

Inessa Gokun's Stuffed Eggs

I **grew up** in the part of Moscow that, in the 1970s, was known as the Barrio of Scientists. Many a Soviet scientist lived there, and although it began as the zip code only for those affiliated with the Academy of Sciences, it soon expanded to include families of engineers, like mine. These were families in which both the mother and the father worked full-time to build the great socialist paradise promised by the Communist Party—and in which the children attended state-run schools.



Every day, after my mother deposited me at kindergarten on her way to work, the teacher sat us at round tables, put a bowl of oatmeal in front of each child (with a spoon stuck firmly in the thick mixture), and then walked around scooping it into our mouths. By the time she got around the entire table, you were supposed to have chewed that first spoon and be ready for the second.

I hated that oatmeal. Its slimy texture, interrupted only by prickliness of the individual oats; a smell that reminded me simultaneously of an old shoe and the odor of a packed metro train; and its temperature, cooled off enough to form a thin skin-like layer that hung off the spoon the same way snot hung off our often-running noses. But I had little choice in the matter. So I opened my mouth, chewed, and swallowed, repeating the process until the bowl was empty. In the evenings I complained to my mother while devouring fried potatoes she made to compensate for my suffering.

Fried potatoes with fried onion were my favorite. Both my mother and my grandmother knew it, and whenever I went to visit my grandparents, I recognized the smell as soon as I entered the building. Their apartment was on the second floor, and the aroma of potatoes and onions being cooked in sunflower oil hung around the mailboxes. It propelled me to scale the stairs two at a time, often rushing into the kitchen with my boots still on—a no-no in a Soviet household.



All throughout my childhood and adolescence both my mother and my grandmother loved to have guests in the house. And while our everyday cuisine was simple—minced meat made into *kotleti*, a Soviet hamburger, served alongside boiled potatoes and a salad of tomatoes, cucumbers, and dill—our guest menus often contained more than ten items. The most important—the *zakuski*, or appetizers—stood arranged on a dining table to greet the visitors when they arrived. *Zakuski* had to be plentiful, their plates and bowls occupying the entire surface of a table without any extra space allowed, and they had to be beautiful.

I was in charge of their decoration. Salads of potatoes, carrots, and beets all dressed with mayonnaise; plates of thinly sliced cheeses and ham; bowls of marinated tomatoes and pickles; platters of herring and smoked fish—they all needed “some color,” according to my mother. She taught me to use twigs of parsley to impersonate a tree on a mound of *vinegret*, a beet salad; to arrange fresh carrots into a flower on top of *olivie*, the Russian potato salad; and to sprinkle either cilantro or dill over the stuffed eggs—her signature dish.

RECIPE: Stuffed Eggs



Photograph by Eugene Ahn

When and where were you born? Where did you grow up?

I was born in Tula, a city located some 180 kilometers south of Moscow and known as the City of Armorers because of its centuries-old tradition of arms production. My mother's parents lived there—though, at the time of my birth, my parents already resided in Moscow, My mother wanted to be close to her mother when she delivered me.

For the first several years of my life, my parents and I shared my father's family apartment. Squeezed into a seven-square-meter room of a three-room apartment that didn't even have a shower or a bathtub, we stayed there until my parents saved enough money to buy a bigger room in another apartment. Although still communal—we split it with three other families—the new apartment at least had a proper bathroom, a room that was three times the size of our former one, and a location right in the center of the city.

What's your earliest childhood memory involving food?

When still living with my father's family, I was largely left to my own devices both after the kindergarten and on Saturdays. In those post-war years, adults worked long days, and Saturday was no exception. My grandmother, my father's mother, didn't want to be my caretaker, so I spent hours playing by myself in the yard. One time a neighbor took pity on me and brought out a warm piece of Ukrainian loaf—a round, brownish bread popular in Moscow at the time—spread with butter. I still remember the smell and the spongy texture of its freshly baked crumb.

Another memory I have is of oranges. Because we had no bathtub or a shower in that first apartment, every Sunday my mother took me to a *banya*, a quintessential Russian public bathhouse. Whenever she could, she always packed an orange, which she'd peel for me after we bathed. Oranges were a rare commodity in those days, and so both the bathhouse and the orange were a treat, and a welcome moment to share with my mother.

What was your favorite food growing up?

Potatoes and herring. Boiled potatoes, fried potatoes, mashed potatoes—doesn't matter. As long as they were

accompanied by *seledka*, the Russian version of herring, I was happy. Another one was the Russian sauerkraut, which my grandmother made in a large bucket and then distributed, jar by jar, to all of her children.

Can you describe a typical family meal when you were growing up? Who did the cooking?

When we started living in the new apartment, we shared the kitchen with two other families. The kitchen fit three tables—one per family—and one stove. The tables weren't there for the eating; they were there for the prep. That's where my father would usually sit when he helped my mother peel the potatoes, or clean the onions, or mince the meat. We had to coordinate our cooking times with other families so that there wouldn't be "too many cooks in the kitchen," so to speak. After the meal was ready, we would carry it into our room and eat it there.

What's the story behind this dish? When did you start making it, and why did it stick?

I think I first must have made it with my mother for guests. My parents liked to entertain when they were young, and I always helped making the zakuski. I think the stuffed eggs dish was one of the main zakuski my mother liked to prepare—along with the olivie salad.

How did you learn to cook or bake?

I mostly learned everything from my mother. In addition to being a good cook, she was an excellent baker. Every early autumn at our *dacha*, a Moscovite's summer house, my father would scour our fruit trees for apples and pears that were ready. He'd pick them and I'd help my mother make cakes with them. Then we'd all gather the berries—strawberries, raspberries, gooseberries—and she'd use them to make jam for the winter. She'd also pickle cucumbers and tomatoes we grew at the dacha.

When my mother died, ten days before we moved to the United States, I made sure to pack her old cookbook into our shipment. She always scribbled on its margins, recording notes, suggestions, even recipes. But then when we arrived we couldn't find the book. Somehow it never made it here.

Do you still like to cook?

I do, but I no longer do it very often. My most favorite cooking activity now is making a couple of my favorite dishes with my granddaughter. One of those dishes is stuffed eggs.

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Inessa and Margarita