

Dandelion and Bacon Salad

<i>5 cups</i>	dandelion leaves, washed and dried
<i>1/2 cup</i>	thick bacon, diced
<i>1 tbsp</i>	vinegar

Vinaigrette dressing made with:

<i>1 tbsp</i>	white wine
<i>5 tbsp</i>	oil
<i>2 cloves</i>	garlic, crushed

(Those not indulging in bacon can, of course, leave this out and use quartered hard-boiled eggs instead.)

This is a May dish because the leaves need to be young to be juicy. Wash the leaves and as they are drying, dice the bacon and gently brown it in a saucepan. Crush the garlic and rub it around the bowl into which you are preparing the salad. Mix together the wine and oil and pour it into the bowl. Add the dandelion leaves and toss. Pour the vinegar over the diced bacon, stir well and add to the salad. Toss again and serve.

I DID IT. I SUBSCRIBED. And now I am seriously depressed. Two issues of American *Gourmet* magazine arrived on my desk. They always appear just before lunch, which is approximately three hours after my stomach says it's time. And I tell myself: "No. Do not open this magazine before you have eaten your sensible cheese sandwich, you will only get hungry." But each time I have been unable to resist.

So here I sit, stomach growling, dreadfully unhappy, trying to work out the point of life when you can't eat such wonderful things as grilled fresh salmon with fennel orange salsa, baked long-tailed red snapper in a salt crust, spinach salad with goat cheese and pita croutons and Cantaloupe Sherbet.

Luckily I didn't sit for long. I hotfooted it out of the office, straight to the *rynok* to buy up a kilo of delicious new potatoes. If you can't have a meal of Asparagus, Gruyère and Tarragon Souffléed Omelette, you can at least have a good potato salad. Right?

I lugged my kilo home and was almost tempted to join the line of people on Ulitsa Gotvalda near my apartment who were also buying up potatoes — from the back of an enormous truck. Business must have been brisk, because by five o'clock they had sold almost two tons, they proudly announced. But there were a few bags of dirty beauties left for the latecomers. I hesitated. Was this excessive? Did I need more potatoes? How many could I possibly eat? (In France, the average annual consumption of potatoes is 80 kilograms per person per year, in Belgium and Poland it is 200 kilos and in Britain 110. Goodness only knows what it is in Russia.) In the end I declined. Which was a relief to the *babushka* behind me who looked worried I would take the last bag.

I contented myself with my new potatoes instead.

And let's face it, you can't go wrong with perfect new potatoes. They don't need scrubbing, just a quick wash, then boil them (or better still, steam) until tender and serve them with a little butter and fresh dill and a spoon of sour cream, or with plenty of garlicky butter.

Or to get value out of my subscription to *Gourmet* I might try a variation on their potato salad.

Dill Potato Salad

<i>1 kg</i>	new potatoes
<i>1</i>	lemon, juice and zest
<i>1 cup</i>	plain yogurt
<i>1/4 cup</i>	fresh dill, chopped
<i>2</i>	spring onions, finely sliced
<i>Plus</i>	pepper and salt

Cook the potatoes until tender, and toss them in the lemon juice and leave to cool. In another bowl whisk the yogurt, then add the dill, lemon zest, green onions and plenty of good pepper and a little salt. Once the potatoes have cooled, combine the ingredients carefully so you don't break up the potatoes, and serve.

I'M BEGINNING TO TIRE of serving this dish — but friends refuse to see its demise. It has been cooked around the globe: in the mountains near Sydney, in Paris, in London and in Basel. Somehow or other, the Georgians have discovered the perfect combination of eggplant, coriander, garlic and salt. They have turned it into the simplest and tastiest of dishes that can be served hot as an appetizer, cold as a main dish or as a side dish.

What is odd about this dish is how everyone assumes there are gastronomic acrobatics that secretly occur. They don't. It may take a few times to get the timing right, but once you and your oven come to an agreement, there is nothing to it.

Eggplant Chips

<i>2 large</i>	eggplants
<i>5 cloves</i>	garlic, thinly sliced
<i>5 tbsp</i>	good olive oil
<i>5 tsp</i>	salt
<i>1 bunch</i>	fresh coriander, well washed

Preheat oven to 250° Celsius. Slice the eggplant lengthwise into very thin slices. Forget about salting and leaving under heavy weights for half an hour — this is a snappy appetizer and you don't have time to waste. Prepare a flat baking tray with a generous coating of good olive oil, or cover it with baking paper then add oil. Arrange the slices of eggplant flat, making sure the thickest pieces are to the back and try not to overlap. Sprinkle with a little salt, crush the garlic and spread it randomly. Next drizzle good olive oil over the dish (eggplants are thirsty beasts, you will need a lot) and put into the oven for approximately half an hour.

The eggplant should be checked. The ideal result will be for all eggplants to be cooked through and limp with some pieces a little crisp. The garlic may burn and so too will the pieces at the back. Don't worry. Fans will tell you the crunchier the eggplant chips the better. Peel them off the baking tray (if you forget to oil the tray or use baking paper, they will stick and never come off, despite serious scouring and prizing with a knife) and serve at once on a large flat platter with plenty of fresh coriander scattered over the top.

WHEN I WAS FIVE, I started attending Miss Moya Beaver's Ballet School every Tuesday afternoon; an obligation which lasted until I was twelve. My dancing career was not what you would call memorable. I was one of the little girls relegated to playing such roles as a broom in the *Sorcerer's Apprentice*, a butterfly in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, and while dreaming of being a swan in *Swan Lake*, I think I managed to be a tree. Or was I a rock?

No matter what parts we played, September was always the month when we started rehearsals for the Christmas concert and Miss Beaver's booming voice rattled through the well ventilated Balgowlah Hall (even down to the littlies at the back): "Christmas is just around the corner, girls, let's get a move on."

It used to send a delicious thrill of horror through all of us. Concert night was the event when you had to control the urge to wave to mummy in the audience, remember you have already gone to the toilet six times and try and put out of mind the huge box of Cadbury Chocolates that awaited you at the end of the night. Juggling all these difficult thoughts and remembering when to leap on stage at the right cue usually ended in disaster.

Hence the reason why I have blocked out ballet from my memory. What stubbornly remains however is Miss Beaver's dread warning.

September is here and if you want to make delicious presents for Christmas that haven't come from Izmailovo, Moscow's big outdoor flea market, the last weekend in December, you had best start now.

Here is an idea, from my friend's Sicilian grandmother, that takes advantage of the abundance (and cheapness) of eggplants.

This gift is great to make in Russia, because everyone has thousands of jars cluttering up their apartments. You may have to spend some time searching for the lids, of course. If you do not succeed use plastic cling wrap and an elastic band instead.

Pickled Eggplant

5	eggplants (per glass jar)
2 <i>tabsp</i>	salt
4 <i>cups</i>	good olive oil
2 <i>cups</i>	red wine vinegar
5 <i>cloves</i>	garlic, finely sliced
10 <i>small</i>	dried chilies
<i>Small bunches</i>	oregano or purple basil
<i>Plus</i>	salt and pepper
	clean glass jars and tight-fitting lids

Slice eggplant about two centimeters thick, salt both sides generously and place in a colander. Place weights on the top (such as a dinner plate) and leave overnight. Once this is done, squeeze as much of the liquid out of each slice, without squashing the poor eggplant beyond recognition.

Bring red wine vinegar to the boil and drop the eggplant in. Beware, the fumes from the vinegar are very pungent. Simmer for about three minutes or until tender but not falling apart. Carefully remove (they will be very hot) and drain. Once the eggplant is cool enough to handle, again squeeze out as much liquid as possible.

Into a clean jar, pour a few centimeters or so of olive oil, and drop in plenty of garlic, some of your chosen spices and herbs. Take a piece of eggplant and push it down firmly into the oil. Keep adding slices, topping up the oil and adding further slices. When you have pushed as many slices in as the jar will comfortably hold, top with more olive oil so that the eggplant is completely covered.

Cover with a lid or plastic wrap.

Now comes the hard part — put them away in a darkened part of the kitchen until December. If you can't wait, they will be delicious after one month, but scrumptious after three.

SYDNEY — I have just come back to the fast pace of the city. Last week was spent in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney where my friends have only just caught up with the technological innovations of a decent telephone service. Instead of direct dial you used to just call a neighboring mountain exchange and ask for 36, or plain Uncle Bill if you were feeling reckless. They do offer something better than modern technology however: 200 acres of the most magnificent walnut and chestnut trees, a huge kitchen garden full of fig and lemon trees, blueberries, kiwi fruit, herbs, cucumbers and carrots and a large pantry in the kitchen groaning with jams, preserves and chutneys made by Aunt Ruth in her spare time.

And with 700 head of sheep (600 if you are the taxman), they are almost self-sufficient. All they need is a cow for milking and they'd be set. As one would expect, I told them I planned to defect — if only to glean the secrets about Bill's delicious recipe for pickled walnuts. Or just eat my way through the kitchen garden.

I was prepared for both.

Chestnut season was a month or so away and there were very few walnuts on the trees. This surprised me because I knew they never ripened before Christmas but stay there looking luminous and green.

This is a big change from Bill's father who planted the trees over 60 years ago. Now there is a bigger demand for the unripe green walnuts, thanks to a small group of gourmets from Cyprus.

As a traditional welcome in Cypriot households you are served a glass of iced water and a small plate bearing a few preserved spicy green walnuts. There were enough ripe walnuts around when I was there for me to make a deft *lobio* to tantalize their tastebuds.

Lobio is a bean salad that hails from Georgia.

It is quick to make and easy to prepare as most of the ingredients are likely to be found in your supply cupboard. Your best bet, however, is to make the dish the day before you plan to serve it.

Red Bean Lobio Dip

<i>1 large tin</i>	red kidney beans
<i>1 medium</i>	red onion, finely chopped
<i>1 cup</i>	walnuts, finely chopped
<i>4 cloves</i>	garlic (less if you're timid)
<i>1/2 cup</i>	fresh coriander, finely chopped
<i>1 tsp</i>	coriander seeds, crushed
<i>5 tbsp</i>	red wine vinegar
<i>2 tbsp</i>	water
<i>2 tbsp</i>	olive oil
<i>A good grind</i>	black pepper
<i>Plus</i>	toast or fresh lavash

Drain the beans from the can and soak in a little water. Put them in a large bowl. Mash them as much as you can. Slice the onions, walnuts (try crushing them inside a strong plastic bag so the bits don't decorate every surface of your kitchen), garlic, coriander seeds, vinegar, water, oil and fresh coriander.

Mix vigorously, add pepper and leave in the fridge overnight. Give it a stir every few hours. Serve it as a fiery starter with toast or fresh *lavash* — Georgian bread. With the four cloves of garlic you will offend everyone, so make a large batch and invite all your friends.

WHO WOULD HAVE THOUGHT that a Danish cook living in Thailand could make life more palatable for people in Russia? Mogens Bay Esbensen wrote a wickedly good book called *Thai Cuisine* which, in a moment of weakness, I bought and have sitting here beside me.

Not much use with local Russian ingredients you might say. And it's true. But there among all the recipes (with mouth-watering color photographs) for Sugar Bananas in Coconut Cream and Steamed River Prawns is the best solution to boring cucumber I've ever come across.

Thank goodness we have cucumbers and coriander all year round in Moscow. With this dish you can't go wrong. Learn to make it a day ahead and you will always have one dish that will surprise and please everyone.

Spicy Cucumber Salad

<i>2 medium</i>	cucumbers
<i>1 tbsp</i>	sugar
<i>2 tbsp</i>	white wine vinegar
<i>2</i>	red chilies, finely minced
<i>1/4 cup</i>	crushed peanuts
<i>2</i>	green onions, sliced thinly
<i>1 bunch</i>	fresh coriander, well washed
<i>1 tbsp</i>	fish sauce

By making it a day in advance all the flavors will blend although the peanuts will not be as crunchy; plan to leave the nuts out until an hour or so before serving.

Dissolve the sugar and the vinegar in a bowl. Peel the cucumbers, dice into thin slices and toss them in the mixture. Sprinkle with finely minced chili, crushed peanuts, green onions and coriander leaves. Marinate for at least an hour, but better overnight. Splash with a dash of fish sauce before serving. If your guests don't like chilies, omit them. It still makes a flavorful dish.