

# Food from the heart: Flavors of Ukraine

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St. Louis Post-Dispatch

**M**y grandfather came from the city of Boryspil, in Ukraine.

One-quarter of the blood in my veins is Ukrainian.

In Ukraine, you cannot separate the people from the land, and you cannot separate the land from the food that is grown on it.

The soil of Ukraine is unsurpassed in its fertility. So much wheat is grown there that it is often called the bread basket of Europe.

“You just need to drop a seed, and it will grow there,” said Tetiana Mouzi.

Mouzi is a senior research chemist at Pfizer; she moved from the western part of Ukraine, in the Lviv region, to St. Louis in 1994. She thought she might stay here for just a few years.

“It’s a great city. We just fell in love, and we’re still here,” she said.

Though her family loves a wide variety of ethnic cuisines, Ukrainian food to her is comfort food. It’s what she turns to when she is feeling nostalgic; it is what she turns to when times are bad.

“Whatever you ate when you were a child, it’s always got that home-sweet-home feeling. The feeling of that warmth and smell and taste that your mom made, and your grandma. It always stays with you,” she said.

Never has that been more true than now.

“With the stress we are under, I have been making Ukrainian food,” she said. “Yesterday I made perogies, and today I might make borsch.”

Borsch — the T at the end is the Yiddish spelling — is the unofficial national dish of Ukraine. The hearty beet soup was invented there, Mouzi said, despite some other Slavic nations’ efforts to claim it as their own. Some historians suggest people have been eating it since the 1300s.

For a dish that has been around so long, it has almost infinite variations.

Beets are a necessity in borsch, of course, but everything else is a matter of taste. It can be vegetarian, or it can have meat — beef, pork, chicken or even duck. It can be made with beans or without,



Chicken kiev with a side of boiled potatoes and glazed carrots.

Colter Peterson/St. Louis Post-Dispatch-TNS

with cabbage or without.

It does have to be served with bread, preferably rye bread, on the side. Always. That is a must.

I followed a recipe by a Ukrainian immigrant food blogger and used beets, beef stock, beef, potatoes, onions and carrots. Root vegetables are very important in Ukrainian cuisine, and this recipe caught my eye because it was loaded with them.

And like everyone else who cooks it, I added my own touch to the dish. I made a double-rich stock by simmering bones and beef in store-bought beef stock, along with a bay leaf, an onion, a couple of carrots and a couple of ribs of celery.

The borsch was beety and meaty and robustly flavored, worthy beyond doubt of being any country’s national dish.

Up next, naturally, were cabbage rolls, another meal common throughout the Slavic lands. Called golubtsi, this version had a distinctly Ukrainian twist — carrots.

Shredded carrots are mixed into the tomato sauce that goes both on top of the cabbage rolls

and inside them, where it is mixed together with rice and ground meat. I used a mixture of beef and turkey, but you could also use pork or — why not? — chicken.

The carrots add a natural earthy sweetness to the dish that perks up the mild-flavored cabbage. Some other cuisines add raisins or currants to sweeten the dish, but shredded carrots feel more organic to the overall flavor.

I next made one of the best known Ukrainian dishes, which is even named for the nation’s capital. Chicken Kiev is the famous dish of chicken breast stuffed with herbed butter, and fried. There is even a small sculpture of it on the streets of Kyiv.

Chicken Kiev was ubiquitous in the 1970s, on the menu of any American restaurant with aspirations of at least moderately fine dining. Then, as with many things that briefly become too popular, it began to fade away.

But when prepared properly, it is still an exceptional dish. And it is simple in concept. At the very center is butter mixed with herbs (I used tarragon, but you could also use chives, parsley, chervil, thyme or rosemary). Wrapped around that is a chicken breast that has been pounded thin.

This package of chicken and herbed butter is dipped first in flour, then egg and finally bread-crumbs before being deep fried to a golden brown. When you cut into one, the crust is crispy, the chicken is moist and melted butter flows out of the middle.

There are some caveats, though, in making it. Chicken breasts are much larger now than they were when the dish was at the height of its popularity. Even if you pound one as thin as you can and wrap it around the butter, you still are likely to overcook the outside in the oil before the inside is cooked through.

I sliced mine in half horizontally, which yielded the proper size. Some stores carry smaller breasts; the Just Bare brand of chickens are smaller and are available at several local supermarkets, but the store I went to was out of them when I got there.

Most recipes suggest frying the chicken briefly before then cooking it in the oven as a way to ensure it is cooked all the way through. But that’s cheating and is not in the spirit of the dish. I fried mine at the relatively low temperature of 350 degrees for the relatively long time of 15 minutes and ended up with chicken that was perfectly crispy on the outside and thoroughly cooked.



Borsch topped with a dollop of sour cream and dill.

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Forsythia is one of the first shrubs to bloom in the spring.

Barbara Eckstein/Contributed Photo

## Getting ready for gardening



**WENDY SCHMIDT**  
BETWEEN THE ROWS

While we wait for the weather to turn more temperate, many things can be done to occupy the day. Make sure garden tools are cleaned and sharpened. You can also give plants a head start by starting garden seeds indoors.

It is a great plan to take notes about when the seeds are planted, what variety you chose to plant, when they germinate, are transplanted, and when you plant them

outdoors. This will help you plan your schedule for future springs.

Crocus and snowdrops are blooming and forsythia is gearing up to turn the world yellow. It is recommended that any winter mulch be left in place until the forsythia blooms.

### Garden Update for March

- Pussywillows begin blooming
- Bats begin leaving hibernation caves
- Make sure birdhouses are clean and ready for nesting
- Add fresh chicken manure to peonies.
- Sprinkle a good all-pur-

pose fertilizer around where you planted bulbs

- Sow seeds of larkspur, sweet peas and snapdragon where they are to grow outdoors
- If you had ornamentals with aphid or scale problems last year, apply dormant oil spray on a mild day while temperatures are above freezing.
- Begin pruning fruit trees this month; prune apple and pear trees first.

This is a busy time of year in the outdoor and indoor garden in preparation for the growing season. Happy gardening and thanks for reading!