

[Russian Vegetarianism?](#)

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FOOD

Russian Vegetarianism?

Famous for its meat and potatoes, the country has a real style with veggies--and here are two recipes

Jane Srivastava, USA

A joke from my birthplace goes something like this: Someone not familiar with Russia asks a Russian: "Are there any vegetarians in Russia?" To which the Russian responds: "I personally don't know any, but those who tried it have not survived." This joke rings true because for many years it had been virtually impossible for Russians to be vegetarians. The Soviet regime considered vegetarianism a pseudoscientific and bourgeois theory that contravened Soviet ideology. They severely persecuted followers of vegetarian lifestyles. During Soviet times, due to the year-round shortage of food of any kind, people simply could not survive on vegetarian diets.

The idea of abstention from meat is not foreign to the Russians. Before the Revolution of 1917, the majority of Russians observed Orthodox Christian traditional fasts, which excluded meat. In 1901, the first vegetarian society opened in Saint Petersburg. In the following years, nine other vegetarian societies were founded that carried out a variety of activities. They opened vegetarian restaurants and cafes in many cities, operated vegetarian hospitals, published vegetarian newspapers and magazines. Among some of the famous Russian vegetarians of the end of 19th, beginning of the 20th, centuries were writers Leo Tolstoy and Ivan Bunin, composer Alexander Scriabin and painter Isaac Levitan. Tolstoy, incidentally, carried on a lengthy and influential correspondence with the young Mahatma Gandhi in South Africa. Gandhi, in fact, used his ideas to found Tolstoy Farm in South Africa, which served as a training ground for the passive resistance movement (see <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/people/gandhi/bhana.htm>).

After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, interest in vegetarianism and the number of vegetarians have continued to rise. The new Russia offers freedom and the link to the rest of the world that citizens had not experienced for over 70 years. Several vegetarian societies have been created to promote healthy lifestyles and oppose animal killing. All-vegetarian restaurants can now be found in big cities, such as Moscow, Saint-Petersburg and Vladivostok. Supermarkets of the new Russia carry a variety of vegetables year-round that make it possible to maintain a non-meat lifestyle.

Many Russians have discovered vegetarianism as part of their interest in Eastern religions and philosophy, which are gaining popularity among the Russians. Some have chosen not to eat meat in their desire to achieve optimal health. Others do so just because it is fashionable. Whatever the motivation, vegetarian lifestyle is not affordable to everyone. A poll conducted by Eurasian Vegetarian Society (founded in 2001) learned that most vegetarians are among the intelligentsia and the wealthy. Manual laborers, retired and the poor have the least interest in vegetarian lifestyle, or means too meager to adopt it.

Still, there are currently precious few vegetarians in Russia. The majority of Russians are still skeptical about vegetarians and vegetarian lifestyle, and new vegetarians often do not find support and understanding from their friends and family. Many Russians think that voluntarily foregoing meat is crazy and may even harm your health. It's not easy to be Russian and vegetarian when the rest of the community offers you a cold shoulder. Moskovite veggies are in need of support and encouragement of their lifestyle.

Visitors to Russia should not expect many vegetarian choices in most restaurants and private fares. You can find a list of Moscow vegetarian restaurants at http://www.unclepasha.com/vegetarian_russia.htm One is the upscale, pure vegetarian restaurant "Avocado " on Chistoprudny Boulevard, with mostly Russian cuisine.

The traditional Russian table offers plenty of wonderful vegetable-based dishes. However, the unique meat and fish dishes are still essential to any spread. In fact, to most Russians, absence of meat on the table is considered a sign of poverty or inhospitality. Travelers who are willing to cook their own meals will find in local supermarkets most of the necessary ingredients to whip up a vegetarian meal.

In my own kitchen in the United States, I utilize the best of the cuisines I grew up with--Russian, Jewish and Lithuanian--and, to accommodate my husband, recently acquired Indian cooking skills. My interest in Indian culture, religion and cuisine led me to re-examine my eating habits. As a result, I started to make more healthful vegetable, grain and legume dishes, while at the same time experimenting with the recipes I grew up with. I want to share some of my favorite healthy and easy recipes with HT readers.

The first is that quintessential Russian dish, borscht, a beet soup. The traditional version calls for a meat base, but my vegetarian variant of this winter soup is just as flavorful. The ingredients are: three or four medium-sized beets, peeled and grated; four grated carrots, one thinly sliced onion, two thinly cut medium potatoes, one shredded small head of cabbage, three tablespoons each of ketchup and tomato paste, a half teaspoon of sugar, a small bunch of dill, oil, salt and pepper.

Cook the potatoes and cabbage until tender in six to eight cups of boiling water or prepared vegetable stock. Saute the onions, beets and carrots on medium heat for about 10 minutes, stirring occasionally. When the vegetables take on a nice aroma, add ketchup, tomato paste, dill, salt, black pepper and sugar. Turn to coat well, then add to the cooked potatoes and cabbage. Serve garnished with sour cream and dark-rye bread. Makes about six servings.

The next recipe is for buttermilk and apple oladyi. Russian pancakes are of two kinds: oladyi (similar to the American pancakes but smaller in size) and blini (similar to crepes). The ingredients are one cup plus two tablespoons of all-purpose flour, two cups of buttermilk, one teaspoon of corn meal, one apple, a quarter-cup raisins, one-half tablespoon of sugar, a pinch of baking soda and salt, and oil or ghee for frying.

Pour buttermilk into a bowl. Grate one large peeled apple into the buttermilk. Add sugar, raisins, a pinch of baking soda and all the flour to make the consistency of thick sour cream. Stir well. Heat about four tablespoons of oil in a large frying pan. There should be enough oil that the oladyi don't stick. When the pan is hot, take a tablespoon and make several three-inch pancakes, cook and turn several times until golden brown. Add more oil as you put on a new batch of pancakes. If you have enough oil in the pan, but can't turn the pancakes or they stick, you will probably need to add the flour to the mixture. This makes about 15 oladyi. Serve with jam and a dollop of sour cream. Priyatnogo appetita!

Tolstoy's 19th Century Vegetarian Crusade

The following article is excerpted from the address of Valentin Bulgakov to the 8th World Vegetarian Congress held in Berlin and Hamburg, Germany, in 1932 (posted at <http://www.ivu.org/congress/wvc32/bulgakov.htm>). Bulgakov was at one time Tolstoy's private secretary. It is translated from a summary of the talk given in Russian and published in The Vegetarian News (London), September, 1932.

It is now four years since the centenary of the birth of Leo Tolstoy, who certainly must be accounted one of the great ones of the earth, was celebrated. During the last twenty-three years of his life he was a vegetarian and, by reason of his great fame and moral authority, he has done great service to the vegetarian movement.

He understood thoroughly the hygienic grounds for vegetarianism, but it was not for such reasons that he became a vegetarian. Most assuredly, it was the ethical standpoint that influenced him. Nor was the idea that was in his mind either detached or isolated. On the contrary, that idea was essentially associated with his world outlook, that outlook, perhaps, being most correctly summarized in all that is expressed in the word humane. Tolstoy always declared that he was a Christian, by which he meant he had no new teaching to promulgate, his business being simply to translate the teachings of the gospels into modern speech and practice. Man, he held, though confined within the limits of the flesh, yet remains the expression of an eternal Principle. In a word, he is a son of God, and by inference all men are brothers. The natural bond between them is the bond of love, and this should extend also to all living creatures. One and the same "soul" is common to all; and, realizing this, it becomes impossible that men should either slay or hurt animals. The publication of Tolstoy's essay, "The First Step" had a quite staggering effect upon the Russian society of his day, many fine and sensitive people thus becoming vegetarians.

Tolstoy felt very keenly the absolute inhumanity of eating flesh, and on one occasion (as has so often been told), by way of clinching an argument with a sister-in-law who was a confirmed flesh-eater ordered a live fowl to be tied near her place at the luncheon table and called for a plate and large knife likewise to be provided, whereupon he proceeded to address her somewhat as follows: "We all know, dear one, how fond you are of flesh, and we should like to provide you with what you wish, but the difficulty is that none of us can bring himself to slay the bird for you. Therefore, there seems to be no other way but to ask that you should do it

for yourself." His guest, however, who was much perturbed, could not bring herself to do as was suggested and was obliged, for that occasion at least, to deny herself the right to eat flesh, which she had hitherto so vehemently claimed to be her due.

The friends and followers of Tolstoy played a great part in the work of the Moscow Vegetarian Society; but the whole of its possessions were confiscated three years ago in 1929 by the Soviet Government, and today in Russia there is no organized vegetarian movement. So weak, it seems, is the position of the dictator that even the vegetarian idea is accounted dangerous! Russian vegetarians, amid all their difficulties, yet continue to show a spirit of "victorious earnestness."

Many economic communities were also established by followers of Tolstoy, but, finally, I must tell you something about the Doukhobors, a people (the name means "warriors of the spirit ") whose existence, as a following, goes back even to the middle of the eighteenth century. The Doukhobors are, in fact, a Christian peasant society, existing without the fold of the Church, whose message received an added strength by reason of the influx of the teaching of Tolstoy, the whole society in 1890, under the direct influence of one Peter Werigin by name, electing to become vegetarians. In 1898, under the Russian regime at that time, and with the direct assistance of Tolstoy, about 8,000 Doukhobors decided to migrate to Canada, where their numbers have since grown to about 15,000--all, with but few exceptions, still being vegetarians.