

Summer Borscht with Sour Cream and Chives

Serves 4

4 beets, peeled and coarsely chopped
3 carrots, coarsely chopped
2 celery stalks, chopped
1 small onion, coarsely chopped
1 (14-ounce) can chopped tomatoes
1 garlic clove, chopped
1 bay leaf
4 black peppercorns
2 cloves
1 teaspoon sugar
sea salt

To serve
lemon juice
sour cream
snipped chives

This is an elegant version of borscht, a clear, ruby-hued broth served chilled, rather than the heartier beet soups suited to the long winter months. If you have made Rye Bread Kvas (see page 177), try adding a splash to the finished soup.

Put the vegetables and aromatics into a large pan and cover with 5 cups of cold water. Season with the sugar and salt. Bring to a boil, reduce to a simmer, and cook for 40 minutes. Strain through a fine sieve, reserving the broth and discarding the vegetables (which will have lost their flavor). Let cool, then taste for seasoning. A squeeze of lemon juice will brighten the flavor. Serve the broth chilled, with a dollop of sour cream and a scattering of chives.

Suzma

500g full-fat Greek yogurt
salt

Central Asia has vast flat plains, including the world's largest steppe region, 'the Great Steppe', as well as mountain regions. This expanse of grassland is renowned for its rich, smooth dairy products made from cow, goat, sheep, horse and even camel milk. Suzma is a tangy yogurt cheese which is spooned into soups, mixed into salads or eaten with bread and fresh tomatoes as a simple meal.

You can make your own yogurt-based suzma as in this recipe, or substitute the yogurt for cottage or cream cheese, sharpened with a squeeze of lemon juice. Start a day or two before you want to serve. Season the yogurt with a generous pinch of salt. Hang a muslin bag over a bowl, or line a colander with two pieces of kitchen paper and set it in a shallow dish. Pour in the yogurt and tie the muslin at the top to form a tight bundle (or cover the colander with clingfilm) and leave in a cool place for 24–36 hours for the liquid to drain off and the yogurt to thicken. Discard the liquid.

You can either eat the suzma as it is, or flavour it in one of the ways below.

Green Suzma

Finely chop the white and green parts of 4 spring onions, and a small bunch each of coriander, dill and flat-leaf parsley. Stir through the suzma and season with salt and pepper.

White Suzma

Stir in 1 crushed garlic clove and 1 teaspoon of finely chopped dill. Season with salt and pepper.

Pink Suzma

Blend 2 cooked beetroot until smooth. Stir into the suzma with 1 teaspoon of sugar. Season with salt and pepper.

Pomegranate Soup

Serves 4

150g yellow split peas
2 tablespoons olive oil
2 onions, finely chopped
4 garlic cloves, finely chopped
1 teaspoon ground turmeric
1/2 teaspoon chilli powder
1/2 cinnamon stick
1 litre hot vegetable stock
400ml pomegranate juice
2 tablespoons pomegranate molasses
pinch of sugar (optional)
2 spring onions, chopped
150g spinach leaves, roughly chopped
a handful of flat-leaf parsley leaves, roughly chopped
a handful of coriander leaves, roughly chopped
sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

To serve

seeds of 1/2 pomegranate
1 tablespoon mint leaves, thinly sliced

This is an Azerbaijani soup with sweet, tart and complex spice flavours. Substitute the split peas for green or brown lentils if you prefer. Unless your split peas are very fresh, soak them overnight in cold water.

Heat the oil in a large saucepan over a medium heat and soften the onions. Add the garlic and spices and stir for a minute or two, until fragrant. Tip in the split peas, add the stock and pomegranate juice and bring to the boil. Cook for 30-45 minutes, until the split peas are tender. Add more hot water if you want a thinner broth.

Stir in the pomegranate molasses and taste the soup for seasoning. If it is tart, a pinch of sugar will mellow the flavour.

Remove the cinnamon stick and add the spring onions, spinach, parsley and coriander and cook just long enough for them to wilt into the soup. Serve scattered with pomegranate seeds and ribbons of fresh mint.

Non

Makes 1 loaf

190g plain flour
1 1/2 teaspoons fast-action dried yeast

3/4 teaspoon salt
1/2 teaspoon caster sugar, sunflower oil or melted lard
1/2 teaspoon black onion seeds

Non is the flatbread that is made the length and breadth of Central Asia. It is usually baked by being slapped onto the searingly hot clay walls of a tandoor oven. At home, using a pizza stone and the oven cranked to maximum is the best way to achieve the characteristic chewy elastic texture.

Put the flour in a large bowl, add the dried yeast to one side and the salt and sugar to the other. Make a well in the centre, pour in 125ml water and mix thoroughly. If it feels stiff, add a little more water to make a sticky dough. Turn onto an oiled surface and knead for 10 minutes until the tackiness has gone and the dough is silky soft and smooth. Form into a ball and put in an oiled bowl. Cover with a tea towel and leave to rise for about 2 hours, or until at least doubled in size.

Knock the air out of the dough and form it into a domed round. Sit it on a floured wooden board lined with a piece of baking parchment and cover again with the tea towel. Leave to prove for a further 45 minutes, or until doubled in size again.

Preheat the oven to 240°C/gas mark 9, or as hot as it will go, and put a pizza stone or baking sheet in to heat up – it needs to get really hot before you bake the non. Make an indentation in the middle of the bread by pressing with the heel of your hand, leaving a doughnut-shaped ring around the edge. Pierce a pattern in the middle using a non bread stamp or the tines of a fork. Brush the top with oil or lard and sprinkle over the onion seeds.

Trim the excess parchment from the sides of the bread. Put a handful of ice cubes on the floor of the oven – these will create steam. Use the board to lift the bread to the oven and carefully slide it (still on the baking parchment) onto the preheated stone or tray. Bake for 15 minutes. The top should be golden and the loaf sound hollow when tapped underneath.

Spicy Meatballs with Adjika and Yogurt

Serves 4

For the adjika

4 red chillies, deseeded
4 tomatoes, deseeded
4 garlic cloves, roughly chopped
1/2 celery stick, roughly chopped
15g coriander leaves
15g basil leaves
15g dill fronds
2 tablespoons walnut oil
2 tablespoons olive oil
3 tablespoons red wine
vinegar
1 teaspoon sugar
1 teaspoon sea salt

For the meatballs

1 slice white bread, crusts removed
6 tablespoons milk
250g minced pork
250g minced beef
1 onion, finely chopped
2 garlic cloves, crushed
1 tablespoon barberries
1 tablespoon ground sumac
1/2 teaspoon cayenne pepper

1/2 teaspoon ground coriander
1/2 teaspoon ground black pepper
2 teaspoons sea salt olive oil, for frying Greek yogurt, to serve

Adjika, literally ‘red salt’, is a spicy and fragrant pepper paste from Abkhazia, a breakaway region of Georgia. You’ll find it completely addictive and you’ll be using it as a condiment for everything, as they do in Abkhazia. It will keep in the fridge for a few days.

For the adjika, put all the ingredients into a food processor and pulse blend to a chunky paste. The flavour will become more rounded and mellow if you make the paste in advance and leave to sit for a while.

For the meatballs, soak the bread in the milk for 10 minutes. Meanwhile, put all the other ingredients into a large bowl and use your hands to combine everything thoroughly. Mash together the bread and milk to make a paste, then mix this into the meatball mixture. Roll into meatballs; I like them golf-ball sized. Heat a slick of oil in a frying pan and cook the meatballs in batches. Start at a high heat to brown the outside, then lower the temperature until the meat is cooked through. Serve with the adjika and a generous dollop of yogurt.

Beef Shashlik with Tahini and Pistachio Sauce

Serves 4

For the sauce

1 ounce country bread (about 1 slice), crust removed
3/4 cup shelled pistachios
1 small garlic clove, crushed
1 tablespoons tahini juice of 1 lemon
1 tablespoon olive oil, sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

For the kebabs

1 1/4 pounds ground beef
1 red onion, grated
1 garlic clove, crushed
3/4 cup shelled pistachios, coarsely chopped
2 teaspoons fresh thyme leaves
2 teaspoons ground cumin
1/2 teaspoon cayenne pepper
1/2 teaspoon ground allspice
1 teaspoon sea salt
1 tablespoon olive oil
flatbread, to serve

In the province of Gaziantep, in Turkey’s southeastern Anatolia region, pistachios (sam fıstığı) are so celebrated that an arts festival is held in their name. The nuts define the region’s food, from the glorious green baklava to these shashlik, meat kebabs studded with pistachios. They can be made with beef or lamb.

For the sauce, soak the bread in a bowl of cold water for a few minutes, then squeeze out as much of the water as possible. Put into a food processor with the pistachios and process to a paste. Add the remaining ingredients and blend again. Add enough cold water to thin the sauce to a smooth, dropping consistency.

Season with salt and pepper and refrigerate until needed, but bring to room temperature before serving. For the kebabs, put all the ingredients, except the olive oil, into a large bowl. Use your hands to mix

everything until smooth.

Divide the mixture into eight pieces and shape each into a long, thin sausage around a metal skewer. Preheat a grill pan over high heat. Brush the shashlik with olive oil and cook for 5 to 10 minutes, turning occasionally, until well-browned and cooked through to your liking. Serve with the pistachio sauce and some warm flatbread.

Chicken, Potato, and Prune Hotpot

Serves 4

4 chicken legs
sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
3 tablespoons olive oil
1 pound waxy potatoes, unpeeled and cut into 3/4-inch chunks
2 sweet apples, unpeeled,
cored and cut into 3/4-inch chunks
1/2 teaspoon allspice
2 tablespoons tomato paste
1/2 cup prunes, pitted and halved
1/3 cup dried apricots, quartered
2 3/4 hot cups chicken stock
To serve
a small bunch of tarragon leaves
3 tablespoons pistachios, chopped

Fruits paired with meat are a staple of Central Asia, lending both sweetness and tang. This is a cozy, one-pot dish, inspired by the flavors of the region.

Season the chicken legs with salt and pepper. Heat the oil in a saucepan large enough to accommodate the chicken in a single uncrowded layer and add the chicken legs. Brown well on both sides, then remove from the pan and set aside.

Add the potatoes and apples, and cook for 8 minutes over medium heat, stirring occasionally. Stir in the allspice, tomato paste, and dried fruits. Return the chicken legs to the pan, tucking them in among the potato and fruits.

Pour in the chicken stock and bring to a boil. Cover with a lid, turn down the heat, and simmer for 45 to 60 minutes, until the chicken is tender. Remove the lid for the final 10 minutes so the sauce reduces a little. Serve sprinkled with the tarragon and pistachios.