A Recipe for Entering Tradition Sideways



1.
Every recipe claims to begin with ingredients, a set of tools, and instructions. But before the ingredients come the mood that hovers somewhere between the body and the refrigerator: what do we want to eat tonight? Something spicy, something quick, something indulgent. Shall we redeem this lonely chicken? Our guide is a cookbook, a grandmother's voice in our heads, or, more often now, a twenty-second reel on Instagram.

2.
The art of preparing food was admired almost religiously in my family. A woman's worth was often measured by the thinness of the dough she rolled for beshparmak. I also wanted to cook from an early age, but I did not want to become a good girl, a perfect wife. Would mastering the art of dough inevitably pull me into the role that had been attached to it? How do I fail?

3.
One of my favorite children's activity books promised a set of small miracles: paper-cup telephones made from string, physics experiments involving different objects, and

melting sugar in a spoon over a gas burner to make candy. Somewhat unexpectedly, it had a recipe for ***вареники с картошкой***, potato dumplings. The serene illustration showed a mountain of white flour on the table with an egg resting in a crater at its center. I followed the image carefully... my mother entered the kitchen exactly when the egg and the water I had poured on top began to flow down the mountain, in four small rivers, across the table, right onto the floor.

4. .

Another image from the same childhood kitchen. The excess of black caviar. It was cheap, and we had two versions of it, one in jars that you could put on top of the bread and butter with a spoon, smooth and silky. The other version was pressed black blocks of caviar that one could only cut through with a knife. I remember running around all day, coming home for a second to drink some water, open the freezer door, take out the black block, and snack on it, leaving little teeth marks on the salty surface. Eventually, the freezer door broke because I liked to swing on it like a monkey.

5.
Try to explain your Kazakhness through food, and you will inevitably arrive at beshparmak.

A recipe:

Obtain several thick cuts of horse meat, along with kazy (a horse-meat sausage). Lamb or beef can be added if necessary (better to add, not to substitute). Place everything in a large pot and let it simmer for hours until the broth turns deep and opaque with fat, salt, and pepper.

Once the meat is tender, remove it and set it aside. In the same broth—sifted first—cook thin sheets of dough (don't forget to measure your worth as a woman!). Lay the cooked dough across a large platter. Slice the meat into pieces and scatter it generously on top. Finish with onions briefly softened in boiling broth, then season again with salt and pepper.

6.
"Central Asian food must have so many spices!"
"We are not that kind of Asian." sigh.

7.
Surprisingly, food preparation was not a cage, but a loophole: one can enter tradition sideways. I am a person of rituals. I like repetition, the calming predictability of doing the same gestures again and again: kneading dough, cutting onions, waiting for broth to deepen in color. Cooking allowed me to inhabit the ritual without fully accepting the gendered script attached to it.

8.
Queering the beshparmak one dough at a time.

9.
On YouTube, there is a documentary about airport security in the United States. At one point, the camera shows confiscated fruits, vegetables, and seeds being poured into a large rotating machine that turns them into pulp. Agricultural safety requires destruction. In the next shot, an officer holds up a large piece of kazy and explains that it will also be destroyed. A Central Asian viewer gasps.







10.
How to smuggle a contraband of kazy through borders: 1. Go to your local kazy provider and buy the required amount. 2. Vacuum seal it; usually, it is done on the spot by the seller for additional payment. 3. Freeze before your flight 4. In your luggage, hide it between your favorite pants and t-shirts 5. Some people suggest wrapping it in foil to confuse scanners. 6. Upon arrival, merge into the crowd. Maintain a calm poker face that says: I have no horse meat in my luggage.

11.
A new flatmate of mine recently arrived from Kazakhstan. Once I found her standing in front of the refrigerator, eating slices of salami as if performing an urgent task. Most of our recent meals have been vegetarian. I remembered how my mom used to call me: "Have you eaten? Was there meat?" ***Қазақтар ет жесе қасқырлар ұялады***.

12.
Yet, I still sometimes measure my worth through cooking. I know how to do it well: feed people, create abundance from simple ingredients, make a table feel generous. At least three promising (?) relationships with Germans ended after the second date because of how much food I had prepared. For me, a main course, several salads, and sour snacks, followed by dessert and cocktails, was a gesture of casual sympathy. For them, it signaled domestic gloom. Perhaps next time just offer einen Tee, Sprudelwasser, oder Wine.

13.
Food is a weapon. Either through scarcity, as in famines. Google Asharshylyk. Or through excess. Google high-fructose consumption in Indigenous reservations in the U.S.

14.
A Western worker stationed on Kazakh oil rigs posted a photograph of a kazy sausage online and joked that it looked like a horse's d*ck. The post triggered a scandal, and he was fired. Ah, what if the extraction of resources from Kazakh land for Western profit provoked the same outrage?

15.
The eroticism of kazy remains understudied.

16.
Foods I tried for the first time after moving to Europe: avocado, passion fruit, sweet potato, topinambur, plantain, okra, artichoke. Some of them provoked an erotic response, and not a single national feeling was hurt.

17.
If someone asks what drink best accompanies the salty, fatty heaviness of beshparmak, a meal

meant to be eaten with the hands, the answer is simple: Coca-Cola (choose the Palestinian one!).

If someone asks what could be a good drink that accompanies the salty, fatty heaviness of beshparmak, a meal meant to be eaten with the hands, the answer is simple: Apfelschorle or a Cola*.

*look out for an ethical version

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