

Quest for the Ur- Borscht

Few things are as dispiriting as a siege of winter weather hanging on into the late days of March; happily, one of the things that lift one's heart during such an onslaught in a bowl of well made borscht. Working my way through just such a bowl I began to wonder about the origins of borscht.

“Oh, it's ancient, people have been eating it forever.” one person assured me, but “forever” in some contexts can mean the late nineteenth century, although I felt certain the ancient in this statement was to imply ancient as in Indus Valley ancient, as in “right after the invention of mud bricks, people began to enjoy borscht.” Pseudo-history has its delights I'm sure, but relatively few for me, and thus began an undertaking to find out what I could about the use of beets (particularly in borscht) in period.

The wily ancestor of the cultivated beet is a thin, wild seashore plant, which grows throughout the Mediterranean, as well as on the shores of North Africa, and up through the Northern Atlantic coasts of Europe. An early cultivated form made an appearance at the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. By 300 BCE, varieties with edible roots were known, and Theophrastus mentions their cultivation. But it appears that primarily the leaves were used for consumption, although Apicius does mention a method for cooking the root wrapped in muslin, in a broth of oil and water, then wringing the juice from the beet and drinking this. He adds that this is made better if a chicken is added to the broth. This could well be a proto borscht, since almost all the primary ingredients for a simple version of the soup are present.

The leafy bits are interchangeable with chard, were quite popular until spinach surpassed their esteem somewhat, and were often used in tarts. Platina makes mention of them in this way. The German mystic nun Hildegard von Bingen also makes mention of them by way of saying “they are somewhat cold and lay hard in the stomach, it is however easy to digest.” Not quite a glowing recommendation, and it doesn't surprise me to find that the yellow beets, used primarily for fodder, were called Mangelwurzel, which translates as “root for time of need”, ie, something one would only eat in time of famine.

In the late 1580s however, some clever German came up with a method for propagating a thicker, more bulbous red beet closer to what we now enjoy (especially in borscht), although it does not seem that Germans, nor the English who wrote about them used them primarily as ingredients for salads, a contrivance of the Italians and the French.

The name borscht does not imply anything Western European in origin, and of course, we must look eastward to find out more about the origins of the soup itself. But here the trail grows a bit cold, since I can find little in the way of reliable food history about food from Russia. The Poles, while enjoying a number of wonderful foods, were alas, during period apparently bereft of borscht, just one in a series of historical misfortunes to befall an otherwise wonderful people. Rather, they ate a form of the soup made from the cow parsnip, which was called barszcz, the Germanized form of which is borscht- so while

they did not invent this wonderful soup, they contributed its lasting name. The use of the cow parsnips was brought in by the Lithuanians. A “broth from pickled beets” was known in Poland, but appears not to have been widespread.

The trail for good, hard reliable documentation grows as cold here as a Siberian snow fling. In an article about early Russian food, a historian by the name of Sudakov cites several types of schti (a Russian stew, almost always featuring cabbage), one of which includes beet, and these were among the types of soup served in a monastery during the 1500s. What we love and know and borscht made its way west to Poland, and that form of schti includes meat, cabbage, eggs, and sour cream- but it does not become familiar to the Poles, or the rest of Western Europe until the nineteenth century. Mon Dieu! This poses further questions- admittedly, the schti mentioned is acceptable as borscht, but for how long had Russian cooks been making a schti with beets? Was this recipe originally Russian, or was it originally Ukranian? One can easily imagine the use of the cultivated beet moving from Babylon up through the Caucasus to early Kiev, but this conjecture, while fairly sound, is not much more than that.

We are left then with the notion that somewhere prior to the 1500s in the vasty Russian steppes, a cook got the brilliant notion of adding a few beets to yet another pot of cabbage laden schti, and while life there remained chaotic, at times unimaginably brutal, dinner that evening must have contained at least a trace of the serene pleasure which is the pleasure of borscht. I hope something good happened for that cook, whoever he or she was.

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Sources

Alan Davidson *The Penguin Companion to Food* 2002 Penguin Books

Maria Dembinska *Food and Drink in Medieval Poland* 1999 University of Pennsylvania Press

<http://www.strangelove.net/~kieser/Russia/Food/>