

## Episode 125 show notes and advice

### Episode description

This week, Sarah catches up with Ukrainian chef and activist, Olia Hercules, to talk about the joy of Ukrainian cuisine and its ability to comfort and connect people. From Olia's top summertime recipes to their shared love of fresh produce picked straight from the garden, this episode has all the inspiration you need to create a delicious Ukrainian feast.

### In this episode, discover:

- Summertime recipes from the heart of Ukraine
- The beauty of foraging
- Top tips for fermentation

## episode 125 advice sheet

### Olia's background (2:38)

Olia moved to the UK nearly 20 years ago to study Italian at university. Born and raised in the south of Ukraine, at around 13 years old her family relocated to Cyprus, which Olia says has influenced some of the recipes within her books.

Cooking and eating seasonally has run through the blood of her family for generations. Whether it's cooking from scratch or experimenting with fermentation, sustainable living has always been front and centre of how Olia and her family operate.

Olia worked for a brief time as a journalist for a film magazine before retraining as a chef at Leiths School of Food and Wine.

### Home food: recipes to comfort and connect (6:23)

Olia explains that being involved in the growing process (when it comes to homecooked meals) is terrific for the soul. And, she loves growing from seed as it enables a deep connection with the earth around her and is truly nourishing.

### **A top tip from Olia (8:08)**

Pick a blackcurrant leaf and add it to a jar of whatever you are pickling. Olia says she's discovered that the tannins in the blackcurrant leaf help the vegetables to become really crunchy and delicious.

Olia explains that she mostly experiments with brine pickling fermentation, so much so, that one of the first things she planted in her small London Garden was four blackcurrant bushes which she uses regularly.

### **Olia's recipes (9:06)**

#### **Fermented tomatoes**

Sarah loves this recipe as she grows large quantities of tomatoes at Perch Hill, and this recipe is an exciting way to utilise them. In the fermentation process, they become fizzy, almost like champagne, which is totally irresistible!

Olia says that traditionally in Ukraine, tomatoes would have been fermented in huge quantities in large wooden barrels and stored in the cellars of family homes, but in 2023 you can replicate the process with a jam jar.

Start by creating a simple salt brine, Olia goes for an 8-10% brine to season the fruit and then adds horseradish leaves, lovage, celery leaves, whole garlic cloves, allspice berries, and peppercorns for an extra kick.

Add the mixture and the tomatoes into a jar and tightly screw on the lid. If it's super-hot in your kitchen you will see that the brine becomes opaque in around two days, which is a good sign that the bacteria and the yeast are starting to work. Next, fish out the tomatoes and taste!

If you can't grow your own tomatoes, shop-purchased cherry tomatoes work very well. Once the fermentation has occurred, they will burst in a fizzy, umami, sweet and sour way, which is absolutely delicious. Eat them as a pickle or add them to a borscht (a traditional Ukrainian beetroot soup), or create a sauce.

Keep the brine and reuse like a sourdough starter. Each time you use it, it will develop even more flavour, producing even better results each time!

If you have unripe green tomatoes at the end of the season that are likely to spoil when the weather changes, slash them with a knife and put them into the brine, they will lightly cure and taste delicious.

Find the full recipe in Olia's first book, 'Mamushka: Recipes from Ukraine & Beyond.'

### **Stuffed beetroot leaves**

Beetroot is used extensively in Ukraine, which Olia says probably has roots back to Turkish and Greek cuisine.

This recipe involves stuffing the beetroot leaves with different leaves, rice, and mince, or for a vegetarian alternative, use a buckwheat, mushroom, and caramelised carrot and onion filling.

Olia explains that her grandmother always used cabbage leaves, but she came across this recipe in Western Ukraine, in the equivalent of the Scottish Highlands. This recipe is a great way to use excess beetroot leaves that would ordinarily go to waste.

Roll them up and cook them in a simple tomato sauce, with a little bit of crème fraiche and garlic mixed through. Olia says she used big, juicy, and ripe tomatoes in the summer which have a depth of flavour. A pork and beef mixture also works well if you're looking for a meat-based equivalent.

### **Olia's Ukrainian dumpling dish**

A fusion dish where North meets Southern Europe, Olia has spent a lot of time in Italy, and this shines through in her recipes.

These are relatively small, half-moon-shaped dumplings that are fairly similar to Polish 'pierogi' but with a much thinner dough, which is as delicate as ravioli. Most of the fillings are vegetarian, and Olia has only seen offal alternatives when it comes to meat options.

Potato, curd cheese, and spring onion is a popular choice that tastes delicious. Or why not try traditional 'syr' which is somewhere between cottage cheese and quark?

Discover the full recipe by visiting [oliahercules.com](http://oliahercules.com).

### **Foraging and a tasty wild garlic recipe**

Foraging is such an integral part of Ukrainian culture and something Olia has long continued since moving to the UK. Although, unfortunately, since the outbreak of the war, a lot of traditions have been lost with the destruction of the land. Olia explains that there is beauty to these ancient, simple recipes.

This recipe is taken from Armenia, and best utilises rare herbs which most people probably wouldn't have heard of. If you're based in the UK, try wilting wild garlic leaves, or beetroot leaves, and dressing them in a raw cider vinegar, salt, and honey – the better quality of vinegar, the better the taste!

Other forage that Olia loves to use includes nettles, purslane, lovage, and marshmallow, the list goes on. Sarah says that although we consider the majority to be weeds, they are in fact delicious and nutritious if handled with care.

### **Traditional fritters**

A huge staple in Ukrainian cuisine, fritters are a great way to channel a huge glut of produce and create something totally tasty in the process. Cabbage, courgette, and squash are good choices, plus there is something for every season too.

Olia says that a traditional recipe would be similar to a pancake mixture, using egg, a little bit of milk, and flour. Try using buckwheat flour for a nutty taste.

Olia suggests checking out her book 'Summer Kitchens: Inside Ukraine's Hidden Places of Cooking and Sanctuary' for the recipe for her famous cauliflower fritters. Dip the cauliflower in the batter and shallow fry in a pan for a tasty and crunchy delight.

### **Delicious puddings chosen by Sarah and Olia (22:21)**

Olia says that high summer is epitomised by sweet dumplings, which aren't too dissimilar from the savoury dumplings she described earlier. For this recipe, the dough is slightly different, as a raising agent is added (ideally yeast or baking soda.)

Fill the dumplings with the best seasonal fruit, something like strawberries or sour cherries would be delicious. If you want to, you can sprinkle it with sugar, but this step isn't always needed.

Close the half moons and steam them so they puff up like boya buns, and then serve, tossed in melted butter and a little bit of maple syrup or sugar and yoghurt.

Sarah loves the baked apples recipe, which she says is like the classic British recipe. Olia's recipe suggests stuffing the apples with ricotta, which is a different take on apples filled with nuts, raisins, and honey. Sarah says the lightness of the ricotta really elevates the dish. Olia shares that this recipe was passed down from her grandmother and was a big part of her childhood. Traditionally, it would have been made with 'syr' cheese, but ricotta works well as a replacement.

Mix the cheese with a little bit of egg yolk, sugar, vanilla, and a few raisins. Fill the apples with the mixture and bake in the oven. Olia says a sweet apple like Golden Delicious would work really well as the apples become light and fluffy and almost like a souffle.

### **Discover Olia's books**

All of Olia's books are available from all good bookstores – collect them all!

- Mamushka: Recipes from Ukraine & Beyond
- Kaukasis: The Cookbook – A Journey Through the Wild East
- Summer Kitchens: Inside Ukraine's Hidden Places of Cooking and Sanctuary
- Home Food