We join the Sydney-based Russian Zabaikal Cossacks celebrating a krug (circle), where members come together to debate, drink and dine on hearty, home-style traditional food.
The Russian Cossacks here today, gathered at the Russian Sports and Social Club in the Sydney suburb of Kemps Creek, are from the Zabaikal region east of Lake Baikal, bordering Mongolia and China. Some have moved to Sydney recently, others are Australian-born sons and grandchildren of the Zabaikal Russian Cossacks. Cossacks are, and have always been, a deeply patriotic bunch. In the past they inhabited sparsely populated areas and travelled by horse. Those here today live in Sydney and drive a mix of cars; the parking area fills up quickly with family cars, a few sports cars, and a Lexus with a numberplate that simply reads ‘Baikal’.

“Cossacks are people of free will who share a unique history, culture and traditions arising from their historical role as settlers and protectors of the frontiers of the Russian Empire as it expanded its borders,” explains George Vassilevski, the secretary of the Zabaikal Cossack Society of Australia Incorporated. It’s an official business name, and today there’s an official krug meeting before the feast. Krug, which translates to ‘circle’, is a time when all the Cossacks from a geographical region gather to discuss and settle administrative issues. “In this diaspora, Cossack activities are limited to the preservation of culture and traditions,” explains Simeon Boikov, the Ataman (Cossack leader) of the society. “However, in Russia the Cossack movement has revived after 90 years, and today’s Cossacks have their own schools and academies where the next generation of Cossacks are preparing for service to their country.”

You can count the number of women on one hand, and they don’t attend the meeting, instead spending the day crafting the traditional specialties that will be eaten. They spend most of the day skilfully assembling dishes, such as pulemni (small, boiled dumplings), piroshki (fried cabbage buns) and pelemeni (meat and cabbage dumplings) – their hands moving swiftly as they chat together. Sophia Boikov is clearly the head of the kitchen. She shouts orders and occasionally shares a story with whoever is listening. Born in a tiny village located not far from Yakeshi, a town in the Inner Mongolia region of China, she was one of eight children, and moved to Sydney in 1965 where she now lives in Cabramatta. Alongside her, Maria Portnagina and Nadejda Lavrova are working hard. Maria is half-Russian, half-Chinese, and grew up as Sophia’s childhood neighbour and closest confidante, but came to Australia much later in the 1980s. Nadejda made the move to Australia from Oryol in Russia in 1995 and likes to involve herself in Russian activities, helping out with cooking at the Cossack krugs.

Five-year-old Michael Vlasoff, a son of one of the Cossacks and the youngest ‘man’, joins the women in the kitchen after growing bored of the meeting. He unsuccessfully tries to assemble a pelemen. Looking at his clumsy hands and flour-drenched clothes, Sophia cracks a smile and mumbles something about having to milk 20 cows when she was his age. Victor Ulugmurov takes a break, too, and joins the women. He moved to Sydney two years ago from the Buryatia region in Russia, and is known among the community for his authentic country-style dishes. Everyone laughs as he brandishes a large sheet of caul fat. He’ll use it to wrap mutton liver before frying it, a Buryatian dish known as hugubsha.

When the feast is served, there is no hesitation. The men dig into the food, and bottles of homemade pomegranate liqueur, vodka and whisky appear. Cossacks live a simple life and their celebrations reflect their cultural ethos. The food is hearty, there are no unnecessary decorations; it’s simply about being together and sharing a meal – and a story.

After the official part of the day is over, the Zabaikal Cossacks sit down for a festive meal – a time for family and friends to catch up and reminisce about a land they come from or feel a connection with. George stresses that this organisation is the only one in Australia directly affiliated with the Cossacks of the Zabaikal region in Russia, who are officially recognised by the Russian government. "In this diaspora, Cossack activities are limited to the preservation of culture and traditions," explains Simeon Boikov, the Ataman (Cossack leader) of the society. "However, in Russia the Cossack movement has revived after 90 years, and today’s Cossacks have their own schools and academies where the next generation of Cossacks are preparing for service to their country."

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Uniforms
Although very different to the depiction of Cossack dress in films and history books, present-day Cossacks throughout Russia have a standardised uniform and a system of ranks. These are closely modelled on their Russian military and police force counterparts, but also retain traditional elements, such as the names of the various ranks and the distinguishing coloured stripe running down the side of the pants. Cossacks from different regions in Russia have different colours – the Zabaikal colour is yellow. Today, Cossack Ataman General Sergei Bobrov (who is based in Chita, a city in Russia’s Zabaikal region) presents a new banner to the group, and Cossack Russian Orthodox priest Reverend Alexander Filchakov conducts a short moleben (prayer service). Each Cossack region in Russia has a representative banner, and this one was brought from Russia especially for the occasion.

From left to right, at the presentation of the banner, the Russian Federation national anthem is played and the Cossacks salute the Russian flag; Ataman Simeon Boikov, Nikolai Chubakoff and George Vassilevski share a drink; Michael Vlasoff helps to make the pelmeni.

Pouzy
(large steamed meat and cabbage dumplings)
These dumplings are characterised by their large size and thick casings.
(recipe page 56)
HUGUBSHA

FRIED LIVER WITH ONIONS

Makes 12 • Prep 15 mins • Cooking 15 mins

You will need 12 toothpicks for this recipe.

500g mutton or lamb livers
200g pig or sheep caul fat*, cut into 12 x 10cm squares, remainder discarded
60ml (¼ cup) vegetable oil
1 onion, sliced

Slice liver into 12 pieces and place in a bowl. Season with salt and pepper and toss to coat. Place a piece of liver in the centre of a square of caul fat. Fold in edges and roll up to enclose liver, skewering at an angle with a toothpick to secure. Repeat with remaining caul fat, liver and toothpicks.

Heat 2 tbs oil in a frying pan over medium heat. Cook onion, stirring, for 8 minutes or until golden. Remove from pan and set aside.

Add remaining 1 tbs oil to pan and, working in batches, fry parcels in a single layer for 7 minutes or until cooked through. Remove and sprinkle with onions, to serve.

* Caul fat is the thin, fatty membrane surrounding the intestines of an animal and is available from specialist butchers.

A blend of cultures

Because of the region’s close proximity to Northern China, the food that the Zabaikal Cossacks eat and the menu today is a blend of Russian, Chinese and Mongolian cooking styles. Pouzy (pictured left) look very similar to buuz, the Mongolian version of dumplings. The smaller pelmeni are not too dissimilar to Chinese dumplings, and mutton is the most commonly eaten meat in Mongolia. Russian Cossacks like to eat pouzy and pelmeni with both soy sauce (an Asian influence) and sour cream. A traditional Russian meal is usually composed of three dishes – an entrée, which will often be a soup or something simple like selyodka (cured herring), followed by a main, such as pouzy, pelmeni or piroshki, and also a beverage or dessert.
Clockwise from left: pouring a glass of homemade pomegranate liqueur; Ataman Simon Bobokov; Sophia assembles the many layers of the mikada (home-style layer cake); selyodka, a cured herring dish that was also served on the day.

**Mikada (home-style layer cake)**

This cake can also be finished with more elaborate toppings, such as berries, but this is a simpler, home-style version. *recipe page 56*

**ZABAIKAL-STYLE MUTTON NOODLE SOUP**

Serves 6  •  Prep ½ hr, plus overnight chilling  •  Cooking  •  1 hr 45 mins

250g (1⅔ cup) plain flour
1kg boneless mutton* or lamb shoulder, trimmed, cut into 3cm pieces
300g mutton or lamb bones*  
Soy sauce, to serve

1 Place flour, 125ml (½ cup) water and a pinch of salt in a bowl and mix to form a dough. Turn out onto a lightly floured work surface and knead for 8 minutes or until dough is smooth and elastic. Place dough in a greased bowl and cover with plastic wrap. Refrigerate overnight.

2 The following day, place mutton and bones in a large stock pot over high heat and cover with 3L water. Bring to the boil. Reduce to medium heat and simmer for 1½ hours or until mutton is tender.

3 Meanwhile, divide dough into thirds and dust each portion with flour. Using a rolling pin, roll out each portion to 2mm thick. Slice lengthwise into 1cm strips, then cut each strip into 10cm lengths.

4 Remove bones from soup and discard. Increase heat to medium-high, season with salt and pepper and add noodles. Cook for 2 minutes or until noodles float to the surface and are cooked through. Serve with soy sauce.

* Mutton and bones are available from select butchers.
PIROSHKI
FRIED CABBAGE BUNS
Makes 25 • Prep 45 mins, plus 2½ hrs resting • Cooking 25 mins

600g (4 cups) plain flour
2 tsp (1 x 7g sachet) dry yeast
2 tbs vegetable oil, plus extra, to shallow-fry

Cabbage filling
1 small (1.2kg) cabbage, grated
1 garlic clove, crushed
½ onion, finely diced
1 tbs olive oil
1 carrot, finely grated
2 hard-boiled eggs, grated
2 tbs vegetable oil, plus extra, to shallow-fry
1 tsp (1 x 7g sachet) dry yeast
600g (4 cups) plain flour

1 Place flour, 1 tsp salt, yeast, oil and 400ml warm water in a bowl and mix to form a dough. Turn out onto a lightly floured work surface and knead for 6 minutes or until smooth and elastic. Set aside in a warm, draught-free place for 45 minutes or until dough doubles in size. Punch down dough. Set aside for a further 1 hour or until risen.
2 Meanwhile, place cabbage, garlic and onion in a bowl. Season with salt and pepper. Heat oil in a frying pan over medium–high heat. Add cabbage mixture and cook for 5 minutes or until wilted. Add carrot and cook for 5 minutes or until cooked through.
3 Remove pan from heat and gently stir in grated eggs. Season then set aside to cool.
4 Dust dough with flour and shape into a large 6cm-thick log. Slice into 25 rounds and roll out each piece into a 10cm-long oval, about 5mm thick. Place 5 tbs cabbage mixture in the centre of each oval, fold in sides and pinch edges together to enclose. Flatten slightly to make ovals a uniform shape.
5 Fill a deep-fryer or large saucepan one-third full with vegetable oil and heat over medium heat to 180C (or until a cube of bread turns golden in 10 seconds). Working in batches, gently drop ovals into oil and fry, turning halfway, for 6 minutes or until golden brown. Remove with a slotted spoon and drain on paper towel. Serve immediately.

POUZY
LARGE STEAMED MEAT AND CABBAGE DUMPLINGS
Makes 35 • Prep 1 hr 20 mins, plus 3 hrs resting • Cooking 1 hr

200g (1½ cups) self-raising flour
400g (2½ cups) plain flour
½ tsp (½ x 7g sachet) dry yeast
250g minced veal
250g minced pork
2 garlic cloves, crushed
1 large onion, finely chopped
5 chive sprigs, chopped
1 tbs soy sauce
½ tsp sesame oil
1 tbs vegetable oil

1 Place flour, yeast and 275ml warm water in a bowl and mix to combine. Turn out onto a lightly floured work surface and knead for 8 minutes or until dough is smooth and elastic. Place dough in a greased bowl and cover with plastic wrap. Set aside in a warm, draught-free place for 3 hours or until dough doubles in size.
2 Meanwhile, to make filling, place cabbage, garlic, onion and sugar, to soft peaks.
3 Place a cake round on a serving plate. Spread a 5mm-thick layer of cream on top, then top with another round. Repeat layering and spreading process, finishing with a layer of cream and reserving some cream to serve. Cover cake with a piece of baking paper, sit an oven tray on top and weigh down with a heavy object. Refrigerate overnight.
5 The following day, spread remaining cream on top of cake, sprinkle over crushed biscuits and serve.