

Bread & Russia

“Don’t say you’re full if you haven’t touched the bread.” (Nye poglyadyev na khlyeb, nye govori, chto syt.) - Russian proverb.

“You had to eat with all your mind on the food...and how good it tasted, that black bread!”- A. Solzhenitsyn, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*.

To those of us accustomed to abundance, the idea of a ‘staple’ food suggests a possibly fragile dependence on a narrow range of resources. The Western lifestyle delivers year-round access to agricultural produce from all over the world. The notion that any one item of diet should be revered - unless on grounds of price and exclusivity - seems vaguely folkloric in this age of global trade and international brands. However, it is we who may be the poorer if we fail to appreciate that the relationship of a people to its primary food is not only intrinsically important, but also a route by which sensitive outsiders may understand a culture.

Take Russia and bread. An old Russian saying warns that when we die, all the bread we’ve ever wasted will be weighed; if it turns out to be more than the weight of our body, we will go to Hell. Countless proverbs and sayings testify to the respect in which Russians hold the staff of life. Even Soviet-era campaigns against wasting bread were spared the cynicism usually reserved for such public exhortation. The Russian term for hospitality, *khlyeb-sol’* (bread-salt), testifies to the actual and symbolic significance ascribed to these humble foods.

This would have been of no more than passing interest to me, had not an academic involvement with Russian culture become intertwined with a career as a baker. In what follows, I hope to explain how my passion for Russia deepened my understanding of bread and how my journey into bread opened doors to an appreciation of Russia. But first, a word about the breads the Russians actually eat.

Grains were crucial to the diet of the Slavs as they penetrated the forests of European Russia a thousand years ago. They seem to have combined farming with gathering (of fungi, berries, wild plants, nuts, fish and game) in ways which continued into modern times.¹ Rye was the dominant grain of the Northern areas, where its tolerance of poor soils and the short growing season gave it advantages over wheat which was more widely grown in Southern parts and the Ukraine. Some barley and oats were grown, for human consumption, animal feed and brewing, with buckwheat forming a minor, though increasingly significant, addition to the diet.

¹ See REF Smith & David Christian, *Bread & Salt, A social and economic history of food and drink in Russia*, Cambridge University Press.

Gruel or porridge is the simplest way of making grain palatable and these indeed figured in the early Russian diet. But fermentation seems to have been widely deployed and by the seventeenth century a great variety of breads and pastries, usually leavened, were to be found². Leavening would be achieved by the use of a sourdough or *zakvaska*, for which rye is particularly suited: not only does a vigorous fermentation readily occur in a rye and water mix, but the resulting acidity perfectly balances the rather bland and alkaline nature of rye flour.

Could it be that people living at the margins of agricultural security form more intense feelings for their staples than those living in climates where food is more easily grown? The long and severe Russian winter certainly made effective storage of food essential. Grains were ideal, but considerable effort was also made to conserve vegetables, fish and fruits by pickling, salting and drying. Bread, salt fish and pickles are key features of the Russian diet to this day. And it is bread, above all, which at a deep level defines a sense of wellbeing for most Russian people.

“The quality of bread is the quality of our life! The culture and civility of a people is defined by its relationship to bread... Bread will always live and be animated by our memory and consciousness, this bitter and sweet bread of our whole life and history... To be with bread is constantly to feel the warmth of life.”³

For all its undoubted significance, Russian bread never found itself on a culinary pedestal, remaining an essentially domestic or community project. Fillipov was Moscow’s best known baker at the end of the nineteenth century, but he was primarily a confectioner. The Revolution destroyed the small private bakeries and industrialisation spawned standardised bread plants producing volume rather than variety. Regional recipes and local distinctiveness were all but eliminated. From one end of the country to the other, just a few breads were available: Moskovskii, Darnitskii, Stolichnyi, Rossiiskii. Connoisseurs swore by Ryzhskii (Riga) bread, lightly malted and flavoured with caraway. But the pinnacle of Russian breads was, and perhaps still is, Borodinsky, a dark bread sweetened with treacle and flavoured with coriander, named after the village near Moscow where a stand was made against Napoleon. Redolent of a nation’s finest hour, its equivalent in the UK might be “Battle of Britain Bread” - if we took our bread as seriously.

By the late 1980s, one or two foreign bakeries had opened up in Moscow. People flocked to them at first, attracted by crusty white bread and fancy *viennoiserie*. But the novelty soon wore off amid complaints that the new fluffy breads had no flavour, no capacity to sustain. The currency crisis of 1998 gave financial reinforcement to this instinctive preference for ‘our bread’. It was a preference I could easily understand.

² Ibid, 6-7

³ V. Stepanenko, *Bread*, Agpromizdat, Moscow, 392.

In 1967, fired by General de Gaulle's vision of a Europe "from the Atlantic to the Urals" (or so we said in a rather pompous but not altogether fruitless bid for sponsorship) and a desperate desire to speak to 'real Russians', six undergraduates from Sussex University drove a minibus to Russia. In a month-long camping tour from Brest to Lvov via Moscow, Kiev and Odessa, we became experts in pit latrines, learned to avoid the Intourist bores who insisted on speaking English - and would have starved had it not been for...bread. Limited funds and the usurious exchange rate forced us into a diet of black bread and cucumbers, haggled for in collective farm markets. At first, the unfamiliar sourness of the bread appalled us; but after a fortnight we were used to it and by the end of the trip most of us would have admitted to a grudging affection.

I graduated in 1970 and after a spell in computers and a foray into political research, I found myself making programmes in the Russian Service of the BBC. Believing that the BBC's reputation for truthfulness could be assured only by regular demonstrations of its readiness to discuss the bleaker aspects of Western life, I took on the role of ecological Cassandra - serialising Rachel Carson's devastating critique of agri-chemicals Silent Spring, EF Schumacher's "study of economics as if people mattered" Small is Beautiful and Ivan Illich's response to technomania Tools for Conviviality. What a Soviet audience made of all this (between the jamming) is anyone's guess; but it certainly made me think - and try to change my way of life.

My aim was greater self-reliance, less impact on an environment threatened by pollution, resource depletion and climate change. I sold my car and came to work by bicycle. I took on an allotment and tried to grow carrots in the office window box. I made my own clothes. I even tried my hand at breadmaking and found fulfilment in the first four loaves made with wheat grown, harvested, threshed and milled by the power of my own hands. An attempt at rye bread for a Russian Service party led to colleagues placing regular orders. They would tear the loaves open and bury their noses in the doughy cleavage of Mother Russia. Were those tears of bread-born nostalgia starting in emigré eyes? Could it be that bread mattered that much? Of course it could - as I remembered from my own experience.

Something had to give and eventually the lure of a peasant life overcame the satisfaction of trying to tell the truth to those denied it. I found a plot of land in Cumbria and responded to a chance remark by the owner of a restored watermill that it would be good if someone could start a bakery nearby. That bread again! I had few marketable skills (given the limited demand for Russian linguists in rural Britain), but I could bake a tolerable loaf, so I decided to have a go. The idea was to bake a few loaves each morning to pay the mortgage, spend the heat of the day growing vegetables and raising animals and then in the evening, body pleasantly weary but mind alert, put my feet up and read...yes, Tolstoy.

It wasn't like that, of course. The baking demanded more time each day and the peasant life, if not exactly dulling the wits, certainly induced such regular exhaustion that by evening I was beyond Karenina. But in general, life was good. I planted an orchard,

fruit bushes and trees by the hundred. My wife produced four children and developed a successful restaurant alongside the bakery.

Nearly 15 years on, a Russian actor (brother of a former BBC colleague) came to stay and invited me back to Kostroma. I justified the trip by proposing to research Russian breadmaking - but really I just wanted to see how the place had changed. I had reckoned without the actor's assiduous preparations. Everywhere I went during two wonderful weeks in Kostroma in February 1990, I was given bread, often specially baked to traditional recipes by country grandmothers. Even in OVIR (the visa office) my passport was handed back to me by a smiling officer complete with a neatly typed bread recipe. I wasn't sure which was more surprising - the smile or the samizdat.

The highlight of the trip was a weekend spent in the village of Teterinskoye about 20 miles from Kostroma. A member of the church congregation, Nina, generously invited me back to her wooden hut to make real rye bread. As it fermented in the gentle glow of the wood fire I fulfilled an ambition conceived during those first momentous student encounters with Pushkin, Lermontov, Turgenev, and Chekhov - to sleep on the pechka, heart and hearth of Russian village life. It was one of the most uncomfortable nights of my life. The stifling heat from the oven below and the constant attentions of Nina's three cats (who proved that their country's reputation for hospitality does not cross the species barrier), prevented sleep almost as much as the thought that Nina's pensioner husband might return from the drinking-bout which she suspected accounted for his absence, only to cleave me in two with a hatchet - and all for a loaf of bread?

The bread we baked in the morning was, of course, memorable, as was Nina's remarkable open-hearted account of life in the Russian village under Stalin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev and finally Gorbachev. Glasnost, it seemed, had not been slow to reach Teterinskoye - or was it just that two such different fates were briefly united by a simple respect for bread?

I came home with memories, recipes and, thanks to the kindness of the chief engineer and director of Bread Factory No 2 in Kostroma, a small piece of sourdough. Carefully refreshed with rye flour and water at various stages of its journey to Cumbria, it played mother to the many thousands of sourdough rye loaves which I subsequently made.

The story of my Russian forays got out and soon supermarket buyers were showing interest. "Russian Rye Bread" was launched with some success. The BBC asked me to participate in a Moscow broadcast for aspiring business people. Uneasy at the assumption that Western economics had all the answers, I produced a loaf of my Russian Rye Bread to a roar of approval from an audience starved of self-belief. At the reception afterwards I sat next to Natasha, owner of a Moscow bakery. We talked. She came to England, saw my artisan bakery with its wood-fired ovens and asked me to help her do something similar in a small town 200 miles East of Moscow. When Natasha's village bakery was finished (complete with wood-fired oven and equipment from England), I went to begin production, bearing with me a piece of rye sourdough...

On that same trip in 1996 I heard the colourful and no doubt apocryphal story of how Borodinsky bread came by its name - at the hands of a general's wife who inspired the troops before the battle of Borodino by baking special loaves perfumed with native coriander.

It seems to me that culinary sophistication is not simply a result of over-abundance and the need to tickle jaded palates; it may even be symptomatic of an alienation from the essence of food, its spiritual purpose. Some sense of this survives in the Russian attitude to bread, which stands as a symbol of all nourishment. Whether it will hold out against the forces of Westernization is an intriguing question but one hopes that Russia finds the confidence to remain true to one of its defining traditions - *khlyeb-sol'*, hospitality.

In innumerable Russian kitchens, where open-ended meals of bread and *zakuski*⁴ accompany open-hearted discussions about the meaning of life, where opinions are offered as freely and ceremoniously as the 'little water' (vodka) that stimulates both appetite and rhetoric, I have understood that what to some may seem a gastronomic irrelevance is in fact a key to Russian manners and Russian hearts.

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⁴ Hors d'oeuvres of salt fish, pickled cucumbers, salads etc.