



Vegetables

YOU KNOW HOW IT IS with people who give up smoking: they will proudly tell you how long they have gone without a cigarette: Ten days, 10 hours, 10 minutes. And you have to applaud them for their tenacity. It must be hard to give up. I don't smoke, but I can just as proudly say it has been ten days since I gave up eating meat.

Yes, the consummate carnivore, a person who thought nothing about starting the day with bacon and eggs, moving on to something meaty for lunch, then cooking elaborate casseroles at night has decided it's time for a change.

Goodness only knows how long it will last, I haven't had any cravings just yet, but am showing all the symptoms of withdrawal. There is a deliciously large piece of expensive smoked ham in my fridge which is going to waste. Each day I take a peek and yes, it is drying out. It will be a shame to throw it away. I think about it as I chew through my bowl of sensible museli and yogurt in the morning.

But I have kept my nose out of the frozen meat section at the hard currency shops, and have vowed to do more vegetable shopping at the *rynok*.

Last Saturday after a long, gentle walk with a friend around the Boulevard Ring, we went into *Tsentralny rynok* and headed straight for the pulses. I thought I would start with something basic like chick peas. I wanted to buy lentils — but that only evokes delicious French pork dishes and steamy winter soups and only just ten days in, my resolve is not strong.

This recipe allows for creative tinkering and additions, but here are the basic ingredients. Chick peas, spinach or Swiss chard, tomatoes, onions, garlic, lemon juice, olives and plenty of pepper.

My first batch also included a few precious sun-dried tomatoes, a gift from a fellow non-meat eater who just came back from London. Don't be put off by the fact that you have to soak the peas. All good dishes need a little preparation: After all, you take the meat out of the freezer to defrost, so soaking and then cooking chick peas is just another variant that should not cause too much anguish.

Armenian Chick Pea Salad

<i>1 cup</i>	chick peas (uncooked weight)
<i>A large bunch</i>	spinach or lettuce leaves
<i>1 large</i>	tomato, chopped
<i>1 medium</i>	onion, finely chopped
<i>2 cloves</i>	garlic, finely chopped
<i>2 tbsp</i>	olive oil
<i>1</i>	lemon, diced (juice, skin and all)
<i>1/2 cup</i>	olives, seedless and finely chopped
<i>Plus</i>	pepper and salt

Soak the chick peas in cold water overnight, drain and cook in fresh water until tender — about one and a half hours — drain again.

Cook the onion and garlic over a steady heat in about two tablespoons of olive oil. Add the well-washed greens and cook for about five minutes until they are well wilted, add the tomato. In a large bowl combine all the ingredients. Taste and decide if the dish needs more olives for piquancy, more pepper, or more lemon juice. Chill well so the flavors combine before serving.

THREE DAYS AGO IT HAPPENED: not the first daffodils or first crocuses around the dacha, but rather something a little more homelier, a little more Moscow.

The first mosquitos of spring appeared in my apartment.

It was dark, it was late and it was raining. I tossed aside my book — *Wuthering Heights*, which was not a good choice on a dark, late, rainy night because I'm scared of monsters and ghosts — turned out the light and heard a distant tentative whine.

"A mosquito?" I asked incredulously, "already? It's only April." Too true.

And it was such a blundering little creature that had just hatched I almost felt a twang of regret about squashing it against the wall with my book. (The wallpaper is of such a delicate swirly hue you wouldn't notice a squashed cockroach there, let alone a few millimeters of guts and blood.)

Spring! At last! I hauled out my mosquito net from the cupboard, inspected the damage from a winter of neglect, took out my needle and thread and whistled happy Greek fisherman ditties as I went about repairing the net.

So it was up. Each night I triumphantly awaited the invasion, knowing smugly my defenses were impenetrable.

Well I didn't have to worry did I? The poor little dears all froze to death like the rest of us when winter came gushing back in the second week of May.

My net is still up — defiantly — and while I wait for warmer weather I'm dreaming up all sorts of warming winter meals.

For a dish that is simplicity itself, why not go with eggplants. Now I know its not quite the season for them. But it's not quite the season for snow either.

It requires just large eggplants, dozens of cloves or garlic, a little salt, a little coriander, bacon if you feel inclined. Oh yes, and deft fingers. Count one large eggplant for two people.

Baked Eggplant

2 large	eggplants
10 cloves	garlic
A small bunch	fresh coriander
2	rashers bacon, chopped
Plus	salt and pepper
	olive oil

Preheat oven to 150° Celsius. Wash the eggplant well. No need to trim the tops. With a small knife make one centimeter incisions diagonally along the top, about two centimeters apart. Do the same with the other eggplant, then finely slice the garlic. You are going to insert the garlic into the slits. With brute force you can manage to get some thick slivers in, but thin is a whole lot easier.

Next chop your coriander very finely and roll the garlic slivers in the coriander (no points for neatness) and a little salt, then push them into the slits. If you like bacon, alternate a piece of garlic, then bacon, both rolled in the coriander.

Place the eggplants on a baking tray covered in foil and drizzled with just a little oil and bake them in a very, very slow oven for almost two hours.

That sounds long — but you want to have the eggplants retain their shape, cook thoroughly and collapse just a little during this process you have to have a slow oven.

To serve them, carefully lift them off the baking tray, slice thickly but don't separate the pieces, making sure each slice has a portion of garlic or bacon, drizzle more olive oil over the top, a little more coriander, salt and pepper. Serve hot with a main dish, or cold as a perfect picnic salad.

THE SNOW out at the dacha last weekend was a food lover's dream. It was like walking on a giant slice of meringue — a crisp top layer and all gooey underneath. That's what happens in March; you get all emotional about the fact the thaw is imminent and you're going to lose the snow.

Still there is something even better to look forward to in spring. A lot tastier than snow in fact. Greens. Remember them?

Actually that is cruel — one should never forget the two vegetables that are there for us season after season — unfailingly dependable, reasonably cheap and rather dull. This page ought to be called an Ode to Cucumber and Cabbage.

How could local restaurants offer a mixed salad all year without them? How else would we avoid scurvy, beriberi and plague each winter? How else would friends turn on us each meal and moan: "Not cucumbers/cabbage again?" and force you to even more culinary acrobatics in the kitchen to make them tasty.

The trick of course is to tart them up. Pickle them. You can always buy cucumbers from the *rynok* already pickled. These *ogurtsy sally-oniye* make your face pucker up like a prune, but they are delicious. But better still, pickle them like the Thais do. It's a lot faster, won't stink out the fridge and they taste even better.

One of the most important ingredients is fish sauce. Think of it as the soy sauce of Thailand. It is brown, thin and pungent — made from the liquid of salted and fermented fish — vile on its own, but somehow manages to turn any dish into something special. A bottle lasts forever. It's Thai name is *Nam Pla*, but most people just call it fish sauce.

Bak Choi is a Chinese cabbage that has a lot more crunchy texture than ordinary cabbage; but use the latter if *Bak Choi* is scarce.

Bak Choi Salad

<i>1 bunch</i>	Bak Choi
<i>2 cloves</i>	garlic, minced
<i>1 heaped tsp</i>	fresh grated ginger
<i>1 small</i>	chili, seeded and finely chopped
<i>1 tbsp</i>	vegetable oil
<i>1 tbsp</i>	sesame oil
<i>2 tsp</i>	soy sauce
<i>1 tbsp</i>	fish sauce
	fresh black pepper

Wash the Bak Choi, separate the white and green parts, slice both. In a wok or frying pan heat it till hot, add the vegetable and sesame oils, mix them together, and toss in the garlic, chili and ginger. Cook briefly, stirring like mad. Add the white sliced stalks and cook until just wilted but not soggy. Add soy sauce and then put in the green leaves. Mix together, add the fish sauce, a good grind of black pepper and serve immediately.

Cucumber Pickle

<i>5 medium</i>	cucumbers
<i>1 tbsp</i>	honey
<i>1 tbsp</i>	red wine vinegar
<i>1 small</i>	red chili, seeded and finely chopped
<i>1 heaped tbsp</i>	peanuts, crushed
<i>1 small</i>	onion, finely diced
<i>2 tbsp</i>	fresh coriander, shredded
<i>1 tbsp</i>	fish sauce

Combine all ingredients in a bowl with diced cucumber and leave in the fridge for a few hours before serving. Toss well.

IT JUST HAPPENS SO FAST. No matter how many winters you spend here it's still a shock. One week the city is bursting with produce, the next — nothing.

It's that time of the year where you find yourself saying: "so much for lettuce, here comes cabbage season again."

It's funny what habits you get into: people coming for dinner "I'll just do a green salad." So off you go to a hard currency store, stock up on the necessities and you lob into your shopping basket six leaves of hothouse nothingness, held together in a little black pot.

Wasteful extravagance.

Hothouse lettuces don't even taste very good. Granted they are easy to serve — and if you are wicked and have little time you don't even have to wash them. Those poor vegetables wouldn't know what dirt and worms looked like unless you introduced them to each other at a Yuri Gagarin Dance Party.

All of which is a gentle reminder that cabbage is a much cleverer substitute: It is ridiculously cheap, they keep forever in the fridge (so you can always have a "green" handy if you haven't made it to the *rynok* in a while) and best of all, they are tasty.

Honest.

Naturally if you boil them to a limpid mass and try and serve them as a vegetable by themselves you aren't going to be very popular; but keep in mind that they should be blanched first.

Blanching simply means plunging the cabbage — usually quartered or separated into leaves — into boiling slightly salty water for a few minutes, and then running them under cold water. That way the leaves cook a little, retain their color and keep a good crisp texture.

Do this and then you have one of the quickest salads. Slice into thin slices, sprinkle over a little vinegar, plenty of crushed cumin seeds, salt and pepper and a garnish of spring onions. For larger volumes or a big stew, blanch for a bit longer.

One good way of cooking cabbage is to emulate the Irish and make Colcannon; one of those hearty dishes that are easy to make, require few ingredients but are very satisfying.

There are plenty of variations of this dish — and although I had an Irish grandmother, she never passed on the secret. This is the basic version. Once you get the hang of cooking the cake without having it break up or burn, you can experiment with different toppings; most popularly bacon.

Colcannon

4 large	potatoes
1/4 cup	milk
5 cups	green cabbage, shredded
1/2 cup	butter
2 large	onions
1/4 cup	chives for garnish, snipped
	salt and pepper

Peel and cook the potatoes in boiling salted water until tender, remove from the heat and mash until smooth with a little milk. You don't want them to be too liquid however, so be sparing. Shred the cabbage into thin strips and blanch for one minute in boiling salted water, drain well, soak in cold water and drain again.

Mix the potatoes and cabbage together, seasoning well with salt and freshly ground black pepper.

Heat half the butter in a heavy frying pan that is a comfortably large size and cook the onion until softened and just beginning to brown.

Press the potato and cabbage mixture into the pan over the onion, forming a large cake. Cook over low heat until the underside is browned and crusted.

At the first smell of burning turn the cake out on to a large flat plate and put in the rest of the butter to the same pan.

Now comes the tricky part: slide the potato cake back into the pan and cook until the other side is golden and crusty. You aren't supposed to have it break up, but first tries or not being Irish are good excuses for broken bits. Serve it very hot, scattered with chives and cut into even wedges.

TRY THIS FOR A TYPICAL DACHA SCENE: the lilacs are blooming, the blossoms from the apple trees are dropping gently on the dozing figures in the deck chairs, the aroma of barbecue *shashlik* and grilled eggplants is wafting over the yard and one industrious guest is out gathering dandelion leaves for a salad.

Naturally if you were caught out in last Saturday's snowstorm like most of us you are going to take a very dim view of this idyllic scene.

Snow at the end of May. Vile.

We all complained — and pitied the poor *shashlik* chefs who huddled ever closer to the flames in an effort to keep warm. But our dandelion-leaf gatherer was not to be deterred by a mere snowstorm. And she was right. What could be better? A fresh tangy salad you have plucked yourself.

Dandelion is one of those embarrassed flowers that suffers from a silly name in many languages. In French it is called *pissenlit*, which literally means “piss in the bed,” (supposedly because the flowers have useful diuretic properties).

Luckily the French have redeemed themselves with its other name — the one the English took. Dandelion comes from the words *dent-de-lion*, lions tooth because the shape of the leaves are thought to resemble a lion's tooth.

Ever looked in the mouth of a lion to check?

And in Russian it is called *oduvanchik*, from the word *duvat*, to blow away. Rather a pretty image, much better than bed-wetting. Every child knows just what it's like to stand in a field, fill your lungs with air and try and blow all the dried petals off the dandelion in one go. Far better still to make a salad.