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A PASSION FOR COOKING

I have always thought it quite meaningful that almost very important occasion, religious or pagan, seems to involve a sharing of food. The very word "company" comes from com/pani/on — "with bread" — as though eating with another signifies and symbolizes a unity or trust. The examples are endless: bread and wine in the church coming from the Seder (which the Last Supper was), Thanksgiving, eggs at Easter standing for birth, new life, and so on.

I often wondered why I developed such a passion for cooking and came to the conclusion that from my early childhood to this day a meal for us has never been just the process of swallowing food, but a ritual of a kind. It brought the whole family together; it was a pause in our rushed life; it made whatever place we were in feel like home. When I was a child in Lithuania I learned from my parents to love and respect the good food from our fields and farms. Then the Great War exiled us to Moscow, where food during the Revolution was scant and poor. (I remember precisely the feel, like glue between the teeth, of that bread made of potatoes and hashed straw!) But our cook, Barbarka, managed somehow to keep us (and many cousins) fed, and my parents' kindness and warm hospitality made our meals together moments of relief from worry and fear. Those times taught me also never to waste food, or to take it for granted, lessons I know have been passed on to my children, and to theirs.

When World War I ended in 1918, my mother had to rehabilitate and oversee the estates that were her heritage, and so had to spend the winters in Lithuania. My sister and brothers and I went to school in Warsaw where our father was the director of the Warsaw Philharmonic, the Opera, and the Conservatory of Music. The director's private apartments were in a wing of the Opera House, and one could reach the main stage without going out. You can imagine how difficult it was for a little girl of ten, dreaming of being a dancer, to concentrate on her homework in the evenings! Needless to say, my lessons often went unfinished or undone, and I would run from our apartment through a maze of stairs and corridors, peering fascinated into room after room filled with costumes, wigs, props, boots, and ballet slippers, the very elements of that magical world of music and make-believe, until I reached the directors' box. There, wide-eyed, I would listen and watch until I saw my father take his last bow. Afterward, we children would all sit up with him while he had supper, long past our school-night bedtime, drinking in eagerly all the stories and gossip of that wonderful world. In the mornings, of course, I was half-asleep and often late for school, but the many evenings we spent helping entertain our father's friends, musicians, singers, and artists became an invaluable experience for my future life.

After my marriage to Arthur Rubinstein this experience was greatly broadened when I accompanied him on tour. Being a famous "gourmet" he knew the best restaurants all over the world. Then I discovered that I had an odd but very useful talent: much as one might have a musical ear, I had the ability to decipher and identify the ingredients in even fairly elaborate dishes—nad made a sort of game (and challenge!) of reproducing them at home without asking for recipes. Succeeding was great fun and gave me confidence to add or change or improvise, and finally to invent! My love affair with cooking had begun—and now after more than fifty years it has proved a very happy relationship.

BIGOS

Traditional in Poland for centuries, *bigos* is a fragrant stew of fresh meat, smoked bacon and sausage, sauerkraut, onions, apples, herbs, spices, and juniper berries. Of all the dishes *bigos* is the one I commend to you most enthusiastically.

Although I don't get sentimental about food, *bigos* is a friend and standby to cook and hostess, and I have counted on it on many occasions. People always seem to love this delicious dish, and it is easy to make, even in enormous quantities (just allow time for all the chopping and slicing). The dish can be kept hot for hours; it can be reheated; it can be refrigerated for days; it can be frozen; pressure cooking does it fast and well; and the ingredients are usually easy to find.

Bigos began as a hunter's stew. The forests of Poland have always teemed with game, and hunters, setting out on week-long winter expeditions, would bring with them the sauerkraut, smoked meats, and spices to heat over log fires after a day's stalking, when they would find fresh meat for the pot: rabbit, hare, venison, boar, and feathered game like grouse and pheasant. With them they had potatoes to roast in the ambers and plenty of vodka to wash the whole thing down—and I still serve vodka and potatoes with *bigos*. But by the time I "inherited" this dish it was no longer a primitive thing. Generations of good cooks at Ilgovo, my mother's family place on the Niemen, had refined it to create a subtle basic recipe, which of course varied a little with the seasons.

It is typical of the cooking I first knew, for it speaks so plainly of its origins. Except for the salt and spices, which were brought by the

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weekly peddler, all the indredients came from home. In those days of no refrigeration, the arts of preserving food were much prized. From the cool, half-underground larder, where dried mushrooms hung on strings above shelves of ranked crocks and barrels, came the tomatoes (dried or cooked down in their summer prime for use in winter), the sauerkraut that was brined in early fall, and smoked sausage and lean bacon from the pigs killed after the first frost. Apples could be taken all through the winter from the special fruit cellar where they lay in straw, on shelves built with slats so that air could circulate. As for the fresh meat, one of my earliest memories is of my slim, straight grandmother in our big kitchen, demonstrating to Chef Antony how to cut up a carcass: which cuts to hang before cooking, which to smoke, which to be rendered, which to be ground for sausages and pates.

In 1932 I cooked a *bigos* for our first party in Paris in our little place in Montmartre, and it was such a success among Arthur's sophisticated friends that it became my *plat de resistance*. For our first Hollywood party in 1941 we invited the whole Ballets Russes as well as the movie stars, and of course we had *bigos*. Then, naturally, it was our first choice to serve to compatriots. *Bigos* was my contribution to the dinner at the first *Bal Polonais* given in New York after the war—a charity party to raise money for Polish refugees, so we kept down expenses by doing all the cooking ourselves. (Later I taught *bigos* to professional chefs when the ball outgrew private quarters and moved to a hotel.) I cooked *bigos* too, at a party for the Warsaw Philharmonic, which my father had founded and directed, when the orchestra came to New York. Once, for a midnight supper in honor of Stravinsky, I cooked *bigos* in Venice, though in that city sauerkraut was hard to find. And I remember cooking it for a wartime party that Duida and Basil Rathbone gave for a great crowd of American servicemen who happened to be stationed near Los Angeles: none of them had ever tasted it before, but they gobbled it up and all demanded second helpings. So perhaps you will agree with me that this very Polish dish deserves to become international.

Not only can you serve it anywhere, to anyone, but you can cook it anywhere. A kettle, a big pot, a wooden spoon, heat of some kind, and there you are. Just lately when the play *Children of a Lesser God*, which my son John starred in, had such a success on Broadway, I was staying in a small hotel apartment with a two-burner kitchenette, but I wanted to give the cast and crew a party. My photographer daughter Eva lent her loft in Chelsea and I shopped for forty-five guests, cooked up *bigos* in that little closet kitchen, and carried the whole feast down to Eva's studio in plastic pails. It was a lovely party.

On that particular night, all the guests were good friends, happy about working together, happy to celebrate. And of course good feeling counts as much as good food—but they come together in the word "hospitality." And to express this, I know nothing better than a big pot of savory *bigos*.

Once the meat is roasted and the cepes have been soaked, which can be done the night before, this recipe take only 30 minutes of actual cooking in the pressure cooker. In an ordinary pot, it takes about 45 minutes. Either way, one can do what little cutting and trimming are needed during the 2½ hours' preparation time of cooking and cooling the meat.

Serve with boiled potatoes or rye bread. Good drinks with *bigos* are iced vodka, beer, or red wine.

BIGOS

Serves 10 as a main course, 15 as a first course

4 ounces (115 grams) dried cepes
3 cups (¾ liter) strong Basic Beef Broth
or use 2 Knorr beef bouillon cubes dissolved in 3 cups water
2 pounds (900 grams) fresh pork shoulder
(or beef, or venison)*
Salt and pepper
3 tablespoons solid vegetable shortening
4 pounds (1800 grams) sauerkraut, canned or fresh
1 pound (450 grams) slab bacon, smoked or salted
8 apples
2 pounds (900 grams) canned whole peeled tomatoes, drained
12 crushed juniper berries, or 1 tablespoon caraway seeds
12 peppercorns
2 bay leaves
4 medium onions
1 pound (450 grams) Polish sausage, precooked or not
½ pound (225 grams) cooked ham (in a chunk)
2 tablespoons sugar (optional)
½ cup (1 deciliter) dry wine, red or white (optional)
1 Knorr beef bouillon cube (optional)

* You may also use leftover roast lamb, beef, or venison.

Preheat the oven to 300°F (150°C). While the oven is heating, put the cepes to soak in the beef broth. Season the pork shoulder with salt and pepper and spread the shortening all over it. Add ½ cup (1 deciliter) water to the roasting pan and set the meat in the oven. During the first hour of its roasting, you need not baste pork or beef. But if you use venison, which can be very lean, baste it twice with melted butter.

During this first hour's roasting time, you can do the following:

- Rince the sauerkraut in cold water until it no longer tasts too sour. Drain it well, pressing down, and reserve it.
- Dice the slab bacon and cook it until it is slightly brown.
- Peel, core, and grate the apples.
- After they have soaked an hour, drain the cepes, reserving their broth, and slice them thinly.
- With the above ingredients, prepare the first-stage casserole. In a heavy, covered casserole, layer the diced browned bacon, the rinsed sauerkraut, the soaked sliced cepes, the tomatoes, and the grated apples, interspersing them with the juniper berries or caraway seeds, the peppercorns, and the bay leaves. Cover the casserole and simmer it over low heat for 1½ hours.

When the fresh meat has roasted for an hour, quarter the onions and strew them about the meat, then sprinkle with salt. If the pan has become dry, add a little water. Raise the oven heat to 350°F (180°C) and cook the meat an hour longer, or until tender.

While the casserole continues to simmer and the meat to roast, skin the Polish sausage, if necessary, and dice it. If it is not the precooked kind, parsate it slowly until it is half done, about 10 minutes. Reserve it.

Dice the cooked ham and reserve it.

At this stage sugar is caramelized by melting it in a small, heavy pan over medium-high heat until it begins to color, to add richness; this step is optional. Let it cool off heat for 2 minutes, then combine it with the reserved broth from the cepes.

When the roast meat is done, set it aside to cool, then dice it.

When the casserole has simmered for 1½ hours, remove it from the heat and add it to the caramel-broth mixture. When the roast meat is ready and diced, add it to the casserole. Add also the diced precooked or half-cooked sausage, the diced coked ham, and the wine, if you like. Mix all these ingredients well with the contents of the casserol, then simmer it for 30 minutes over low heat, being careful that the *bigos* does not burn. Taste it carefully: it may need a bouillon cube dissolved in it; it may need salt.

For the pressure cooker: Begin as above by soaking the cepes (but use only 1 cup broth) and roasting the pork. After the pork has been roasted 1 hour and strewn with onions, and the oven heat raised, start dicing the bacon, and then lightly brown it in the open pressure cooker. Rince the sauerkraut, peel the skin and dice the Polish sausage; if necessary, cook the sausage 10 minutes or until half done.

Before the pork is done, slice the cepes (reserving their broth), and arrange the "first-stage casserole" in the pressure cooker. Combine the bacon sauerkraut, tomatoes, cepes, juniper (or caraway), and apples with the peppercorns and bay leaves. Cook for 12 minutes after pressure is reached; then cool the pot under running water and open it.

When the roast pork is cooked and diced, do the second stage of cooking in the pot. Caramelize the sugar and add it to the reserved cepes broth. Combine the caramel-broth mixture with the ingredients already in the pressure cooker, and add, mixing well, the diced meats: sausage, ham, and pork. Taste: you may wish to add a bouillon cube. Add the optional wine. Cook the assembled dish in the open pot for about 10 minutes, until all the flavors have blended. Taste, season if necessary, and serve.

Note: As mentioned earlier, *bigos* may be kept warm for hours, may be refrigerated and reheated, and may be frozen.

HONEY AND SPICE CAKE

(Piernik, pronounced pyehr-neek)
Makes a thick 9- by 13-inch slab

This is a very old recipe actually my grandmother's, which my mother wrote down in a little notebook for me many years ago—along with many other family "heirloom" recipes as she managed to bring out of Lithuania after the war.

A *piernik* is a flat cake that comes out extremely hard when just baked and feels as though one could never even bite into it—but—it is supposed, according to all the old recipes, to be put away for 2 weeks or more, during which it actually absorbs moisture from the atmosphere and becomes perfectly soft. And if one is impatient and wants to eat it right away, although it is a bit difficult to cut, it will actually melt in your mouth!

One of its chief virtues is the fact that it will keep indefinitely; if you make several at once, you can give them as winter holiday presents and know that they will be even more delicious weeks after the candles are out and the tinsel put away.

Serve pieces of buttered *piernik* with tea or at breakfast or a festive buffet brunch.

The mixture is very stiff. If possible use a heavy-duty mixer on a stand. I use the processor only to grind the walnuts, which I do with a ¼ cup of the sugar, so that they will not become oily. The blender, if you prefer it, also grinds nuts well.

1 cup (¼ liter) honey
½ teaspoon each: powdered ginger, powdered cloves, powdered cinnamon, powdered nutmeg
1 large pinch of ground black pepper
3½ cups (875 grams) flour
2 jumbo (or 3 large) eggs
1 teaspoon baking soda
3 tablespoon vodka
1 cup (¼ liter) walnuts, ground fine with ¼ cup sugar

Preheat the oven to 350°F (180°C). Butter and flour a baking tin 9 by 13 by 2¼ inches.

In a saucepan, melt the honey with the ginger, cloves, cinnamon, nutmeg, ground pepper, and bring it to a full boil. At once, while it is very hot, pour the mixture over the flour in the mixer bowl, turning as you do so with the flat beater blade. When the mixture is perfectly blended, add the eggs 1 at a time, blending each in turn completely. Let the mixer go on beating at medium speed while you dissolve the baking soda in the vodka. Add the soda-vodka mixture, then the nuts, beating only until they are well combined. Pour the batter into the baking tin and smooth the surface.

Bake for 1 hour, then lower the oven heat to 300°F (150°C) and continue baking for about 30 minutes, or until the cake has shrunk faintly from the sides of the pan and the edges are a little browned. Reverse the cake onto a dish towel spread over a rack, but do not remove the pan until the cake is cool. Let the cake sit overnight. Wrap the towel around it, using a second towel, if necessary, to cover the cake, and store it at room temperature for a week. It will soften a little. For longer storage, up to 3 months at least (overall), wrap the cake airtight when it has softened and store it at room temperature.

reprinted from Nela's Cookbook

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