

Cool as a Cuke: Recalling the Salad Days of Cold Soups

By Linda Morel

New York (JTA) – Shavuot celebrations often center around brunch, where bagels and lox grab the attention. Those who branch out typically gravitate to blintzes and kugels.

But in the Old Country, Shavuot meals often started with cold, creamy soups, an appetizer that has all but disappeared in today's grab-and-go world.

I suspect that cold soups have been replaced by Smoothies, a staple at juice bars where fruit is whipped in blenders with ice cream, yogurt or sorbet to create magical drinks.

While refrigerated soup sounds like an oxymoron, in the days before air conditioning, Jews adored dairy soups, beginning at Shavuot and continuing throughout the summer.

Falling seven weeks after Passover, Shavuot commemorates the children of Israel receiving the Torah from God at Mount Sinai. According to scholars, when they returned from this event, the ancient Israelites probably were too exhausted to prepare meat and instead ate dairy products.

New to the laws of kashrut, they needed to kosher their cookware, so dairy foods probably sufficed in the interim.

Over the centuries, milk's whiteness has been compared to the purity of the Torah. Tethered in time to Passover, Shavuot falls during the season when cows produce an abundance of milk.

For these reasons, Shavuot has become a dairy holiday, and Jews from many countries have celebrated with a variety of cold, creamy soups. Recipes fall into two categories: fruity and sweet or herbal and green.

In her "Jewish Holiday Cookbook," Joan Nathan explains that fruit soups, often sweetened with honey, originated with German Jews who made them while summering near the Baltic Sea. This practice spread to neighboring countries. During the summer months, plum soup with its sour cream base was wildly popular among Eastern European Jews.

Hungarian Sour Cherry Soup causes Jews who remember it to swoon. Tangy morello cherries, which flood local markets in June, produced the defining taste.

On a trip to Budapest a decade ago, my daughter and I saw cherry vendors on many street corners. We snacked all day on those cherries, purchased in small paper bags, and at dinner we were treated to cherry soup.

Back home I tried to replicate our experience but never found morello cherries. Don't ask how long it took to remove enough cherry pits to feed four. For days my fingers were stained red, and the results were a far cry from my Budapest memories.

Instead I turned to the strawberry yogurt soups springing up on restaurant menus. In a fraction of the time it took to pit cherries, I devised a refreshing soup that's been a big hit ever since. Along the way I discovered Greek yogurt, which is far superior in taste and texture to other yogurts.

During the summer,

Hungarians serve most soups cold. On the savory side, green bean soup was a favorite among Jews. While it can be difficult to locate the slender, young beans required for the recipes, I have substituted with haricots verts — thin, French-style string beans.

Jews of a certain age rave about Schav, a cool, tart soup made from sorrel, an herb that grew wild on hills throughout Eastern and Central Europe. But sorrel is a rare commodity in America, found only in farmer's markets for a brief season. Finicky eaters are repelled by Schav because sorrel turns khaki green when exposed to heat.

Middle Eastern and Mediterranean Jews love chilled spinach soup. Seasoning varies, but yogurt is the common denominator.

Originating in Persia, Cucumber Yogurt Soup is widespread throughout the Mediterranean. It arrived on America restaurant menus during the 1990s. Crisp and refreshing, this soup requires no cooking.

I was introduced to yogurt soup by my husband, who learned to make it in Tel Aviv from a red-headed cousin. Since their family has Italian Jewish roots, David sprinkles in balsamic vinegar, claiming it adds punch with mellow tones.

Preferring the lemon juice from his cousin's recipe, I object to this practice because it muddies the soup's milky hue. We often compromise using white balsamic vinegar.

In his cookbook "Olive Trees and Honey," chef and rabbi Gil Marks notes that Jews from some countries heighten yogurt soup with zesty ingredients: garlic, scallions, cilantro, mint, tarragon, raisins, ground nuts, or hard-boiled eggs.

I have fond childhood memories of my father each summer pouring bottled borscht into a blender along with dollops of sour cream. As the blender blades twirled, I was thrilled by the gorgeous magenta color he created. To this day, I'd love to own a sun dress in the same shade. I have ratcheted up the soup's intensity by adding sugar and vinegar to this last-minute appetizer.

It's a pity that few people today prepare any of these recipes. Chilled soup is part of our collective consciousness, and the perfect antidote to summer.

The following recipes are by Linda Morel.



Cucumber Yogurt Soup

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Ingredients:
1 English or hothouse cucumber
3 scallions
2 c. of 2% reduced-fat Greek

yogurt (such as the Fage brand)
2 c. water
8 t. fresh lemon juice
2 t. fresh dill, minced
1 t. garlic powder
1 t. salt

Garnish: dill fronds

Preparation:

Slice the cucumber lengthwise. Remove seeds but leave skin on. Finely dice cucumber. Remove fibrous ends from scallions and discard. Chop the tender light green parts. In a lg. non-metallic bowl, place the yogurt. Add water slowly and mix until a thin soup consistency is reached. (If using a low-fat product other than Greek yogurt, you may need less water than called for.) Whisk till well blended. Add cucumber, scallion, lemon juice, minced dill, garlic powder and salt. Gently mix ingredients. Cover and refrigerate for 12-24 hrs. Serve from a tureen or in individual bowls. Garnish with dill fronds.

Yield: 8 servings



Summer Borscht

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Ingredients:
1/2 c. white vinegar
1/4 c. sugar
1 bay leaf
2 bottles (33 ounces) borscht, refrigerated
1-1/2 c. reduced-fat sour cream

Garnish: dill fronds

Preparation:

In a sm. saucepan, heat vinegar, sugar, and bay leaf on a medium flame, stirring till sugar completely dissolves. Cool to room temperature and remove bay leaf. Reserve. Place 1 bottle of borscht, 3/4 c. sour cream, and half of the vinegar mixture in a blender. Run on high speed till contents puree. Empty blender into a lg. bowl. Repeat with the 2nd bottle of borscht and remaining ingredients. Serve immediately or cover and refrigerate till ready to use. Serve in soup bowls garnished with dill.

Yield: 8 servings



Chilled Hungarian Green Bean Soup

Chilled Hungarian Green Bean Soup

Ingredients:
1-1/2 lbs. haricot vert (French string beans)
1 Vidalia onion or lg. yellow onion, chopped
2 cloves garlic, minced

1 lg. potato, peeled and cut into 1" chunks
3 t. fresh dill, minced
2 t. salt
2 T. dry Vermouth or dry white wine

1/2 t. dried tarragon leaves

10 c. water

2 sm. (14-oz.) cans of vegetable broth, on hand if needed

1-1/2 c. reduced fat sour cream

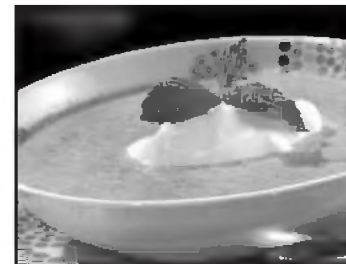
3 t. white vinegar, or more if needed

Garnish: fresh chives, cut into 1/4" snips

Preparation:

Rinse beans under water and dry on paper towels. Trim off ends and cut beans horizontally into 1/4" lengths. Place beans, onion, garlic, potato, dill, salt, Vermouth, tarragon, and water into a lg. pot. Cover pot and gently simmer on a med. flame, stirring occasionally so potatoes don't stick to pot. You'll need the broth, so don't let it boil away. Simmer for 20 min. or till potatoes soften when pierced with a sharp knife. Cool bean mixture to room temp. With a slotted spoon, move potato chunks to a plate and reserve. Place a colander over a lg. bowl. Pour contents of pot through the colander and wait till broth drains completely. In 3 batches, place potato, broth, sour cream, and vinegar into a blender. Puree ingredients. Pour contents into a large bowl. Mix in bean mixture from colander. If soup seems too thick, slowly add vegetable broth to thin to desired consistency. Taste and add more vinegar (a teaspoon at a time), if necessary. Soup is supposed to have a pleasantly sour tang. Cover bowl and refrigerate for several hours or overnight. Soup tastes best when made the day before. Serve in soup bowls garnished with chive snippets.

Yield: 8 servings



Strawberry Smoothie Soup

Strawberry Smoothie Soup

Note: Serve as an appetizer, or garnish with ice cream, and this soup is a dessert.

Ingredients:

2 lbs. strawberries, rinsed, hulled, and dried on paper towels

1-1/4 c. pineapple juice

1/4 t. ground cinnamon

1/8 t. ground nutmeg

2-1/2 t. sugar

1 T. orange liqueur (or orange juice if serving children)

2 T. fresh lime juice

1/2 t. vanilla

3 c. of 2 percent reduced-fat Greek yogurt (such as the Fage brand)

Appetizer garnish: 1 c. slivered almonds and 8 sprigs of mint;

Dessert garnish: Strawberry or vanilla ice cream and mint sprigs

Preparation:

Place all ingredients (except the garnish) into a blender. (You may have to divide ingredients into 2 batches.) Blend on a high setting till the ingredients are pureed. Serve immediately or cover and refrigerate for several hours in a non-metallic container. Consume the day soup is made, as fruit soups quickly lose their vitality. Ladle into soup bowls. For appetizer garnish, bake almond slivers at 350 degrees for 2 min. or till golden. Cool briefly. Gently arrange a circle of almond slivers in the center of bowls; some almonds may sink. Place a sprig of mint on top of almonds. For dessert garnish, place a scoop of ice cream in center of bowls along with mint sprigs.

Yield: 8 servings ☆

P'tach Libi Betoratecha

Opening the Heart to Torah

By Rabbi Amy Eilberg, co-director of the Yedidya Center for Jewish Spiritual Direction; co-founder of the Jewish Healing Movement

Three times every day, traditional Jews pray the words, "P'tach libi betoratecha," "Open my heart to Your Torah," at the sacred moment at the end of the silent Amidah (standing) prayer. What might help our hearts to open to the rich nourishment and healing power of the Torah this year?

The classical commentators on the Torah were fascinated by the fact that the Torah was given at Mount Sinai, in the midst of the wilderness, in the middle of our people's long, perilous journey from slavery to freedom. The Torah, according to this line of thinking, could not have been revealed in the city, in the midst of the people's ordinary routine, in the busy fullness of life-as-usual. Rather, Torah could only be revealed in a radically open, empty, and unfamiliar place. For only here could we recognize our powerlessness, surrender to our fear, confusion, and dependency, and let our hearts fall open. The Torah was given to us when we needed God most, when we had no choice but to trust. Only in such a place could we open our hearts to Torah.

This year, as we once again approach Shavuot, our Festival of Revelation, imagine that you are in a wilderness: a place without signposts, where nothing is familiar and your ability to control your life is revealed as illusory. In this place, open yourself to the wisdom that can only come from Beyond, from the One. Allow yourself to be guided, trusting that you will be given exactly what you need, one step after another. Imagine that everyone you know, everyone in the world, is in the same state of radical trust and readiness to receive Divine Wisdom as you are at this moment. Now open your eyes and see that the earth itself is trembling, anticipating the gift of Revelation. Let your heart open, to receive the Torah that you most need this Shavuot. ☆