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# A Family Named Gold Tries to Add Cool to a Soup That's the Color Purple

*Borscht Fans Think It Can't Be Beat, but Too Few Agree; Maybe Call It a 'Beet Smoothie'?*

By LUCETTE LAGNADO



Gold Pure Food Products Co.

The Gold brand has added several varieties to its lineup.

HEMPSTEAD, N.Y.—Marc Gold has a dream to make his cold borscht cool again.

Borscht, an old world beet soup long savored by Russian and Eastern European Jewish immigrants, lent its name to the Catskill region of upstate New York where generations of revelers summured at hotels such as the Concord and Grossinger's. In the "Borscht Belt," the fuchsia-hued concoction was sipped liberally—either from a glass as a refreshing drink or from a bowl as a hearty warm soup.



Gallons of borscht were once served at resorts in the Catskills and gave the area its nickname: the Borscht Belt. But the humble beet soup has fallen out of fashion. Lucette Lagnado reminisced with legendary Borscht Belt comic Freddie Roman.

"Summer used to be borscht season," says Mr. Gold, chief executive of Gold Pure Food Products Co., based here. Several times a week, he recalls, "we would ship it in trailers—40- to 52-foot-trailers" each packed with 1,000 cases of bottled borscht headed to supermarkets.

In the 1950s, ads for the stuff featured a jar outfitted with a beret and sunglasses. "Be a Beet-Nik...Get Cool, Man!"

These days, the borscht business is beat. Mr. Gold recently watched as one of his workers loaded a truck with just 360 cases of his 79-year-old family company's recipe. Mark Dewey, whose Dewey Produce Inc. in Byron, N.Y., grew beets for nearly all the

borscht makers in the Northeast, says his shipments to borscht producers have dropped to just 200 tons a year, down from 1,750 tons a year in borscht's heyday.

Despite its star turn in the 1987 film "Dirty Dancing," the area has seen most of its big resorts close. The children and grandchildren of Jewish immigrants no longer flock to the "mountains" in the summer the way they used to. And they don't much care for the dish.

Mr. Gold's own son, Shaun, 19, admits he's never even tasted it.

So blue were borscht's prospects that Mr. Gold once suggested to his father that they remove a colorful image of a borscht jar from the company's trucks and feature one of the newer Gold offerings. "I said, 'Dad let's replace the borscht with duck sauce,'" he says. "It was the future and borscht was yesterday."

Borscht was brought to America by Eastern European Jews, says Andrew F. Smith, culinary historian at The New School, a university in New York City. But its origins are unclear and the stuff of debate. Certainly not only Jews like it—it remains a staple in Russia, Ukraine and throughout Eastern Europe, Prof. Smith said.

Indeed, in Sag Harbor, N.Y., gallery owner Romany Kramoris, who was raised Roman Catholic in a Slavic enclave of Milwaukee, says she loves it. She prefers hers served cold "with a dollop of sour cream."

Unwilling to yield to beet defeat, Mr. Gold, his brother Steven and their two cousins, Howard and Neil, decided to soldier on—even as other local borscht makers abandoned the business and gave Gold Pure Food their contracts to supply the soup.



Gold Pure Food Products Co.  
Men chug away at a 2008 borscht-drinking contest in Coney Island, N.Y.

Now the Golds say they are determined to revive the yen for borscht by latching onto appetites for healthy fare—or riding the nostalgic culinary wave for fads of the 1950s and 1960s, like cupcakes and seltzer water.

The Golds, though, don't need to worry about going into the red. Over the years, their business, also known for its classic horseradish, has expanded to include such things as mustard, salsa and wasabi.

"Horseradish is our bread and butter," Howard Gold likes to say, invoking the firm mantra.

Brothers Marc and Steven, and their first cousins, Howard and Neil, have worked together for nearly 40 years. When they took over the company from their fathers in the 1970s, Gold Pure Foods did about \$2.5 million in sales. Now, thanks mostly to horseradish and other foods, the privately held company says annual sales are \$18 million.

Borscht has been at the root of some tense family moments. Steven Gold, who heads production, once told older brother Marc, who's in charge of sales, that he was falling down on the job. Marc was so furious he grabbed a jar of borscht and flung it in the garbage.

"Now we have one less jar of borscht to sell!" he yelled.

Recently, the four Golds got together to debate strategy in the executive conference room—also the pantry—of their factory in Hempstead, Long Island. Seated on vinyl chairs around an old Formica table, three of the four wore the company uniform: white shirts with their first names embroidered on one pocket, blue cotton pants and black rubber-soled work shoes.

The Golds have at different times offered low-calorie borscht, low-salt borscht and even a thicker Russian borscht. Jumping on another food trend, they have labeled all their products as gluten



-free—an easy claim since Gold's borscht never contained any wheat products. Still, sales of borscht have still slipped.

The family has experimented with various borscht recipes. Over a meal of borscht-flavored pasta topped off with a borscht "smoothie"—a blended mixture of borscht, yogurt and mint—the Golds debate what's holding back a borscht renaissance.

Is it the packaging? The jar with the big Gold label has stayed basically the same since the Golds started making borscht in 1947, barring some tinkering here and there. Howard Gold is partial to the classic container—it provides continuity, he says. His cousin Steven doesn't like it.

"It needs a totally new look to it," Steven Gold declares. "A sexy look." He advocates taking the word "borscht" out of the

equation altogether. Call the product "Beet Smoothie," he suggests. "Power Beet Juice," offers Howard Gold. How about "Organic Borscht" to capture consumers devoted to natural foods?

That resonates with Melissa Gold, at 31 the only member of her generation to work in the factory and the only member of the target market in this brainstorming session. Her friends are having babies and like certified-organic products, she says.

But her uncle Marc Gold puts on the brakes. Switching to organic would be pricey; they'd have to charge a lot more than the current \$1.39 per jar.

Meanwhile, at the Friars Club, the private midtown Manhattan club for comedians where borscht is still on the menu, Freddie Roman casts a skeptical eye on efforts to make it chic.

"I am one of the few Jews in the history of the world who does not like borscht," says Mr. Roman, the dean of the Friars Club who earned his station with countless nights on the Borscht Belt circuit.

But Mr. Roman does have a suggestion for the Golds: Mix their borscht with mint and rum and "call it a Beet Mojito."

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