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**Angela Brintlinger**  
Yellow Springs, Ohio  
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**Thomas Feerick**  
Columbus, Ohio  
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# Preface

In today's gastronomically obsessed landscape, with chefs competing on television, cuisine blogs proliferating on the internet, food selfies on Facebook, and Julia Child's entire kitchen firmly ensconced at the Smithsonian, this fact seems obvious: Food is culture.

But the 1970s in the United States were not a time of great cuisine. (I know—I still have my great aunt's recipe box from 1975. Canned soup, corn flakes, and marshmallows feature in an alarming percentage of recipes.) When Pyotr Vail (the “yo” in **Pyotr** is pronounced much as you might hear “YO!” on the streets of New York) and Alexander Genis emigrated from the Soviet Union in 1977, they were surprised at how much they missed the cuisine they had known since childhood, and they were horrified by much of what they found here. The whitest of white breads, priorities of convenience over taste, food whose primary virtue was the speed with which it arrived. They did not really understand American culture, but what they perceived made them long for the habits of their homeland.

After arriving in the United States, Vail and Genis began to work in both newspaper and radio in New York City (among other things writing and presenting stories on the Russian Service of Radio Liberty). They were part of a larger community of writers and artists, including Vagrich Bakhchinyan, Lev Loseff, Joseph Brodsky, and Sergei Dovlatov, with whom they founded the short-lived weekly newspaper *Novyi Amerikanets* (*New American*). What made these émigrés into a true community was their shared level of sophistication and their encoded language of humor and satire, and Vail and Genis wrote with them and for them. A cross-section of Soviet dissident society, brought together primarily from the capitals of Moscow and Leningrad, but repeating the multiethnic nature of their country of origin, these émigrés were Jews, Armenians, Georgians, Russians, often in combination, and their food culture drew on that history.

Vail and Genis were actually from Latvia, but they quickly embraced the New York area as their home. Until 1990 they wrote together, as a team, and their output included such books as *The Sixties: The Soviet People's World* and *Native Tongue*, both of which remain in print today.<sup>1</sup> The authors “separated” after 1990 and continued their own careers. Genis remained in the U.S. while Vail decamped for Europe, where he reported on events including the first war in Chechnya. When the headquarters of Radio Liberty's Russia service moved to Prague in 1995, Vail became managing editor there. He died in that city in 2009 after a long illness.

By leaving the Soviet Union, Vail and Genis joined a larger Russian diaspora, what has been called Russia Abroad or the “Russian emigration” (as though that were a place, not a description), participating in the so-called “third wave” of Russian emigration after 1917.<sup>2</sup> After the Revolution over a million Russians—the “white émigrés” or first wave of emigration—fled the Bolsheviks. Most went to Europe, though some ended up in Harbin and Shanghai, China, and a few even landed in New York. The “second wave” included secondary émigrés, as refugees in Europe moved on to the UK or United States, as well as those who fled the Soviet Union during and after World War II.

Gleb Struve was one of those itinerant émigrés who left Russia after the Revolution. From Paris to London to Berkeley, he spent several decades moving house, only to establish himself eventually at the University of California. From there he wrote his *Russian Literature in Exile* (1956).<sup>3</sup> His choice of vocabulary—not émigré literature, not diaspora literature, but literature that has been driven out of its homeland, cast out, banished, ostracized—reflected the spirit of his enterprise. None of the literary figures he wrote about, or so Struve implied, left their homeland of their own free will. Instead they had been expelled, and their mission in exile was to maintain, protect, and nurture their national literature, in order to be ready at any moment to return home and take up pride of place in Russia again. That didn't happen, of course, until the 1990s.

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<sup>1</sup> *60-e: Mir sovetskogo cheloveka* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1988) and *Rodnaia rech'* (Tenafly, NJ: Hermitage, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> For an encyclopedia of the emigration, see John Glad, *Russia Abroad*.

<sup>3</sup> For V&G's joke on this account, see note on *Russian Sex in Exile* in chapter 12. *Russkaia literatura v izgnanii* was published by the Chekhov publishing house in New York and YMCA Press in Paris.



When Vail and Genis wrote their book there was still no going home. But by pairing “cuisine” and “exile,” Vail and Genis spoofed Struve’s somewhat more melancholy project. Yes, we have had to leave our homeland, they seem to be saying, but let’s have a little fun in our new environment. Soviet dissident culture of the 1970s and 1980s is characterized by the tone that pervades this book: satirical and yet gentle, affirming and at the same time bitter, hilariously deadpan and vividly poignant. And, I might add, quite difficult to translate.

We have striven mightily to capture that sensibility in this translation. When Alexander Genis looked over our work he wrote, “I rejoiced every time I saw that you were translating not word for word but smile for smile, as Dovlatov used to beg his translators to do.” We were delighted too with that response. And while it would be possible to simply present an English version of *Russian Cuisine in Exile* with no explanations at all, that seemed irresponsible. Instead we have supplied an extensive set of commentaries. At first Genis was put off. “I was horrified to see over two hundred notes,” Genis said, “but then I realized that this was in itself a kind of game, a serious one that will allow Slavists and other crazy people to immerse themselves in culturological research.”<sup>4</sup> That is exactly our goal.

Vail and Genis’s book demonstrates a yearning for the time of their youth, when loose tea had not yet been sacrificed to the rapid convenience of teabags and processed cheese was a favorite chaser for a bout of drinking. Yet even as it functions in an *à la recherche de la cuisine perdue* way, with its self-deprecating humor, self-mockery, and all the plays on words, it refuses to take nostalgia too seriously. It is a cultural artifact of a time, and a place, and most importantly an attitude.

Like *Russian Literature in Exile*, with which *Russian Cuisine in Exile* surely resonates, this book documents and organizes historical material, in particular habits, preferences, and memories of the Soviet kitchen. (In fact, the title in English could easily be *The Russian Kitchen in Exile*—we think about Dovlatov’s book of short stories, *The Suitcase*, in which each item he brought with him receives its history and backstory. Here the entire kitchen is unfolded in a New York apartment.) And like the peripatetic Struve, Vail, Genis, and other third wave émigrés made stops in Europe on the way to North America, which is why the Spanish paella and other recipes and ingredients unknown in the Soviet Union make it into the book.<sup>5</sup>

Importantly, this book is not a cookbook, not merely a reference book to check how to make borscht or *ukha* (fish soup), but a repository of a vanishing culture, a means of protecting and sharing that culture. It is also a record of a particular attitude, perhaps unique to dissidents or to émigrés—we loved our country, and we hated it, and the best way to explore and process those feelings is through humor. And finally, it is a recipe book. Pull a copy down off the shelf of any émigré and it will open magically to favorite dishes. *Russian Cuisine in Exile* was read, and it was used, by Russian émigrés across the world.

Ethnic restaurants have always sprung up in immigrant communities in the United States—consider Philadelphia’s Italian South Philly or the Chinatowns of New York and San Francisco, or Greektown in Chicago. When we think of Russian cuisine in the United States today we usually imagine Brighton Beach, Brooklyn. Some in that wave of Soviet émigrés to which Vail and Genis belong were among the founders of those very restaurants and shops.

At the same time, Soviet cooking was home cooking, not restaurant fare—and émigrés needed help to remember the dishes they were used to and to figure out how to prepare them in their new consumer landscape. Russian-language newspapers were one of the ways that the far-flung Russian diaspora communicated with each other—the literary version of Little Odessa. Each place had its own paper, or even competing papers, and writers published wherever they could. When a fellow émigré suggested the column title “Russian Cuisine in Exile” for the Los Angeles newspaper *Panorama*, Vail and Genis were in business.

As they thought about food and culture, Vail and Genis quickly came to understand that their own mutual palate was formed from a completely unusual menu. One part nostalgia for Soviet canned goods and public catering options, one part Jewish tradition, one part cosmopolitanism that extended to the

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<sup>4</sup> Genis compared our effort to the “Literary Monuments” series published by the Soviet and then Russian Academy of Sciences beginning in 1948 that presents the world’s “great books” with academic commentaries. He personally believes that there is no such thing as too much commentary. We hope you will agree!

<sup>5</sup> As Masha Gessen explains, by the time in the early 1970s that the Soviet Union finally granted Soviet Jews the right to leave—hard-fought and won by Soviet Zionists—“the Soviet Union had long severed diplomatic ties with Israel. This meant, among other things, that a plane could not go directly from the Soviet Union to Israel, and neither could the Jews.” While in Vienna or Rome, non-Zionist Jews “broke ranks” and “declared their intention to seek asylum in the U.S.—or Canada, or Australia” (*Where the Jews Aren’t*, 141). David Bezmozgis, another Latvian Jewish refugee from the Soviet Union, chronicled his family’s decision to choose Canada in the novel *The Free World*. I myself, after giving a scholarly lecture at Middlebury College, was treated to a Spanish paella concocted from Vail and Genis’s recipe—a dish prepared for me by Sergei Davydov, a Russian émigré born in Czechoslovakia [AKB].

spicy foods of the Caucasus, plus a generous serving of the adventurous spirit that had made them dissidents in the first place, that palate led them to brave the unknowns of emigration and prompted them to experiment in the kitchen. Food, they discovered, was a major part of who they were: the comfort of family recipes, the habitual products of Soviet everyday life, the Russian and Ukrainian and Jewish and Georgian and Siberian specialties that they had tasted throughout their childhoods and young adulthoods.

The audience for these newspaper columns, and eventually the book *Russian Cuisine in Exile*, was as cosmopolitan as the authors. These Russian readers in exile were political and cultural dissidents, often Jews, and their personal histories involved poverty and deprivation, making do, and creating what we now call work-arounds to the obstacles in their paths. They were cultured, literate, politically sophisticated, steeped in the Russian classics from literature to history to ballet. They were also in desperate need of laughter, and Vail and Genis were just the men to deliver it. Being savvy and smart creators as well as consumers of public taste, Vail and Genis recognized a literary niche when they saw one.

It was thirty years ago, in 1987, that thirty-eight-year-old Pyotr Vail and thirty-four-year-old Alexander Genis penned this book, and it has gone on to be reprinted many times in the post-Soviet era. Now a beloved cultural artifact in post-Soviet Russia and across the world, *Russian Cuisine in Exile* is being translated into English for the very first time.

In the notes to the chapters of this book, the reader will find that the translators begin to refer to Vail and Genis as V&G. We do this for several reasons. First, the style of this book is very personal. It will draw you in as it drew us, and you will begin to feel a relationship developing with the authors. We certainly did, and as with any friends, we groaned at some puns, found jokes or descriptions that had us chuckling for days, and others that left us flat. Vail and Genis came to feel like relatives, like our co-conspirators, as we worked on rendering their clever phrasing, their literary allusions, or their typically Russian aphorisms into comprehensible English. Thus we dubbed them V&G (and when we asked Alexander Genis if this offended him, he assured us that it did not).

(Here we might imagine a scene in which we sit down to a favorite Russian beverage, probably vodka, with accompanying *zakuski* [snacks]. We talk, we laugh, we tell stories, we become inebriated. At some juncture one of us—Thomas, or Alexander, or Pyotr, or even me [though I’m a woman, which carries different connotations in drinking culture]—says, seriously or in jest: “Do you respect me?” In some happy afterlife we may all still get together to have that drink.)

Another reason why Vail and Genis became V&G to us was that we could not tell them apart as we translated—they write as one. Sometimes it seemed as if we could discern a personal voice through the prose, but we could never be sure. Were they conversing? arguing? sparring? speaking with one accent? playing off each other? America has a tradition of pairs of comedians: Abbott and Costello, Laurel and Hardy, Burns and Allen, Cheech and Chong, Key and Peele, and their routines involve physical slapstick as well as linguistic humor. But in Russia it has been literature that teems with partnerships. Kozma Prutkov, Ilf and Petrov, the Strugatsky brothers—this satirical tradition of writing as partners was another thing V&G brought with them into exile.

For the translators of *Russian Cuisine in Exile*, who have ourselves worked as a team, correcting each other, making suggestions, arguing over what we called our “points of contention,” the term of affection V&G reminds us of P&V, the husband and wife translation team of Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. Though neither Thomas nor I is a native speaker of Russian, we brought to the project extensive experience in Russian language and culture (AKB), a strong background in British humor (TF), deep knowledge of intertextual references (AKB), fresh eyes and a poetic touch (TF). So while we are not yet ready to dub ourselves B&F, we have had immense fun working together to transfer this comedic duo’s philosophical, insightful, and often highly amusing view of the intersection of Russian/Soviet life and the American cultural landscape. We hope you will enjoy the result.

# Introduction: Expressions of the Soul<sup>1</sup>

When the Japanese make declarations of love, they place their hand not on their heart but on their belly. They are sure that the soul resides in the stomach. This is why they perform hara-kiri, to set the soul free—which is a rather torturous way to reassure yourself of your own metaphysical being.

A Westerner, when talking about spiritual matters, might thump himself on the chest. If he does, he might feel, in the breast pocket of his coat, a Parker pen, a handkerchief, or even a billfold.<sup>2</sup> He won't find his soul, though, which lies three buttons below. You can grow accustomed to any geographic distance: longitude, latitude, altitude. But the umbilical cord, which ties a man to his home, naturally connects to the stomach, not the heart. Hearts may differ across the world. But no one can dictate to the stomach. Try to explain to the stomach, for example, that avocados are for eating and not just for decoration.<sup>3</sup>

The threads that tie a man to his homeland are many and varied: a rich culture, a mighty people, a glorious history. But the strongest threads stretch from the homeland to the soul. That is to say, to the stomach. These are not mere threads but more like ropes, Manila ropes. You can argue about culture, ethnicity, and history until morning, but can there really be any controversy about dried fish?<sup>4</sup>

They say you can't bring your country with you on the soles of your boots,<sup>5</sup> but you can bring crabs from the Far East, spicy Tallinn anchovies, store-bought layered

<sup>1</sup> The original Russian, *Dushi prekrasnye poryvyy*, is quoted from Pushkin's ode "To Chaadaev" (1818): "My friend, let us dedicate to our country the beautiful outpourings of the soul!" Pyotr Chaadaev was a member of the Tsar's bodyguard in the Napoleonic Wars. After his resignation, he wrote a number of "Philosophical Letters," which criticized Russian culture. Nicholas I declared him insane in 1836. This is thought to be the first use of a diagnosis of mental illness to discredit a critic of the government in Russia.

<sup>2</sup> This translation modifies the "white man"/Japanese contrast of the original; the importance lies in the exoticism of Japanese cultural markers such as hara-kiri. Russians are perhaps closer to the "East"; at any rate, they value the "soul" in a way that Westerners do not. The everyday details here are striking, and the Parker pen is important. In the authors' childhoods a ballpoint pen—especially one that wrote smoothly—would have been a luxury. However, does anyone actually carry a billfold in his breast pocket?

<sup>3</sup> An avocado was quite an exotic food in the Soviet Union, one that must have seemed utterly improbable to new émigrés to America.

<sup>4</sup> Dried fish, *vobla*, here evokes Russian drinking parties where beer is the preferred accompaniment to this appetizer. Russians are tied together by their eating and drinking habits, and differing opinions about other matters pale in comparison to solidarity on this front.

<sup>5</sup> This expression, attributed to French revolutionary Georges Danton (1759–94), dates to the late eighteenth century, considerably before today's border control concerns about whether visitors have been on a farm or in a pasture while abroad.





wafer cakes, “Bears of the North” chocolates, and bottles of Essentuki artesian mineral water (the best is No. 17). A shopping list like this (plus hearty Russian mustard) makes living in an alien land (ooh, and unrefined sunflower oil) better (don’t forget those tangy little tomatoes) and more joyful (and round it out with some six-star Ararat cognac).<sup>6</sup>

Of course, even with a spread like this there will still be room at the table for nostalgic memories. Suddenly, with a puff of pink smoke, out swims an aspic costing 36 kopeks, then piroshki with “jam,” then “borscht b/m” (b/m means *bez miasa*, without meat, nothing indecent).<sup>7</sup> Also—hot greasy meat patties, bloody roast beef, Strasbourg pie. However, pardon, we’ve moved from nostalgia straight to the classics.<sup>8</sup> As the prophet of our own scandalous generation, Venichka Erofeev, said, “We are given only one life, and it’s necessary to live it so as not to make mistakes in recipes.”<sup>9</sup>

Our recipes, naturally, are not taken from the *Larousse Gastronomique* culinary encyclopedia,<sup>10</sup> but they do have one undeniable advantage: they are ours, assembled by the collective mind of the masses and imbued with the spirit of the nation. Can we really leave all that behind?<sup>11</sup> There will always be vegetarians and atheists who assert that the soul does not exist.<sup>12</sup> But, then, why should we bother with people for whom nothing is sacred?

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<sup>6</sup> This sounds like a conversation between the two authors—one, trying to stay on topic, while the other keeps adding more items to the imagined shopping list. “Better and more joyful” evokes the Stalinist maxim: “Life has become better, comrades, life has become more joyful.” The juxtaposition of this Stalinist phrase associated with multiethnic bounty (as advertised and promoted, for example, in the 1939 *Book of Healthy and Tasty Food*) onto the émigré’s life “in an alien land” makes a good introduction to this book of recipes and essays—nostalgic, but always playful. The shopping list features the flavors of a pan-Soviet diet: Essentuki is in Southern Russia, near the Caucasus mountains, but Ararat cognac comes from Armenia. “Northern” chocolates, far Eastern crabs, and Estonian anchovies mean this list contains every point of the compass across the vast Soviet empire.

<sup>7</sup> As part of medical testing during the resettlement process, Russians—like all immigrants to the United States—were subjected to conversations with doctors and interpreters about b.m. (bowel movements). My own experience explaining about taking samples “*chez stul*” (or every other b.m.) led to embarrassment and hilarity in sparsely furnished refugee apartments in the late 1980s. Among other things the Russian translation, *chez stul*, sounded like I was asking the refugees to jump over kitchen chairs [AKB].

<sup>8</sup> These first items are all “proletarian” or everyday items one might find in a Soviet factory or school cafeteria, whereas the last two, “bloody roast beef” and “Strasbourg pie,” are upper-class food items from Alexander Pushkin’s 1820s novel-in-verse *Eugene Onegin*. Russians of the late Soviet period would know these lines, both because of the culturally conditioned habit of learning vast stretches of Pushkin’s novel by heart, and because these dishes were so exotic as to be unattainable and even unimaginable in the Soviet era. We can see the logic as the “hot, greasy meat patties” lead directly into the “bloody roast beef”—but for a Russian reader, the other (also unattainable in the Soviet era) items on Pushkin’s dinner menu would also be hovering in his mental background as he read: truffles, pineapple, Limburger cheese. See *Eugene Onegin*, chapter 1, verse XVI.

<sup>9</sup> The transition directly from the “poet-prophet” of the nineteenth century into the underground “prophet” of Soviet dissident culture indicates that the reader should take Venedikt Erofeev’s alcohol-infused 1969 novel *Moscow to the End of the Line* (sometimes translated as *Moscow’s Stations*) seriously as a vital cultural text. This quote from Erofeev’s novel is a parody of another famous line from Nikolai Ostrovskii’s classic Socialist Realist novel *How the Steel Was Tempered* (1936), spoken by his protagonist Pavel Korchagin: “We are given only one life, and it’s necessary to live it so as not to feel excruciating pain about aimlessly lived years, so as not to feel burning shame about a miserable and trivial past and so that, dying, we can say: All my life and all my strength were devoted to the most wonderful thing in the world—the struggle to free mankind.” The Pavel Korchagin line was memorized by all Soviet schoolchildren and was supposed to serve as a moral guide to how they lived their lives; Erofeev’s line gives them a different message, a suggestion that they drink heavily, concocting more and more new and cheaper cocktails, which would help to obliterate the effects of official propaganda all around them.

<sup>10</sup> Both an important culinary artifact and, again, something very exotic to the Russian ear. The *Larousse* might evoke *à la russe* to someone unfamiliar with the name, but the next word in French, *gastronomique*, makes it clear that the homonym is only a coincidence.

<sup>11</sup> The “collective mind of the masses” and the “spirit of the nation” are Soviet clichés, but the authors’ reluctance to part with them underscores the degree to which Soviet culture remained essential to those who chose to emigrate. And, of course, like many of V&G’s borrowed expressions, these clichés drip with irony in their new usage.

<sup>12</sup> The “b/m” [without meat] in the previous paragraph indicates a cheaper soup for a student budget, although its precedent would have been a “fasting” version of beet soup for those who followed Russian Orthodox dietary restrictions. In the Soviet context, diners could not admit to following a religious diet, and yet vegetarianism for V&G is, as we see here, an abomination. So where does religious feeling inhere? Clearly for V&G, it is to be found in cuisine.

C H A P T E R

1

# The Clay Pot— A Repository of Tradition





If you like to eat, if you feel a natural nostalgia for the culinary relics of the homeland you left behind, if its traditions are dear to you—buy a clay pot. A capacious glazed clay pot with a tightly fitting lid—now that's a thing worth having! All of Russian cuisine comes out of it, the way that all Russian writers came out from under Gogol's overcoat.<sup>1</sup>

Technological progress has led to the invention of aluminum pots. But your life will be even better if you acquire this simple object, a gift from your ancient kin, who knew that the thick walls of a clay pot heat up slowly and evenly.

In the clay pot food does not boil, but rather stews. It retains all its vitamins, proteins, or whatever. (A normal person shouldn't worry about this. One doesn't thrive on vitamins, but on meat, fish, and vegetables.)

The main thing, of course, is taste. Food prepared in a clay pot acquires that delicacy, that refined quality and nobility of spirit characteristic of the highest achievements of ancient Russian cuisine.

Let's take, for example, a 3-pound piece of beef. We'll chop 2 large onions very finely and scatter them on the bottom of the pot. Then we lay the meat on top in one large piece, add peppercorns and a bay leaf, and put the pot into the oven on medium. Under no circumstances add water or salt. The pot will do all the work itself, and after 2 ½ to 3 hours you will have a tender meat dish, swimming in a mixture of onion and meat juices. In the meantime, you can prepare your sauce.

Fry some flour on a dry frying pan until it begins to smell of nuts (and it will, don't worry), then add 2 cups of sour cream to the flour. When it comes together, add 3 tablespoons of Dijon (if you don't have any Russian) mustard. Now you need to season the sauce with ginger and marjoram, add some garlic, and pour the sauce onto the meat. Then lightly season the dish. Another 1/2 hour in a warm oven, and you will have Merchant's Roast, the pride of the restaurant Slavic Bazaar.<sup>2</sup>

The meat will be so tender, well-spiced, and aromatic that it will simply fall off the bone. Add buckwheat kasha as a side dish, and you can invite your boss to a dinner *à la russe*.

You can prepare chicken or rabbit in the clay pot in the same way. And you can also cook a fish fillet in it; pour over top a mixture of milk and eggs, sprinkle generously with dill (1/2 cup) and in a half an hour serve the fish—tender as a young bride.

Cooking in the clay pot is very simple, because after you add the ingredients you don't have to do anything else.

The only problem is buying the pot. It's easiest to find one in stores that stock goods for people from Africa and the Caribbean Islands. In those underdeveloped countries, clay pots are normal and indispensable. One more thing—never put your clay pot on an open flame. It doesn't like that and will crack.

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<sup>1</sup> These words are usually credited to F. M. Dostoevsky, but as S. A. Reiser demonstrated in an article in *Voprosy literatury* [Questions of Literature] (no. 2, 1968), they actually belong to Eugène-Melchior de Vogüé (1848–1910), who published an article about Dostoevsky in 1885 in *Revue des deux mondes* [Review of the two worlds]. De Vogüé's book, *Contemporary Russian Writers: Tolstoy, Turgenev, Dostoevsky*, was later translated into Russian and published in Moscow in 1887.

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<sup>2</sup> The hotel and restaurant *Slavic Bazaar* opened in Moscow in the 1870s and became popular with local merchants as well as visitors to the capital. (Chekhov's Anna Sergeevna, in the story "Lady with a Little Dog," stayed here when visiting her lover in Moscow. Another of his characters, from the story "Peasants," was a waiter at the restaurant.) The historically real chef Vladimir Ivanov trained in Paris but maintained a menu in the "Russian style."



C H A P T E R

2

# Tea Is Not Vodka— You Can't Drink Too Much<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter title, like many in the book, is a common Russian saying.



It's safe to say that the national drink of Russia is vodka. To argue about this is foolish, and we'd rather not bother, but for the sake of the truth it is necessary. This is because there is also tea. Tea was brought to Russia from China in 1638, which was over a century before it was introduced in, say, England. Since then tea has become the symbol and sometimes even the center of Russian cuisine. The samovar has evolved into an icon of Russian life. Without tea you cannot understand the plays of Ostrovsky or Chekhov. Tea drinking accompanies key aspects of everyday Russian culture: long conversations about the meaning of life, the dacha, nightingales...<sup>2</sup>

Despite all of this, in Russia currently no one knows how to drink tea properly. As is often the case, one must go into exile to enjoy Russian cuisine. It's not that they understand tea here, but America has everything a true gourmet needs.

First of all, forget about teabags. Do not confuse ease of preparation or price with quality. You can make a cup of fabulous tea in just 10 minutes, and even the best drink does not cost more than three cents a glass.<sup>3</sup> Tea bags are packed with mere flecks of tea (that is to say, the waste).<sup>4</sup> What's more, the glue in the paper wrapper dissolves in boiling water, spoiling the whole flavor.

Another historical mistake is the practice of diluting the brew with boiling water. This custom originated with the poor and has grown into a superstition according to which strong tea is bad for your health. There is not one medical authority who would deny that strongly brewed tea is exceptionally valuable for good health. Many claim that Anglo-Saxons' predilection for this drink is precisely what allowed them to create their global empire. And the invention of the tea bag led to the demise of that empire.

Brewing tea is surprisingly simple. The only thing needed here is precision. Generally speaking, cooking is unlike any other art: diligence is more important than talent.

Heat up a porcelain teapot, scoop in some tea—1 spoon of tea leaves for every cup plus a spoonful for the teapot—pour in freshly boiled (not reboiled!) water. Let it steep for 4 minutes (if you leave it longer, it will turn bitter). Then stir and pour into a cup.

You can drink real tea with sugar, but don't use lemon or jam, which take away the smell. If you love English tea, observe the proper order: pour the tea into the milk, not the other way around.

It's hard to believe that a large part of humanity is unable to observe these simple rules and drinks swill when they could be enjoying an enchanting beverage.<sup>5</sup>

In any American city, there is a store where they sell the best sorts of loose-leaf teas. And there are tin cans packed with the famous English brand Twinings everywhere. The Indian tea Darjeeling is considered the best kind. All the high-quality black Chinese teas, such as

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<sup>2</sup> Everyday life is related to the important Russian concept of *byt*. As semiotician and cultural critic Yuri Lotman has defined it, “*Byt* is the usual passage of life in its real and practical forms; *byt* is the things that surround us, our habits and everyday behavior. *Byt* surrounds us like air, and, like air, we notice it only when we don't have enough of it or when it is spoiled. We notice the specificities of the *byt* of other [cultures], but our own *byt* is elusive. We tend to consider it as ‘life itself,’ the natural norm of practical being. Thus *byt* is always in the sphere of practice, it is the world of things above all.” From “Introduction: *Byt* and Culture,” in Iu. M. Lotman, *Besedy o russkoi kul'ture: Byt i traditsii russkogo dvorianstva (XVIII–nachalo XIX veka)* [*Conversations on Russian Culture: Russian Noble Traditions and Lifestyle in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries*; this work has not been translated into English]. Dachas are obviously a significant part of Russian *byt*—they seem normal to the Russian and exotic to the foreigner. But nightingales are another matter—the nightingale is a symbol of inspiration and the presence of love in Russian poetry, as it is in classical and English poetry as well. But as V&G emphasize, the Russian dacha wouldn't be the same without the twittering of real nightingales. They are also a part of *byt*.

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<sup>3</sup> Many American grandchildren of émigrés from the Russian empire grow up wondering why their grandmother or grandfather always talked about a “glass” of tea. Russians drink in cups or glasses, but the glass is a classic way to drink tea *à la russe*, particularly in a metal glass holder.

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<sup>4</sup> The Russian word *brak*, translated here as “waste,” means any second quality or defective merchandise that cannot be sold but must be disposed of somehow.

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<sup>5</sup> Notice how V&G frequently prefer the short, even one-sentence paragraph. Throughout the text we have maintained their stylistic specificities as much as possible.



Yunnan, are lovely and aromatic. Ceylon is best for a cup of milky tea. And after a heavy lunch, nothing beats a Japanese green tea. The unusual Chinese tea Lapsang yields a gentle, smoky flavor. When added to any black tea, it summons nostalgic visions of tea parties in the woods.

For lovers of the exotic, the nomadic Kalmyk variation can be adapted for city conditions. Brew very strong, black tea in boiling milk (not water!). Add a pinch of salt and some butter.

Kalmyk tea will cure your hangover, a result that can only enhance overall health. Especially if you remember the ancient Russian proverb: tea is not vodka, you can't drink too much.







C H A P T E R

3

# The Scent of Cabbage Soup



What is the symbol of the Russian table? Vodka? Gefilte fish? Fighting?

Of course not. There is only one dish without which Russian cuisine is as unthinkable as an émigré newspaper without the old men of the Kremlin.<sup>1</sup> What is it? Cabbage soup, *shchi*.<sup>2</sup> Our entire culture and history are concentrated in this soup. And that's why we talk about *shchi* using not the singular, but the plural, not "it" but "them."<sup>3</sup>

Over the course of the first thousand years of Russian history *shchi* was the main and often the only dish on the Russian peasant's table. Then both *shchi* and the peasantry went into decline. Gradually this meal descended to the level of a pauper's thin broth, and it proceeded to seriously compromise Russian cuisine. If it smells like *shchi* in the house it must mean that the people living here are uncultured and backward. But at one time the scent of cabbage soup signified a special Russian hominess and coziness. "Here's the Russian spirit! Here it smells of *shchi*!" as the great poet wrote.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, in order to enjoy *shchi*, you don't actually have to put on a Russian peasant blouse and bast shoes.<sup>5</sup> You just have to prepare the *shchi* properly. Which may not be simple, but it's at least entertaining. Put the marrow bone and a good chunk of beef into the pot (don't ever use pork—that is a Ukrainian influence which is forbidden to us both as Russians and as Jews).<sup>6</sup>

Pour water over the meat and boil until it is partially cooked. Squeeze out some sauerkraut, put it into a clay pot, pour boiling water over it, and add 2 spoonfuls of butter. Cover the pot and place it in a warm oven; keep it there until the cabbage is soft. This will give the *shchi* the taste of having been stewed, something which you can otherwise only achieve by cooking it in a Russian stove. Since in America even the president doesn't have a Russian stove, this cabbage operation is unavoidable.<sup>7</sup> In another pot boil 2 or 3 dried mushrooms with a chopped potato.

Now you need to unite all the ingredients (the cabbage, the mushrooms and potato, and the liquid in which they were cooked) and add to the *shchi* finely chopped onion, carrot, turnip, parsley root and greens, celery root and greens, a few black peppercorns (crushed), 2 or 3 bay leaves, a teaspoon of marjoram, and some salt, and let it cook for about 20 minutes. Then take it off the flame, add garlic and dill, and place the soup pot into a warm oven for half an hour.

Before serving the *shchi* at table, it's good to add some pickled mushrooms cut into large chunks (we can't imagine where you will get them) and don't forget to add a dollop of a mixture of sour cream and cream to the soup plate when you serve it. Aesthetes sometimes include finely diced ham along with the root vegetables, but that is the devil at play.

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<sup>1</sup> The expression "Kremlin Elders" (or "old men") refers generally to the politicians of the Brezhnev era and later, all of whom lived on well into their seventies. There was a sense in the USSR that young (men) didn't have a chance at power. And certainly Russian émigré newspapers followed the speeches and actions of those in power closely; after all, the Communist leaders were much of the reason that people emigrated from the USSR in the first place.

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<sup>2</sup> *Shchi* is one of the classic Russian soups, and it also consists of only two letters in Russian, ЩИ. Generally speaking it symbolizes the simplest of Russian meals. As Pushkin wrote in the final chapter of his novel *Eugene Onegin*: "My ideal is now a housewife, All I desire is peace and quiet, A pot of cabbage soup, a proud toddler". A favorite Russian aphorism about the simple things in life goes: *Shchi* and porridge are our daily bread.

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<sup>3</sup> Russian, like many languages, has a familiar and a formal "you." Since the formal corresponds to the plural, it may sometimes seem as though a really important person is addressed as if plural, or spoken about as "them" rather than him or her.

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<sup>4</sup> Pushkin didn't say this. In the prologue to his first narrative poem, *Ruslan and Liudmila*, he did write: "There's the Russian spirit, there it smells of Rus'" (1820). V&G have rewritten this to emphasize the smell of cabbage soup.

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<sup>5</sup> Bast shoes were made of woven fibers and worn primarily by peasants in Russia.

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<sup>6</sup> Note that the authors do not always eschew pork products—just when it's convenient for their rhetoric.

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<sup>7</sup> The Russian stove traditionally takes up 20–25% of the interior of a peasant home. Built of bricks, it has elaborate piping inside to turn the entire edifice into a source of heat as well as a place to cook food. Frequently the upper portion of the stove is turned into a berth which creates a warm bed for the young, infirm, or elderly, and sometimes it has benches for sleeping built in along the sides as well.





You must eat the shchi with an enormous quantity of fresh black bread, cut into slices a hand's breadth thick. On shchi day, no main dish is necessary. May God help you manage this soup course. The biggest problem is the consistency of the shchi. It must be very thick, so thick that a spoon can stand in the soup. But this recommendation, like all others of its kind—for example, "salt to taste, boil until ready"—is not particularly helpful for the cook. On the other hand, a reasonable person must have an inborn intuition and a sense of measure. People who don't shouldn't make shchi at all.<sup>8</sup> They will manage with less: for culinary purposes—a hamburger, for art—television, for sports—the card game of *durak*.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Notice how few exact measurements we find in this recipe. V&G would certainly argue that intuition (rather than precise measure) should guide the cook's hand.

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<sup>9</sup> *Durak* (or "fool") is similar to slapjack or Egyptian ratscrew, all easy card games which are often the first game a child will learn.



C H A P T E R

# 4

## Walking on Eggshells<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Russian original of the title is “The Value of a Hollowed-out Egg”—an idiom that means more or less “nothing.” V&G would have loved the marketing slogan of the American Egg Board (1976): “The Incredible Edible Egg.”





We have a complicated relationship with the edible egg. On the one hand, it's tasty and supposedly nutritious. On the other, if your child gets a rash, you may be reminded of the dirty word "diathesis," which is awfully close to the even worse word "diet."<sup>2</sup> Civilization has not invented anything more demeaning to human dignity than dieting. At least abstinence makes a certain sense—for example: economic sense. A heavy drinker spends far more money than a teetotaler. Not just on vodka, but also on related pleasures—taxis, decorative flowers, stupid presents like lamps or budgerigar parrots. Even sexual abstinence makes some sense (at least theoretically). They say that it increases creative potential exponentially. And it frees up more time for self-improvement and for cooking.

But there's not even a kernel of sense in dieting. First of all, health professionals don't have a clear understanding of which foods will be harmful or helpful for whom and under what circumstances. We know from our own experience that heartburn comes from tea, eggplant, milk, oysters, and so forth. But sometimes those foods don't lead to heartburn at all. The whole point is that the process of food absorption is not subject to the purview of universities. It is governed by higher spheres.

There is confusion about the egg's role in specific diets. Entire systems have been developed around eating hard-boiled eggs. Rumor has it that French ballerinas subsist on eight eggs a day, plus well water. Yet almost all other set diets, including Orthodox Christian fasting rules, exclude eggs entirely. The anti-egg movement is supported by Slavophile ideology and based on data from the Russian fairytale about Kashchei's death, which is hidden away in an egg. Since the Russian Kashchei is traditionally slender and gracile, his death must signify the victory of Western self-indulgence and its resulting corpulence.<sup>3</sup>

Actually, the egg is one of the most universal foods known to mankind and, significantly, one of the few that you don't get sick of if you eat them frequently. Apart from that, the egg is quickly and easily prepared, which has made it a fundamental part of breakfast, when time tends to be short. Eggs are fantastic raw, cooked (soft-boiled, coddled, hard-boiled), sunny side up (Russian-style), and scrambled (Ukrainian-style). But the pinnacle of egg culture remains the omelet!

In the old days, when master chefs were hiring, they would give the candidate one and only one test: making an omelet. This dish, laconic and demure, is simultaneously modest and clever—like a sonnet. On a thoroughly heated skillet you melt butter, and then pour in the egg-milk-flour mixture, already beaten to foaminess. (Only a little flour—1 teaspoon per 2 eggs. Together with the milk, you could add diluted sour cream and regular cream.)

As soon as the mixture thickens, immediately move the skillet to a preheated oven, where the omelet will swell and rise. The omelet should be eaten within seconds of being removed from the skillet.

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<sup>2</sup> Diathesis, not a common word in English, describes a constitutional tendency or predisposition to a disease. This must have been a fancy way of saying what American pediatricians tend to say when they see a rash: "It may be contact dermatitis." In other words, we don't know why your child has developed a rash. The anxiety this induced in Soviet mothers was matched only by their anxiety about questions of diet.

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<sup>3</sup> Orthodox dieting rules are extremely complex, in part because they were designed for people dwelling in monasteries rather than for lay people. In brief, there are four major "fasts" per year and many minor fasts, including most Wednesdays and Fridays, ranging in severity from no animal products at all to dairy-only days. Well over two hundred days of the calendar are "fasting" days of one kind or another. It is interesting that V&G add Kashchei the Deathless into their discussion of Orthodoxy and Slavophilism. Kashchei is one of the primary characters in the Russian folk tradition. Motifs from this tale were used in Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's 1902 one-act opera *Kashchei the Deathless* and in Igor Stravinsky's *The Firebird* (1910), which merged two traditional Russian tales. The most important thing for this chapter, of course, is that Kashchei's death was hidden in an egg.

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