

MAYONNAISE

The quintessence of Russian cuisine

Alexander Meienberger, Universität St. Gallen, 15.12.2022



Photo credit: One of the most famous Russian salads with mayonnaise as basic ingredient is the olivier salad, whose earliest known recipe dates back to the 1860s. However, it is not always served as elaborately as in this picture. John - stock.adobe.com, Free access - no reuse

Russian cuisine, especially festive cuisine, is simply unimaginable without mayonnaise. Salads such as seledka pod šuboj (herring in a fur coat), salat oliv'e (olive salad), krabovyj salat (surimi salad), mimoza (mimosa salad) and many more, as well as meat dishes such as mjaso po franzuski (meat à la française) are prepared with mayonnaise. Originally a French

sauce made of egg yolk, mustard and oil with a little salt and pepper, mayonnaise gained popularity in Russia in the 1990s and is now one of the most popular sauces on the Russian dinner table.

Mayonnaise sauce and sauce à la provençale

Like many other culinary dishes, such as consommé or blancmange, mayonnaise found its way from French cuisine into the Russian diet. However, in the Russian Empire in the 19th century, the term mayonnaise could refer to two completely different things: one was a dish prepared from cooked fish or poultry, doused with aspic and served cold as an appetizer.¹ The other was the sauce we know from French cuisine, which was also common.²

The linguistic and culinary difference came about during the 19th century, when French cooks reinterpreted and developed Russian cuisine. One example of this development was the Russian dish *zalive* or *studen'*, also known as *cholodec* (aspic). At that time, the dish was cooked using meat scraps and was not widely popular in Russian cuisine.³ French cooks refined the dish⁴ and served it with mayonnaise sauce.



“When you have measured out the right amount of melted aspic into a pan, add the raw egg yolks, Provençal oil, vinegar, mustard and salt. Then put the pan on ice and beat the sauce first with a metal whisk and then with a spatula until it turns white and is thick enough to stick to the side of a dish without running down. This sauce is mainly added to cold meat and fish dishes.”⁵

The designation of the term “mayonnaise” to the dish can therefore possibly be traced back to Russian cooks, who did not have a particularly strong grasp of French. They understood mayonnaise as the aspic rather than solely the sauce it was served with.⁶ Evidence of this can be found in numerous cookbooks of the late 19th century. *Majonez iz lososiny* (mayonnaise made from salmon), *belorybica pod majonezom* (white salmon under mayonnaise), *majonez iz kur* (mayonnaise made from chicken), *majonez iz ryby s salatom i zelenym sousom* (mayonnaise made from fish with lettuce and green sauce) are all names of dishes from the “Complete Cookbook of the Experienced Russian Housewife,” which was published in 1875.⁷ Similarly, the “Cookbook for Young Housewives” from 1880 contains recipes such as *majonez iz raznoj ryby* (mayonnaise from various fish) and *majonez iz cypljat* (mayonnaise made from chicks).⁸

The sauce known today as mayonnaise was commonly referred to in 19th-century Russia as *sous provansal'* (sauce à la provençale). [Pelageja Aleksandrova-](#)

Ignat'eva ▾

Pelageja Aleksandrova-Ignat'eva

Pelageja Pavlovna Aleksandrova-Ignat'eva (1872-1953) was a Russian and Soviet writer and the author of numerous cookbooks.

included a recipe for it in her 1909 cookbook:



“In a deep bowl, beat the raw egg yolks, add the cooked mustard, knead a little and then pour the Provençal oil into the yolks in a thin stream, stirring quickly with a whisk. When the oil is used up and the sauce is thick enough to stick to a spatula without running down, add a pinch of tarragon or, if this is not available, some table vinegar, then stir once and add a pinch of salt and a pinch of sugar. The sauce à la provençale can be served with cold meats, poultry, game and fish, as well as with some fried dishes.”⁹

So, at the height of 19th century Russian cuisine, two foods and dishes existed that were called mayonnaise or contained mayonnaise as a key ingredient – and

yet neither is still called that today. The most common version of mayonnaise today is a product of the Soviet food industry.

Table mayonnaise à la provençale

The 1917 revolution in Russia destroyed not only the tsardom, but also an entire way of life that Soviet power had to restore, if not reinvent. In the course of industrialization (1929-1941), this even affected the country's cuisine. [Anastas Mikoyan](#) ✓

Anastas Mikoyan

Anastas Howhannessi Mikojan (1895–1978) was a Soviet politician.

, who was People's Commissar for the Food Industry from 1934 to 1938, revolutionized Soviet cuisine by having food produced industrially and in larger quantities. To obtain the technologies required for this, he traveled to the United States in 1936 to see how the food industry there operated and to sign contracts. Subsequently, a whole range of products began to be produced industrially, based on the US model¹⁰, such as hamburgers, which became known in the USSR as *kotlety* (meat patties), as well as ice cream, juices, lemonade, and even mayonnaise. Legend has it that Joseph Stalin personally praised the sauce and approved its production.¹¹

Um sowjetische Arbeiter auf den neuen Geschmack zu bringen, wird sogar eine großangelegte Werbekampagne gestartet – zu den Plakaten ebenso gehören, wie Empfehlungen zum kulinarischen Einsatz dieser neuen Sauce. Schon im ersten sowjetischen Kochbuch „Buch von der schmackhaften und gesunden Nahrung“ aus dem Jahr 1939 raten Autoren den sowjetischen Arbeiterinnen:

To introduce Soviet workers to the new taste, a large-scale advertising campaign was launched, which included posters as well as recommendations on

the culinary use of this new sauce. Already in the first Soviet cookbook "Book of Tasty and Healthy food" from 1939, the authors advise Soviet workers:



“To dress salads, vinaigrettes and other cold dishes, housewives usually use vegetable oil, vinegar, mustard, horseradish and other seasonings. All these condiments can be replaced with great success by mayonnaise sauce, [...] developed by the Institute of Nutrition at the USSR People's Commissariat of Health. Mayonnaise sauce has a high quality and degree of flavor that homemade condiments do not have. Mayonnaise sauce can be served with all cold dishes – meat, fish, and also as an accompaniment to vinaigrettes, potatoes, salads, herrings, etc. Take one to two tablespoons of mayonnaise per serving, depending on taste.”¹²



Soviet advertising poster from 1938 for the new "Sous Majonez". The state campaign praised the new sauce as an "excellent seasoning for all cold meat, fish, and vegetable dishes", a total of 5,000 copies of the poster were produced. Rossijskaja gosudarstvennaja biblioteka,
<https://viewer.rsl.ru/rsl01009435547/>
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The 1952 edition of the cookbook also advises serving mayonnaise with any cold dish. In addition, it is recommended as an addition to almost all salads containing cooked meat or fish. The cookbook promotes the industrially produced sauce on the grounds that it is not always possible to make it at home:



“The reason for this is that even slight changes in the quantity and quality of ingredients and insufficient care in the preparation of the sauce affect the taste and strength of the mixture (emulsion) and result in a sauce that either does not work at all or does not taste right.”¹³

In the Soviet Union, several varieties were produced: *majonez stolovyj* (table mayonnaise), *majonez s chrenom* (with horseradish), *majonez s tomatom* (with tomatoes), *majonez s kapersami i kornišonom* (with capers and gherkins), etc.¹⁴ The most famous was *majonez stolovyj provansal'* (table mayonnaise à la provençale),¹⁵ which was very similar to the 19th-century version. Its recipe consisted of "68% sunflower oil, 10% fresh egg yolk, 6.7% cooked mustard, 2.3% sugar, 11% vinegar (5%) and 2% spices."¹⁶ Despite this variety, mayonnaise was still a rare product in Soviet kitchens. In general, there was a shortage of certain foods in the USSR in the 1980s – including mayonnaise. Soviet housewives were prepared to stand in line for several hours to get hold of a jar. This was especially the case in the lead-up to New Year's Day – a high point in the Soviet worker's annual calendar – because on that day two dishes were traditionally served with mayonnaise: olive salad and herring salad, which had become a symbol of modest Soviet prosperity.



“Olive salad was rightly placed in the center of the table, which was decorated with a festive tablecloth. The overall composition was supported by a cooked Hungarian chicken (head removed, feet up), boiled potatoes, meat aspic (cooked the day before, poured into bowls and cooled on the balcony), fish aspic, “herring under the fur coat”, sausage cleanly cut with a specially sharpened knife, salted red and (or) white fish, balyk of pork, boiled eggs with red caviar, etc. [...]”¹⁷



Unbroken popularity: Mayonnaise products in all shapes and sizes in a Russian supermarket. NVS my world - stock.adobe.com, Free access - no reuse

Mayonnaise with everything and for everyone

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, mayonnaise came onto the market in the most diverse varieties and forms, was suddenly available to everyone, and became a staple in Russian refrigerators. Russians eat about 750 thousand tons of mayonnaise annually. The Internet portal www.eda.ru lists over 300 recipes for mayonnaise and over 3,000 recipes containing the popular sauce.

Why is it that mayonnaise enjoys such great popularity among Russians? The main reasons for this are certainly the deep-rooted, traditional use of this product and its convenience; moreover, it is a very special and, for many Russians, unforgettable taste from the times of the Soviet Union. Its ubiquity in Soviet communal canteens shaped the palate of the Soviet citizen.

Mayonnaise also became associated with festivities and celebrations. To this day, elaborate salads such as the "herring in a fur coat", olive salad, surimi salad and mimosa salad, which all contain mayonnaise, are prepared in large quantities and presented at every celebration – be it a birthday, a wedding or

New Year's Day. Last but not least, its low price and long shelf life – thanks to modern preservatives – have contributed to the fact that mayonnaise has become a universally enjoyed sauce.

Footnotes



Literature



Citation



Geographical context

Soviet Union (1922-1991)

People and organizations

Mikojan, Anastas Ivanovič Aleksandrova-Ignat'eva, Pelageja

Key words

Russian cuisine Mayonnaise Everyday culture Cookbook

Time periods

2nd half 19th century 20th century