

First Crimea, then Donbas, now Borscht

Ievgen Klopotenko

Ievgen Klopotenko is a Ukrainian chef, television presenter, and culinary expert. He has been recognized as one of the most promising leaders in the world of gastronomy and entered 50 Next, a global list of 50 people under 35 who are shaping the future of gastronomy. He also founded a non-profit organization to advance borscht as the national food of Ukraine worldwide. He is working on recognition of borscht as part of Ukraine's cultural heritage by UNESCO.

Russia annexed the Crimea and started a war in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine, but that wasn't enough; now the Kremlin intends to steal borscht from Ukraine.

I didn't intend to start an Eastern European culinary clash. My mission was to get borscht recognised as an aspect of Ukrainian national culture by UNESCO, the United Nations cultural heritage agency. Why? I was just fed up with restaurants around the world calling borscht a Russian soup. The last straw was when the Russian Foreign Ministry described borscht in a four-line tweet as one of the 'most famous and popular dishes in Russia'.

Borscht is one of the most popular dishes of Ukrainian cuisine, but it is more than just a dish. It's not just about food, it's about the nation's cultural identity. The world-famous Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko ate borscht with dried carp. Also, there were Cossacks in a special Cossack register with the second name Borscht and it is rude not to refer to the villages Borschi, Borschiv, Borschivka that are situated in Ukraine. What is more interesting, some people believe in God and some don't, but I've never seen a person that regrets tasting Borscht. Most likely every Ukrainian had Borscht this week. Almost 500 million litres of borscht are eaten in Ukraine every year.

During my 'borscht expedition', I've made a genuinely notable discovery. There is no canonical recipe of borscht, nor is there regional borscht. However, there are as many recipes for this dish as many families are living here. When two people meet each other and start a family, they give birth to a new Borscht recipe. These recipes vary from region to region, from family to family, from house to house, from apartment to apartment. As I told you before, there are literally as many recipes as families. No doubt, borscht is in our DNA.

Perhaps that is the reason why borscht is an essential element of Ukrainian identity. That is why it has become a key object of Russian

propaganda. The pro-Kremlin media uses terms such as 'borscht war' and 'battle of borscht', while most Russians consider borscht Ukrainian. Once I talked to a German journalist based in Moscow who didn't understand the fuss around borscht. He asked people on the streets which country borscht is from, and they answered that it is Ukrainian. 'Then I went to a cafe', he told me. 'I asked cooks there: whose is borscht? I was also told that I was Ukrainian. And what is the problem?' And here is the problem: people understand that borscht is Ukrainian while propaganda claims it is not.

Borscht is Ukrainian, and this historical fact is indisputable. Awkward fact: if you open an article about borscht on Ukrainian Wikipedia and then on the Russian site, you will decide that these are two different dishes. Russian propaganda tries to get its hands on borscht, claiming that this dish comes from the name of the plant *borschivnik* (Heracleum), which is supposed to be the main ingredient in their variant. This version is absurdly awkward and doesn't withstand any criticism because *borschivnik* is a poisonous plant, which is unacceptable for cooking.

Most likely, the name 'borscht' came from the Old Slavic '*brsch'*—beet or beet kvass. The first mention of the dish 'borscht' dates back to 1584. German trader Martin Gruneweg, who was traveling from Lviv to Moscow via Kyiv, wrote that he had stopped for the night over the Borshchavka river—now the Borshchahivka, which gave its name to Kyiv's modern western outskirts. When Martin Gruneweg inquired about the history of the river's name, Kyiv citizens explained that there was once a borscht bazaar in that area. But he didn't believe it, because according to him, it didn't make sense for Kyiv people to get so far from the city center for the sake of borscht. 'Besides, Ruthenians rarely or never buy borscht, because everyone cooks it at home, it is their daily food and drink', he wrote in his diary.

There are other mentions of borscht. In 1598, the famous Orthodox polemicist Ivan Vyshensky wrote about the peasants who 'sip

water or *borschik* from one bowl. There are seven Borshchivs and Borshchenkos in the register of the Zaporozhian Army of 1649 among the Cossacks. Moreover, in the history of the Razumovsky family, researcher Kazimir Valishevsky mentions that the Russian Tsarina Elizabeth fell in love with Alexei Razumovsky, 'and after she fell in love with Ukrainian borscht.'

Besides, we want to single out one more fact—the researcher of USSR cuisines and the 'father' of Soviet cuisines William Pokhlobkin wrote in his book 'National Cuisines of our Peoples' that borscht is a Ukrainian dish that has gained wide popularity in the world.

There are not only historical arguments when it comes to questions of the origin and affiliation of borscht—there are also the depth of its roots in folk culture, regional distribution, and variety of recipes. In particular, proverbs and sayings are of great importance. For example, a children's saying: 'Go, go to the rain, I'll cook you a borscht.' In the dictionary of the Ukrainian language of Borys Hrinchenko from 1907, we find more than a dozen words derived from the word 'borscht'. There are various names of borscht among them—*borschik*, *borschichok*, *borschishche*, *borshchisko*—and *borschuvati* (to eat borscht) and *borschivnitsa* (trade in borscht).

So there are no facts that would deny the nationality of borscht to Ukraine. But then how to explain the intensification of the Russian propaganda machine?

Russia seeks to take away our values so that we don't form a nation. National identity consists of language, food, religion, and life. If you take away all elements, the nation will be vulnerable to aggressive manipulation. The Soviet Union 'took' the food from other nations. When it collapsed, as an offspring of the Soviet Union, Russia attributed all the food to themselves. They used the statement, 'if it was in the Soviet Union, then the borscht is ours.' As Taras Shevchenko wrote, Russians with their imperialistic thinking are sincerely convinced that 'you are ours, and your things are ours.'

This propaganda was a crucial thing that forced me to legally consolidate borscht's status as a Ukrainian national dish. As it turned out, borscht was never officially considered Ukrainian. The first mention of borscht is recorded in Ukraine. It is prepared and eaten by every Ukrainian, but borscht is not Ukrainian at the legislative level. We just didn't think it had to be documented.

Our team worked hard for a year. I created a public organization—the Institute of Culture of Ukraine—with the support of the Chumak Company and sent my team on a 'borscht expedition' throughout Ukraine. At the same time, we conducted a 12-stage preparation task to collect and approve all documents. It was a complicated process, but we managed to cope with it. Borscht is now on the National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Ukraine. In March, we are applying for the inclusion of the Ukrainian national dish in the UNESCO list of intangible heritage, and I believe that we will be successful.

For Ukrainians, borscht is more than just a dish. Borscht is a part of Ukrainian identity and our national value. An influential cultural phenomenon and the answer to the question: 'What unites Ukrainians?' If it is not worth fighting for, then what is?