Borscht
Borscht is a soup made with beets. It may be hot or cold and it may contain meat or be vegetarian.

Origin: Ukraine
Other names: Polish: barszcz; Russian: borshch; Ukrainian: borshch; Yiddish: borsht.

Northern Poland and the Baltic States are rather far north, lying in a region with long dark winters, a relatively short growing season, and a limited number of (as well as sometimes an aversion to) available vegetables. During the early medieval period, eastern Europeans began making a chunky soup from a wild whitish root related to carrots, called brsh in Old Slavonic and cow parsnip in English. Possibly originating in Lithuania, the soup spread throughout the Slavic regions of Europe to become, along with shchi (cabbage soup), the predominant dish, each area giving the name its local slightly different pronunciation. In May, peasants would pick the tender leaves of the brsh to cook as greens, then gather and store the roots to last as a staple through the fall and winter. Typically, a huge pot of brsh stew was prepared, using whatever meat and bones one could afford and variously adding other root vegetables, beans, cabbage, mushrooms, or whatever was on hand. This fed the family for a week or more and was sporadically refreshed with more of the ingredients or what was found. The root’s somewhat acrid flavor hardly made the most flavorsome of soups, even with the addition of meat, but the wild roots were free to foragers; brsh was one of the few vegetables available to peasants during the winter and provided a flavor variation essential to the Slavic culture. The mainstays of the eastern European medieval diet were bland starches—black bread and gruels—and, to provide an essential sensory offset, eastern Europeans would always accompany them with acidic foods, which Ashkenazim called zoyers (sours), notably sauerkraut, pickles, sorrel, rhubarb, sour cream, and brsh. Augmenting the tartness of the cow parsnip, as well as contributing essential nutrition and helping to slightly thicken the broth, peasants commonly topped the soup with tangy sour cream (smetana), which was always added individually at the table to achieve the desired texture and flavor, and never stirred into the pot.

In the mid-sixteenth century, the modern-day beetroot—fat, red (but paler than modern varieties), inexpensive, and easily grown—was developed in Italy or Germany, and initially received with little enthusiasm. However, eastern Europeans soon began adding beetroots, which grew well in much of the region, to their classic soup. Increasingly, beets supplanted the cow parsnip entirely, although the soup retained the meat and other root vegetables, as well as the name, borshch. Since the erstwhile Russian name for beet soup was borshch malorossisky (the former name for Ukraine), it is probable that the development of beet borshch happened in Ukraine.
In any case, beet soup quickly spread throughout much of eastern Europe to become the quintessential Slavic dish; as with the original *borshch*, it was commonly accompanied with sour cream. (Borscht was predominant in Ukraine, while cabbage soup held sway in Russia.) In keeping with the eastern European passion for acidity to compensate for the bland starches, cooks induced a mildly tart flavor to the sweeter beet soups with vinegar or fermented beet juice. Lemons were rare in northern Europe and vinegar often expensive, and people commonly made their own beet vinegar, called *rosl* in Yiddish. *Borshch* also contained the basic Slavic seasoning combination of chopped onions and carrots. In Ukraine, the predominant beet-growing region of eastern Europe, *borshch* was everyday fare. Much farther north, where beets were less accessible, it was generally reserved for special occasions.

Beetroot soup (*boreke borsht*) first appeared in Jewish sources, pronounced *borscht* or *borsht* in Yiddish, toward the end of the 1500s in eastern Europe, corresponding to its initial usage in the region. Soup was also made with the beet greens, known as *botvenye borsht*, but this was generally considered a dish for the poor. Borscht was most fundamental among Jews in Ukraine and southeastern Poland. The farther west and north one traveled, the lesser the amount and frequency of borscht consumed. Germans tended to sneer at the red soup, as well as at most eastern fare.

Jews imitated the Slavic practice of adding meat and bones to borscht, yielding a hearty, sustaining dish. However, in order to enjoy the soup with sour cream, another practice Jews absorbed from the Slavic culture, they also developed a vegetarian version. This borsht, typically containing only beets and the Jewish favorite, onion, produces a translucent, bright red liquid, which turns pink when blended with sour cream. In the Slavic vein, Jews added tartness with vinegar or the less-expensive *rosl*. Following the establishment of the first sugar beet refineries in the early 1800s, which resulted in inexpensive sugar becoming accessible in the region, many Jews in those areas started adding sugar, turning Jewish vegetarian borscht into a distinctive sweet-and-sour dish. Galician Jews tended to add a large—some might say copious—amount of sugar, while most Ukrainians preferred more vinegar. In the mid-nineteenth century, after the potato became accepted in eastern Europe, it became a ubiquitous accompaniment to Jewish borscht, along with the sour cream.

When eastern European Jews immigrated in huge numbers to America beginning in the 1880s, they brought both their meat and vegetarian versions of borscht with them. Thus the original edition of *The Settlement Cookbook* (1901), a work primarily aimed at eastern European immigrants, included both a “Beet Soup Russian Style (Fleischik),” consisting of beets, brisket, onions, sugar, and citric acid, and a “Beet Soup Russian Style (Milchik),” made with beets, citric acid, sugar, and either sour cream or milk thickened with egg yolks. Within decades of *The Settlement Cookbook*, Jewish companies, notably Rokeach and Gold’s, began producing borscht in jars. As the Jewish simple sweet- and- sour borscht appeared on American grocery shelves, it became associated with the name. And since Jewish immigrants initially popularized this soup in America, it took on the Yiddish terminology, borscht, rather than the Russian or other Slavic names.
For many centuries, beets, along with cabbages (frequently added to meat borscht) and potatoes, were among the few produce items in eastern Europe capable of storage through the winter. Thus at the end of the winter enough beets remained, as well as remnants in the barrel once full of fermented rosl, to provide a peysakhdiker borsht, a note of brightness and sweetness for the Passover holiday. This season, corresponding to the birth of new calves, also meant a renewed supply of fresh sour cream. The classic combo of borscht, boiled potatoes, and sour cream emerged toward the end of the nineteenth century as a quintessential Ashkenazic comfort food. Today, in most eastern European households, no Passover would seem complete without borscht. Many mothers, like their mother before them, each year order a case or more of the red liquid, using any leftovers for the following months, though rarely having enough to last till the next Passover. Some people, however, find commercial brands too sweet and prepare their own.

Beginning on Passover eve, when the household is busy with preparations for the Seder, and continuing for much of the ensuing week, many lunches and dinners consist of ice-cold borscht paired with soft, hot, boiled potatoes and creamy, cool sour cream. Borscht is the lifeblood of Ashkenazic Passover cuisine. Borscht emerged not only as traditional fare among eastern Europeans on Passover, but also seven weeks later on Shavuot, on the third meal of the Sabbath, and at the festivities immediately following the Sabbath.

**Eastern European Beet Soup with Meat**  
*(Fleishidik Borscht)*  
6 to 8 servings [meat]  
2 pounds beef brisket, flanken, or stewing meat, cubed  
2 beef marrow bones  
8 cups water  
2 pounds (8 medium) beets, peeled and diced  
2 medium yellow onions, chopped  
1 to 2 cloves garlic, minced  
2 tablespoons tomato paste or ¼ cup tomato puree  
3 to 6 tablespoons cider vinegar, red wine vinegar, or fresh lemon juice  
1 to 3 tablespoons granulated or brown sugar  
About 2 teaspoons table salt or 4 teaspoons kosher salt  
Ground black pepper to taste  
2 bay leaves  
12 ounces (4 large) carrots, peeled and sliced or coarsely grated (optional)  
1 cup shredded turnips or rutabagas (optional)

1. Place the meat, bones, and water in a large, heavy pot. Bring to a boil, cover, reduce the heat to low, and simmer, skimming the foam from the surface occasionally, for 1 hour.  
2. Add the beets, onions, and garlic. Cover and simmer for an additional 1 hour.  
3. Stir in the tomato paste, vinegar, sugar, salt, pepper, bay leaves, and, if using, carrots and/or turnips. Simmer until the meat is tender, about 30 minutes. Serve hot with boiled potatoes.

**Borscht Belt**
As early as the 1820s, the Jewish Agricultural Society settled new Jewish immigrants as farmers in Sullivan and Ulster counties in the Catskill Mountain region of eastern New York, about one hundred miles from New York City. Some of these settlers in this 250-square-mile area joined together to form agricultural communities akin to a kibbutz, while others went it alone. By the 1870s, the wealthier residents of New York City began escaping the summer heat by heading to resorts in the Pocono and Catskill mountains. At that time and for the following century, however, Jews were excluded from most American hotels, especially resorts, due to open and unabashed discrimination, as dramatized in the precedent-breaking 1947 film Gentleman’s Agreement. Seeing a lucrative situation, beginning in the late 1890s, some Jewish farmers in the Catskills divided their homes into boarding houses, while others built small bungalows on their land to house wealthy Jewish guests. Some of these evolved into small hotels, kuchaleyns (self-catered boarding houses), or large bungalow colonies.

Beginning in the 1930s, the popularization of the automobile led to an annual mass exodus of New York City Jews to the Catskills. As housing guests proved much more profitable than tilling the land, many of the farmers gave up agriculture for hospitality. As disposable income grew following World War II, so did the demand for summertime in the country. Typically, the women and children stayed in the bungalow or kuchaleyn throughout the week, while the husbands spent only the weekend, returning to the city early Monday morning in a commute called “the bull run.” Jewish summer camps tended to the children. Large resorts emerged to cater to the growing crowds by hiring numerous Jewish entertainers and musicians, as well as providing jobs for college students, all of whom were excluded from similar opportunities elsewhere due to anti-Semitism. The Catskills emerged as a center of Jewish entertainment and culture, which, as these entertainers were increasingly accepted into mainstream America, became part of American culture.

Eastern European Jewish fare was prominent in the area’s resorts, many offering all-you-can-eat kosher (or kosher-style) fare. Non-Jewish cooks and bakers learned traditional Jewish dishes in the kitchens of the Catskills’ resorts and subsequently spread this cuisine throughout the country. Dairy meals were popular in the morning and at lunch; dining rooms offered classics such as blintzes, kugels, gefilte fish, and borscht. At Grossinger’s, borscht was served all day long, 365 days a year, giving rise to the region’s nickname, attributed to Abel Green, longtime editor of Variety—the Borscht Belt. The term was originally intended at least partly in derision, but eventually emerged as one of affection.

At its heyday in the 1950s, more than a million people spent their summers in the Catskills in more than three hundred hotels and another couple hundred boarding houses. Then in the late 1960s, changing holiday norms, the accessibility of airplane travel, the increasing number of women entering the workplace, and a major lessening in discrimination in the hotel and travel industry led to a quick and dramatic decline of the Borscht Belt, as portrayed in the popular 1987 movie Dirty Dancing. By the turn of the twenty-first century, less than a dozen old-time Jewish resorts remained and all the great ones had disappeared. Nevertheless, the impact of the Borscht Belt on American culture and cuisine endures.