

Russian Food: Old and New

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Darra Goldstein recently retired as professor of Russian literature, language and culture at Williams College. From the start though, she's been as interested in food as in literature and history, and she combines those passions in her books. The latest of those is called *Beyond the North Wind, Russia in Recipes and Lore*. That sounds like a fairy story or a folk tale.

Darra Goldstein: I'm glad it evoked that because I very much wanted to. The title actually comes from the ancient Greek name for a utopia called Hyperborea, which means beyond the north wind, and it was described by Pliny and Herodotus as this place where the Sun always shone, there were beautiful, tall, blonde people, and most importantly, it was the birthplace of technology. And in their writing they described how to get there. You cross the Carpathians and you go over a river, you turn left at a certain rock. Russian geographers over the years have tried to pinpoint where that utopia was, and came up with the idea or the belief, the conviction that it was the Kola peninsula, which is in the far northwest part of Russia above the Arctic circle.

And in fact, that area was settled by Vikings: tall, blonde people. The sun always shines there, at least in the summer months because of the midnight sun, even if it's dark in the winter. And early Russian sources describe these towers where the moon and the sun and the stars had been captured. So perhaps this was early astronomy and therefore a kind of birthplace of technology.

Jeremy: So you decided to go to the far North because that's where you thought you would find this essential Russian cuisine?

Darra Goldstein: Yes. It was also not just because of this romantic idea inspired by the ancient Greeks. I also wanted to go there because this part of Russia isn't just frequently visited by outsiders. It's a bit forbidding on the surface. And importantly, it was never under Mongol occupation. So I felt that the foodways there were perhaps less influenced by Western and Eastern traditions. And in fact, I found that during the depredations of Ivan the Terrible, there was an influx of people from the area around Moscow who were escaping, and

these people who'd left Muscovy brought with them their methods of cooking, many of which are still practiced today.

So I think I did find something elemental there.

Jeremy: It sounds like this is an area as it were, untouched — well, apart from the influx of Muscovites — untouched by what was going on in the rest of the country.

Darra Goldstein: It was. It was seen as an outpost. It was seen as a bit wild. And many of the Russians who moved there intermarried with indigenous populations such as the Sami, and they became a distinct group called the Pomor, those who live by the sea.

Jeremy: You mentioned the essence of Russian cuisine, of Russian foodways. What did you find there that seemed to you to mark Russian cuisine?

Darra Goldstein: I found what I had found elsewhere in Russia, but just somehow intensified there.

I think one of the great defining characteristics of the Russian palette is this taste for the sour. You get this through fermentation. The pickles in Russia are lacto-fermented. So they get this wonderful natural tang as opposed to using the sharp bite of vinegar. There's a wide range of dairy products that are cultured, not just to make sour cream, but also a number of different yogurt like preparations. Cultured butter as well.

There are a lot of whole grains, Hardy ones like barleys and millet and buckwheat and rye and oatmeal that are still very much used in porridges, both savoury and sweet. So all of those contribute to what is, in contemporary terms, a very healthy and robust diet.

Jeremy: You mentioned that the area was kind of forbidding, especially to outsiders. The contrast between summer and winter; I can't begin to imagine it. You went there in summer and in winter. What was it like?

Darra Goldstein: I went there in summer and, I'm being glib now, but in a certain way it wasn't Russian enough for me.

It was quite warm. It was very beautiful. We went foraging for all kinds of beautiful, beautiful berries. There are wonderful mushrooms. The sun is warm. The herbs in the far North are extraordinary

because they have so much sunlight that the flavour's intensified, as good as anything you might find in the Mediterranean.

Jeremy: That surprises me.

Darra Goldstein: Yes. It really is surprising because everyone thinks of this area as being very barren, and it's true that the snow sits on the ground for a very long time, eight to nine months of the year. But the summer is this glorious bursting forth and people — almost everyone has small little hothouses where they're growing cucumbers and tomatoes and other warmer weather crops.

Traveling in the summer is perhaps a little bit difficult because there are streams and rivers to ford and the roads are pretty wrecked. The time to really travel is during the winter when — unless, of course, there's a blizzard — you can really glide along the surface. And I wanted to experience the, the sparkle, the glitter, the amazing light of the Arctic winter. So I returned.

Jeremy: And presumably the bounty of the summer has to last them through the winter.

Darra Goldstein: Yes. And that's really at the basis of Russian cuisine because of all of these berries are preserved. Initially it was with honey. Russia was famous for the number of wild hives that it had. When sugar became more affordable and accessible in the late 19th century, it largely replaced honey in the preserves, but in my book I give a recipe, an old fashioned one, for making strawberry preserves with honey. Mushrooms are salted and put up for the long winter or else they're dried. The herbs are dried, fish is cured; it's salted or else it's frozen.

One of my favourite dishes is called stroganina, and it is like a Russian sashimi. But instead of the fish being at chill temperature, it's frozen, and you take a very sharp knife and you shave it. And the pieces fall off into these beautiful spirals that still have ice crystals in them and absolutely burst on your tongue when they encounter the warmth of your mouth. That's one of the great dishes of the Russian North.

Jeremy: Wow. Tell me about how you eat that. You say you have a block of frozen fish and you just shave it, but does everybody serve themselves or is someone doing the shaving? How does that work?

Darra Goldstein: Well, usually someone is doing the shaving. It's very much a fisherman's dish, or you can do with venison or reindeer, which is what they would be using in the far North. It is something that was done when people were up fishing or out hunting. But in terms of the home kitchen in Russia, they tend to use a local white fish from the White Sea. We use salmon because it's more readily available and you just stick a one-pound chunk in the freezer. And then someone with a strong arm, after it's frozen, just starts shaving it. I like to put some ice in a cake pan and freeze that. Then you have a block of ice that you put on a wooden board, put on the salmon, shave the salmon on the ice, and serve it with another Russian traditional specialty, which is black salt.

It's salt that has been charred with either oatmeal or black bread or the sediment from kvass, which is a fermented black bread drink, and flavoured with spices. You bake it in the oven until absolutely black and then you pound it or grind it into a beautiful, beautiful salt.

Jeremy: That also, that all sounds absolutely wonderful.

Going back to this idea of sour. Sour and bitter seem to be two flavours that as economies develop, the people in them seem to give up on bitter and on sour. They're regarded as just not very attractive. Is that something you came across in Russia?

Darra Goldstein: No. And they also, I have to say, have an extraordinary sweet tooth. So it's not that they disdain things that are sweetened, but the sour is something that they really can't do without. I would say this wide range of pickles that I've spoken of, they use the pickling brine in a number of very beautiful soups, which gives them another dimension.

There's a wonderful passage in a book by a 19th century Russian scientist who was head of the St Petersburg Polytechnic Institute, and he was exiled to his country estate because there were protests on the campus. And because he was a chemist, he was observing the peasants who worked on his estate. And he noted that if they didn't have something sour, they didn't feel as though they had had a meal. And for them, this mostly consisted of the sourdough black rye, this bread that had also been fermented through the sourdough process.

It's true that in the 20th century, and certainly in the post-Soviet years, the immediate post-Soviet years, people wanted the white

French bread because it represented something elite, but in terms of what they crave, it has always come back to this sour tang.

Jeremy: Do you have a sense of the kind of broader shifts that have taken place from, I don't know, the feudal period through czars and the revolution and then perestroika and beyond. Has the taste changed only mildly, or has it changed considerably?

Darra Goldstein: I think that at the core it has remained the same. Uh, you still find a lot of the dishes that were made a thousand years ago. People are still eating kasha, which is buckwheat porridge and beloved. Even in accounts of the aristocracy in czarist times, they would have all of these French chefs who had come to work for them and were making extraordinarily complex French cuisine dishes. But then as part of the menu, there would often be this kasha. Or there would be a drink that is known as, literally, sour cabbage soup, but it's actually a sparkling kvass or fermented beverage. So they never quite gave up on that.

I would say that what has happened is that there are, as everywhere, there are trends and there are foods have become very trendy, and as political situations have changed, people either have access to more or access to less. And it's this overall Russian resourcefulness that has meant that there have been these through lines throughout all of the centuries.

Jeremy: You first went to Russia in the late seventies when, by all accounts, the food was appalling. Was it that bad when you first went and how has it changed since?

Darra Goldstein: It was actually 1972 when I first went there. And it was shocking to me because there basically was no food visible in the stores except for canned goods and very tired looking produce. And I think that is what has given Russian cuisine a very bad reputation in the West because of those grim Soviet years. And people who travelled there were eating at institutional restaurants and the food was pretty appalling.

If you had the opportunity to get to know Russians and to dig below the surface, you found that people worked through a system of barter or a black market, where they were able to get very delicious foods. Not necessarily expensive things, but really good products. And almost everyone had their own kitchen garden that they tended in the summertime. And the foraging that we talked about has been a

constant in Russian life. So I found once I got to know Russians, pretty extraordinary food and amazing hospitality. And that really has been what has encouraged me and helped me to go through all of these political vicissitudes, especially between Russia and the United States over so many years. It's this constant of the Russians wanting to share what they have and kind of a spinning a culinary gold out of very basic straw, if you will.

Jeremy: You've also written a book — Fire and Ice — about Nordic cooking, cuisine. Did you find similarities? I guess there must be some between the Nordic side of the Arctic circle and the Russian side of the Arctic circle.

Darra Goldstein: Yes, enormous similarities. I would say that the Russian palette is maybe ... there's greater piquancy, more pungency; greater use of horseradish and strong mustard.

So if you think about new Nordic as a very minimalist kind of a presentation of food, then the Russians would have ramped up the flavour profile several degrees. I think that it is every bit as hipster, if I can use that word, and modern as new Nordic. Unfortunately, it has the adjective Russian in front of it, so it's never going to have the same cache.

Jeremy: Wait a minute. You said — I've forgotten the word you used — but these people who are related to the Sami of Northern Finland or Norway; couldn't they rebrand it?

Darra Goldstein: Well, I think they could, but I think these are tough political times. People aren't necessarily open to that sort of thing, although I'm hoping that those who read my book will start thinking a little differently, at least about Russian food.

Jeremy: Talking about tough political times, there is this slightly strange, to me, phenomenon, of a nostalgia for Soviet food. I've seen quite a lot of books, memoirs, online of people working their way through and thinking about, and even maybe nostalgic for Soviet food.

Darra Goldstein: I think yes, you're absolutely right, but I think that nostalgia is for something larger. It's for Soviets life and food is a part, one aspect, of that life. Certainly a dish I think that has become iconic of that is herring under a fur coat, which is a potato salad with chopped herring and shredded beets, and often carrots and hard boiled eggs. And it is served in layers with a lot of mayonnaise, and

it's absolute comfort food. So that epitomizes a Soviet-era ingenuity, taking very basic ingredients that you could always find — the root vegetables, the potatoes, and the herring — and turning them into something more than their parts. And it's a very grand looking dish on a table.

There was a certain stability to Soviet life. There's a reason that it was, under Brezhnev, called the era of stagnation. Nothing really changed, but there weren't a lot of big surprises. I think that in this world now, especially at the moment when there is a distressing surprise almost every day, there's a kind of comfort to some people to look back to the past and think about those foods that perhaps defined their childhoods or that represents something when life seemed simpler.

Jeremy: That's by no means exclusive to Russians for sure.

Darra Goldstein: No. I mean, in the States it would be macaroni and cheese. That now has lobster in it.

Jeremy: Finally, what impact do you think the sanctions that have been imposed on Russia, but also some of the trade goods, like when America was selling boatloads of frozen chicken to the Russians, did those things have an effect on Russian cuisine?

Darra Goldstein: Yes. Well, there's the frozen chicken. It was known as Bush's thighs because it was the dark meat, the thighs of the chicken, and it was under George Bush, the president. So it was Bush's thighs, and chicken had always been this extraordinary luxury. It was much more expensive than pork, or even beef, and suddenly to have these ... And the Russian chickens were enormously flavourful, but very scrawny. So to have these plump thighs was a revelation and they were relatively affordable. So yes, people started cooking more, experimenting more with chicken.

But the sanctions that the West — or the US, Canada, Australia, the EU and Norway — levied against Russia in 2014 after the annexation of Crimea actually had this rather amazing effect on Russian foodways.

In the post-Soviet years, Russians who were able to have a little extra money to spend on groceries, became passionate about Western cheeses, which they had never really had access to before. And suddenly they couldn't get the cheese anymore because the imports

had stopped. And so even though Russia had never had a tradition of making hard aged cheeses, very inventive people began making cheese in the style of brie or feta or gouda, cheddar, you name it. And the cheese making in Russia is pretty phenomenal now, the cheeses are quite wonderful.

But the Russians also started looking back to their own traditions and realizing that they have some pretty awesome foods that had been more or less forgotten during the long Soviet era. And there's been an artisanal revival because of that. So even though the political situation is ugly, something good came out of it, at least in the realm of Russian food.

Jeremy: Of those artisanal foods, do you have a favourite you could tell me about

Darra Goldstein: I don't know if I would call this a favourite, but it's epitomizes a very special moment for me.

In my teaching, I would often give my students accounts of early travellers to Russia who called it “a rude and barbarous kingdom”, but they described a loaf, very fine loaf, of white bread that was made in Moscow, called a kolach. It was shaped like a purse, so it had a bottom part that had more crumb, it was thicker, and then a handle that was crustier. And then it could be put on a stick or an arm and peddled through the streets. And this was one of the things I always imagined and romanticized and wondered what this kolach might taste like. And I went to Moscow in the early 2000s, I can't remember what year it was, and there was a new shop called La Kolacha where the founder had been working very hard to connect farmers and young growers and producers of these small artisanal products with a market. He'd opened a shop, and then he opened a cafe and I went to the cafe and he was making a lot of old recipes that he had discovered and reworked, and there was a kolach on the table.

I nearly cried. It was so beautiful, made of very fine white flour, you know, sort of more in the French style.

So you can imagine why people rhapsodized about it when they were more used to eating a dark, dense rye. Although people are not sitting around eating kolach. It's not their favourite thing, but for me it remains a particular moment.

Jeremy: Darra Goldstein, author of *Beyond the North Wind: Russia in Recipes and Lore*.

That bread Dara was talking about there at the end was a kolach. And the person who baked those breads would be called a Kolachnik. Over time, the pronunciation probably shifted to kolashnik. And the son of the baker, he might then be called Kalashnikov. So Mikhail Kalashnikov, father of the AK 47, might be the descendant of a kolach baker.