

Tablet

Remembrance of Herrings Past

Trying several varieties of forshmak on a recent trip to Ukraine sent me back to my own kitchen, trying to recreate the recipe for minced herring my grandmother used to make

BY SAMANTHA SHOKIN NOVEMBER 3, 2021



The author's grandparents, at left, at a dinner party in Ukraine ORIGINAL PHOTO
COURTESY THE AUTHOR

During my extended stay in Kyiv earlier this year I sat down at the charming Favorite Uncle, one of the city's many trendy eateries, for a taste of cuisine boasting "the bright personality of the Middle East." There, I was shocked to find one decidedly non-Middle Eastern menu item: forshmak, aka

minced herring, or what poet Jake Marmer describes as “probably the most authentically Jewish herring recipe” there is.

Maybe forshmak served at an upscale Ukrainian restaurant is nothing out of the ordinary, but I hadn’t thought about it since childhood, and simply reading the name on the menu triggered a rush of memories.

Back in the 1990s, I spent my childhood summers at a bungalow colony in the borscht belt that had once been frequented by Yiddish-speaking immigrants not unlike my grandparents. By that point, mountain resorts had long since fallen out of fashion and welcomed a new crop of vacationers: namely, Russian-speaking Jews in search of affordable summer dachas. It was at this bungalow colony that I had my first crush, played my first game of soccer, caught my first fish, and learned the Macarena, subsisting solely on my grandmother’s food—and one food in particular: the visually unappetizing but strangely addicting gray mush known as forshmak. Though the fish-based schmear is not that conceptually different from its North American cousin whitefish salad, somehow it never caught on to the same extent and I had never chanced to see it at any American Jewish delis growing up. Instead, forshmak retained its place as a staple of Russian and Ukrainian fare, and as a child of Soviet Jewish immigrants I used to gobble up my grandmother’s forshmak by the jarful.

There is no discernible reason for a 6-year-old to love the taste of pickled herring (though I suspect it is encoded in my genes). Whatever the reason, my forshmak obsession gave peace of mind to my grandparents, whose patience for picky eaters had long run thin. Having immigrated from Ukraine a decade before I was born, they were no strangers to food shortages and could not shake the notion that a healthy child is a plump child. If I refused to sit down for my grandmother’s three-course meals, whose portion sizes were fit for at least one barrel-chested adult, at least I would eat forshmak. Given its medley of nutritious ingredients—fish, egg, bread, apple, and onion, all ground to a pulp and soaked in vinegar—it was reasonably balanced, and one of the few things I, the *kindelah*, loved to eat, so they left me alone.

At Favorite Uncle, when my order arrived, I looked at the presentation—a miniature tower of cucumber slices, two hefty slices of black bread, and half a soft-boiled egg tucked into a teacup-size portion of forshmak—and couldn’t help but laugh. *If this was once considered poor man’s food*, I thought, *it sure has come a long way*. Adding to my disappointment, the taste was entirely

wrong. It wasn't bad—in fact, by industry standards (if those exist) it would probably be considered quite good—but it lacked that magical, life-affirming flavor of my grandmother's recipe, the flavor of my childhood summers in the Catskills.

Cooking was my grandmother Raisa's *raison d'être*, and I owe many of my favorite flavor combinations to her, particularly the delectable trifecta of sweet, sour, and savory. Her kitchen was a mashup of hyphenated cuisines—Ukrainian-Jewish, Soviet-American—and the apartment that housed it was a testament to her love of the finer things in life, however unattainable they often were. Forced to leave everything behind in Kyiv save a few trifles and \$96 per family member, she insisted on shipping the entirety of her ornate furniture collection abroad shortly before immigrating, baroque paintings and all. Eventually the collection made it to East New York where it ended up furnishing my grandparents' apartment through the end of their lives. The decor always seemed to me ironic, or aspirational at best, belying their modest means in America.

When my grandmother passed away, it marked the end of any era: Gone were the days of living room dinner parties and champagne-stained carpeting. With my grandparents no longer with us, extended family gatherings became obsolete, and, with their American dreams realized, my parents' generation preferred to dine out.

Although my family cherishes grandmother Raisa's handwritten recipe collection, forshmak was among the many dishes that she would prepare from memory, leaving us no written record of her method. Today I appreciate that her recipe was truly unique, with a mouthwatering tartness that I have yet to encounter in the dozens of forshmak variations I've since tried from Eastern European groceries and restaurants. And as I discovered in Ukraine, there are as many varieties of forshmak as there are people who make it, Jewish or gentile.

On a visit to Lviv a month after the meal at Favorite Uncle, my husband and I stopped into the very haimish Cafe Jerusalem for a kosher-style lunch complete with three forshmak varieties. Once again, the vinegary taste I so desperately craved was conspicuously absent, making me wonder: Was grandmother Raisa's recipe really that obscure? Even more surprising was spotting forshmak at the military-themed restaurant Kryivka alongside Ukrainian moonshine and garlic-infused pig fat. That the menu was

garishly treyf didn't bother me at all; tasting forshmak pureed with mayonnaise, on the other hand, felt all but sacrilegious.

Having tried so many forshmak varieties to no avail, it was time to attempt my grandmother's recipe myself. I returned home to New York with a pang of reverse culture shock that could only be remedied by a visit to my parents on Brighton Beach. There my mother joined me in reverse-engineering her mother's recipe. "The secret is in the black bread," she said. "In Odessa they used white bread, but in Kyiv, grandma Raisa used only black."

As my mother and I cut the ingredients down to size, I pictured the magnificent spread of my grandmother's dinner parties, set to perfection on a folding table in the living room where guests would scurry in from the winter chill, fur coats piled on the bedspread and ladies' perfume mingling with the scent of piping hot borscht. Despite leaving all their savings in the Soviet Union and only scraping by as immigrants in America, my grandparents never stopped loving to entertain—and though I didn't realize it as a child, grandmother Raisa was truly an extraordinary hostess.

The ingredients fell from the meat grinder into the mixing bowl, and I scooped them up with the first utensil I could find. Without any need for adjustments, the taste was remarkably spot on. It turns out that the holy grail of forshmak recipes had been waiting for me at home all along—and this time I made sure to write it down.