfish, you know? — at the top, and it had layers, and you had to sift it and you had to add some tea and some sugar in it.

And so then the bacteria would grow, and the older it was, the more sour it was. And you could share it. You could take one layer off and give it to someone else. And I remember, someone would come over to our place and my grandmother would always say, would you like some? And she'd give some away. And we would sometimes have two jars.

And they went on for a long time. I remember we always had it in the morning. I remember going, "Oh, it's a bit more sour today, or it's sweeter today". And then suddenly it disappeared. And I was trying to remember when it happened, and I asked my Granny. I said, "do you remember when it disappeared?" She said, "no, I have no recollection." For some reason everyone just dropped it and I don't know what happened.

And now we also have this kombucha in the stores. And it was so funny. I went over to a friend's place in Georgia and she said. "Do you know what this is? Do you know what they call it? There's this new thing, apparently it's a thing now". And I tried them. I was like, "Oh my God, yes. It's the thing I had as a kid. I had no idea it was fashionable again."

Jeremy: When I think of Soviet food, one of the things I think of obviously is cabbage and, and sauerkraut. But your attempt to make sauerkraut was a complete failure.

Anna Kharzeeva: It was.

Jeremy: That was following the recipe in the book?

Anna Kharzeeva: Yes

Jeremy: I mean, sauerkraut's easy. I make sauerkraut.

Anna Kharzeeva: You do? Well, I've never made it. I never had to make it because my grandmother always made it. So I've never had to think about, “Ooh, how do I make that?” If I want it, I just call up my grandmother and say, “can you please make me some sauerkraut?” And she's happy.

Jeremy: And I make my own because my grandmother is no longer with us and never did make it for me.

Anna Kharzeeva: So. I've never had to do it. I've witnessed old women talking about it. they'd be like, Oh, I use this ingredient. Do you add sugar? No, it's much better not to add sugar. And they're like all into it. They love making it. They love the process. But as a young person, I've never really come across it. Young people don't really make sauerkraut in Russia for the most part because everyone's got a grandmother or a mother who does it.

So when I read the recipe, my grandmother said, “I'll tell you the recipe”. When I started cooking it, she said, I'll tell you the recipe. And I said, “no, you can't tell me your recipe. I'm supposed to follow the book's recipe, so don't tell me your recipe.” She was like, “okay, ha ha. Let's see how it turns out.”

And so I followed the recipe, but the book doesn't go into enough detail. You know, it's not like modern recipes where they tell you everything and you get videos and photos and all of that. The book is sometimes really vague. It just says, “Oh, take a bunch of this. And mix it with a bunch of that and then cook it till it’s ready”. It's up to, you have to figure it out how you understand that.

So I was trying to follow the book to the letter, and I don't have the equipment. I don't have the jars. I don't have the, what was it, they wanted me to use, um, a wooden, like a piece of wood. And I couldn't find any of that, so I just used whatever I had.

And of course it didn't work. It just failed miserably. And my grandmother, I think she was quite delighted. She was like, “okay, now do you want my recipe?” And I said,” yes. Okay. I do”. But I've actually never made it properly, so I better do it now while she's still alive. So she can make a comment.

Jeremy: When read your account of the sauerkraut, sour cabbage, it said, put some rye flour in the bottom of the barrel, or jar or whatever you're doing, which is really interesting because rye really kicks off fermentation and makes it go much faster. So that, I thought that was interesting. I might try that the next batch.

I haven't seen anything about bread, that black Russian bread. Does the book talk about bread or was this just assumed to be something everybody knew how to make?

Anna Kharzeeva: Well, to be honest, I don't think anyone made it. It was pretty much always store-bought.

So I didn't come across a recipe for bread at all. My grandmother eats bread with everything. She jokes about having bread was pasta. Well she does. She will always have bread. And whenever she comes over to my place and I cook for her and say I've prepared meat and potatoes and something like that; she'll say, "can I have some bread as well?"

Because she cannot have a single meal without bread. For her, bread is an absolute essential. If she doesn't have any bread at home, or she's running low on bread, she runs to the shop and she buys enough bread, white and dark. She has to have it. But as for making it, she's never made it, I'm pretty sure. I've never had her homemade bread and I've never come across bread being made, to be honest.

It sort of became a thing more recently with breadmakers, with these machines. So it's more of a recent trend, like you buy this machine or you make your own bread, but it's like a fancy thing that younger people make.

Jeremy: That's really interesting, that old Russians didn't make their own bread, and young Russians do make their own bread because it's kind of the reverse of Europe and reverse of America.

Anna Kharzeeva: Mm. Well, you know, another another key thing to keep in mind is the living conditions that my grandmother lived in.

To make bread, you need room, you need time for the fermentation and you need the room and you need to bake it. So I guess it was just too hard.

Jeremy: The communal kitchens: you write about communal kitchens, and I have read a little bit about this, but families would share one kitchen. How many families? How does that work?

Anna Kharzeeva: Well, my grandmother lived in the centre until 1962. She lived in this apartment for about 27 years. It was a house, two stories that used to belong to a rich person before the revolution. And then it was split up into all sorts of different rooms and they would use the dark room, storage room, for somebody's bedroom and it was all turned upside down.

And the person who used to live there was just occupying one tiny space, a corner. And I think there were about four families living on one floor. So one apartment. And yes, they would just have to take turns. They'd have to take turns to use the bathroom and they'd have to take turns to use the kitchen.

And lots of people ate in canteens. Certainly lunches, but some people would have dinner there as well because you couldn't cook at home properly. I was speaking to my grandmother's friend recently, and her father was killed in the purges, in 1952 he was killed. And she was sent away to a small town in Kyrgyzstan, and when they came back, they didn't have anywhere to live because their apartment was taken away from them.

And a relative took them in and that relative was sharing an eighth square metre room with her daughter. And she took in my grandmother's friends with her mother. And now, obviously that wasn't a very long term solution, they didn't last for years, but for a long time they were sharing that tiny space, and lots of people were sharing just the smallest rooms.

Jeremy: it's odd, hearing you talk about that and knowing about the food shortages as well, because you write about some of the food shortages and people lining up, your grandmother in a long line for sausages. I find it odd that there seems to be almost a nostalgia for Soviet era food, and one of the reasons I imagine that everything you write is popular is a kind of nostalgia.

How else do you explain it?

Anna Kharzeeva: That's a very good question. I think this nostalgia is a psychological thing, to be honest. People reminisce about when they were young, when they were carefree, and they forget about the bad parts.

Nowadays, you can earn good money in Moscow, but you need to make an effort. You need to think for yourself. You won't just be given a job after university. You need to go out there and you need to study. You need to learn how to be a better manager of your own time and what you do, and it's up to you how successful you become, how happy you become. Maybe that scares some people because it's easier to be told what to do.

I agree with you that there's definitely this nostalgia for the Soviet times now, but my grandmother doesn't share it. My grandmother will go to the shop and hear from a 30-year-old cashier, "Oh, wasn't it better? The Soviet times?"

And my 87-year-old grandmother will say, "well, no, it wasn't. You weren't there. I was, it certainly wasn't better."

Jeremy: Tell me the story about the man who invented the Eskimo ice cream.

Anna Kharzeeva: So, he was working at this factory and he was Latvian, I think. I don't know exactly what happened, but what my grandmother says is that it looked like somebody else wanted the glory of the invention, and this was during the times when, if you wanted to get rid of someone, you could.

And, he just, he got arrested, and, er … .

There's lots of, lots of very sad stories, unfortunately, about the Soviet times, but I really wanted to show as well that it wasn't all just badness and purges. No. I love the stories of my grandmother when she reminisces about being young, and when they went to Moldova, when they went to the Caucuses and they went to this carbonated drinks factory where they'd be closing the lids and they'd be allowed to have some, and how they enjoyed the tomatoes, how they use the avoska (авоська), the shopping bag

Jeremy: That's the string bag?

Anna Kharzeeva: Yeah. The name of it is really interesting. It's called avoska, and avosk is a very Russian word. It means sort of chance. We say to hope, to rely upon chance, which of course you cannot do as a sensible person, but it's a very Russian thing. So if you didn't plan, if you didn't prepare for something, you'd just hope that it might somehow work out magically. And avoska is the shopping bag that you bring with you, just in case you magically stumble upon some food. And that was the Russian, the Soviet word, avoska. And to be honest, I never even thought about it because I'm so used to it, until someone asked me the meaning of it. Ah, avoska, avoska. Oh, that's clever.

I also want to just say that there was a lot of amazing sense of humor. I don't want to say happy lives, but they still found a way to have fun and to be around people they love and come up with these really funny things. It’s so clever. I mean, it's really amazing.

I'm not sure how well they translate, but like there's one, for example, where someone walks into a store and asks, “you don't happen to have fish here, do you?” And they say, “no, we don't have meat. The shop across the road doesn't have fish.”

Jeremy: That's still pretty funny. And I was talking to Anna Kharzeeva, whose book based on her articles about cooking from The Book of Tasty and Healthy Food and talking to her Granny about it will be published soon.

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