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RUSSOPHONE IMMIGRANT FOODWAYS AS MARKERS OF CULTURAL ADAPTATION AND HYBRID IDENTITIES

Abstract

In social media, Russophone immigrants in different countries discuss their favourite foods for New Year, their fusion recipes and the psychological functions of the traditional festive dishes which they cook when they are away from home. These discussions reveal that food is a powerful trigger of predominantly positive nostalgia.

Introduction

The critical importance[1] of the senses for ethnographic and cultural studies was emphasised by Edward T. Hall who remarked that people from different cultures do not just speak different languages but 'inhabit different sensory worlds'.[2] Indeed, these differences are strongly represented in sensory metaphors. Every linguo-culture has its own sensory metaphors related to taste which are used to convey meaning through evocative sensory referents.[3] The Russian language shares some of these sensory metaphors with other linguo-cultures. These are biblical metaphors, such as 'salt of the Earth' (Matthew 5:13), and 'sweet' as the marker of things that make one happy and satisfied, and, conversely, 'bitter' as the marker of unhappiness, disappointment and even anger or hatred. On the other hand, Russian has its own expressions which extend perceptions of taste to other realms – e.g., the verb *nasladit'sia* ('to delight in something') is derived from *sladkii* 'sweet', *kisnut'* ('to

1 Reference to this study: Ekaterina Protassova, Maria Yelenevskaya: Russophone Immigrant Foodways as Markers of Cultural Adaptation and Hybrid Identities. In Anikó Báti and Patricia Lysaght (eds.): *Living Eating Habits, Revitalized Foodways and the Concepts of Tradition and Food Heritage*. Budapest: ELTE RCH Institute of Ethnology – Museum of Ethnography, 2025. pp. 385–397. DOI: https://doi.org/10.61380/978-963-567-084-0-24

2 Hall, Edward T.: *The Hidden Dimension* (New York: Dobleday, 1966).

3 Classen, Constance: 'Foundations for an anthropology of the senses', *International Social Science Journal* 49/153 (1997), 401–412.

sour') means to be sad, gloomy and passive, and *peresolit'* ('to use too much salt') denotes 'overdoing something', while *nasolit' komu-to* ('to treat someone to salt') means to 'spite or to do a bad turn to someone'. The phraseological unit *ne solono khlebavshi* ('without gulping any salt') emerged in the period when salt was expensive and difficult to get in Russia and it is used when one talks about futile efforts or failures to achieve a goal. The saying *nedosol na stole, peresol na spine* ('not enough salt on the table leads to too much salt on the back') implies that excessive economy may be punished. 'Salty' jokes, stories, maxims, and so on, denote something which is witty while being indecent or politically incorrect. The adjective *gor'kii* 'bitter' combines with nouns, such as, for example, 'fate', 'grief', 'irony', 'defeat', 'separation', 'loss', 'disappointment', 'remorse', 'experience', or 'reproach' to denote unhappiness. Finally, *naest'sia* means not only to eat enough, to be full, but also to be fed up with something unpleasant. These, and other sensory metaphors, are widely used in informal Russian-language and media discourse. Interestingly, with the exception of 'bitter', most other sensory metaphors related to taste do not have stable value sememes and may have either positive or negative connotations.

Moreover, there is a large corpus of metaphors in the Russian language that make use of the names of different foods. The dictionary of Russian food metaphors shows that those foods that have been staples of Russian cuisine for centuries, are particularly rich in producing symbolic meanings. A case in point is *kasha*, a cereal cooked in water or milk, that has produced three stable language metaphors – heavy and dirty wet snow, confusion of ideas, facts and events, and turmoil in a military or political situation. The noun is also used in various phraseological phrases, such as *kasha v golove* ('cereal in the head'), referencing an inability to sort out knowledge to find useful information; *zavarit' kashu* ('to start cooking cereal'), meaning to start a difficult project without hopes of success; *kasha vo rtu* ('cereal in the mouth'), referring to unclear and incomprehensible speech; *kasha vo rtu stynet* ('cereal gets cold in the mouth'), about a slow and dim person; *(s nim) kashi ne svarish'* ('you cannot cook cereal with him'), meaning that you cannot reach an agreement or have a joint project with him; and *malo kashi el* ('he didn't eat enough cereal'), referring to a physically weak person.[4]

Notably, these metaphors are used by residents of Russia and by Russophone immigrants in the diaspora. In our sample of texts, immigrants' conversations about

4 Yurina, Elena and Borovkova, Anastasia: 'Precedent figurative words and expressions in the dictionary of Russian food metaphors', *Journal of Lexicography* 1/7 (2015), 36–51.

their food nostalgia are interspersed with food idioms and sayings, such as: *gde kasha, tam i nashi* ('you'll find ours where cereals are'), *shchi da kasha pishcha nasha* ('cabbage soup and cereals are our foods'), and *kashu maslom ne isportish'* ('you won't spoil a cereal by adding butter'). Such phrases have cultural connotations beyond their literal meanings, reflecting the traditional significance attached to food.

These, and other examples, confirm that taste is inseparable from smell, touch, vision and hearing; in other words, that all of these senses interact with each other and can be cognitively and psychologically unified.[5] Moreover, food is related to intellectual and emotional spheres of human life, and food metaphors help us to make sense of the environment and to make value judgments: "[…] the senses are far from innocent; they are a situated practice that can shed light on the way bodies experience different spaces of culture".[6]

In this paper, we explore food traditions of New Year celebrations and discuss attitudes towards some popular dishes commonly found in Russian-speaking emigrant communities. Online ethnography applies ethnographic principles to digital settings, evolving since the 1990s to study virtual, hybrid, or cross-cultural communities across disciplines, using richly contextualised, interpretive approaches to explore technology-mediated cultures.[7] It should be borne in mind, however, that traditional recipes often have to incorporate local ingredients and tastes while striving to maintain the essence of nostalgic flavours and cooking methods. Cooking these dishes at home helps to pass family traditions down to the younger generations in emigrant communities.

Russophone New Year food celebrations and *Olivier* salad

Usually before Christmas and New Year, Russophone diasporans discuss in face-to-face conversations and on different internet platforms, where to buy their traditional festive foods – proper herring and pickled cucumbers, cold cuts and caviar and what is used for the filling of the *pirozhki.* Can one find them in local grocery stores, or

5 Auvray, Malika and Spence, Charles: 'The multisensory perception of flavor', *Consciousness and Cognition* 17/3 (2008), 1016–1031.

6 Law, Lisa: 'Home cooking: Fillipino women and geographies of the senses in Hong Kong', *Ecumene* 8/3 (2001), 266.

7 Dawson, Catherine: *A-Z of Digital Research Methods* (London: Routledge, 2019), 248–254.

does one have to go to Russian/Latvian/Estonian shops importing foods from the post-Soviet space. On 23 December 2023, food blogger, Gulnara Galeeva, a Moscow native living in Antibes, France, wrote a text entitled, 'Longing for *Olivier* Salad' (quoted here with the author's permission). She claimed that:

> in emigration, nostalgia for simple childhood things intensifies. Tell me, who would dream of salted mackerel, 'herring under a fur coat' [*shuba* salad][8] or *Olivier* salad, if living in Moscow? Tap a few buttons on an app, and within half an hour, a courier is at your door with a plastic container of any salad, thoughtfully packed with napkins and disposable utensils.[9]

In Antibes where she settled, Galeeva faced a plethora of choices at the chilled 'Russian' supermarket displays and deli section, where variations of familiar dishes, crafted by diligent entrepreneurs, filled the shelves. Options ranged from vegan to halal, hypoallergenic to 100% natural, with or without mayonnaise, and featuring diverse foods such as sausages labelled 'approved by the state', *Antonovka* apples, shrimps, farm chicken, boiled tongue, salmon, freshly caught tuna, pomegranates, and delicately boiled eggs from free-range hens. Confronted with such a dizzying variety of foods, and while checking expiration dates, her tired brain often defaulted to autopilot. Returning home from a supermarket dairy section with *ryazhenka* (a traditional fermented milk product), cottage cheese, and butter, she occasionally realised that she had forgotten to buy a salad. The convenience of pre-cooked options – which others had meticulously prepared and seasoned, and with every 100 grams priced at just 1 euro – sometimes overshadowed the appeal of the homemade. During the festive season, visits to friends or relatives in Russian cities usually meant being treated to various appetisers called salads, aspic, pies and stuffed poultry, with leftovers packaged for the guests to take home. This tradition of hospitality was not abandoned after migration. Delis stocked traditional treats such as honey cake, cookies with condensed milk, pastries in the shape of potatoes made of biscuits crushed into crumbs and mixed with chocolate or cocoa and butter, *syrniki* (curd fritters), and grandma's pies, while thoughtful colleagues often shared their own homemade delights. Despite having spent a decade away from Moscow, Galeeva had never prepared traditional New Year dishes herself, as they were always readily available from Russophone émigré caterers. In general terms, however, living in France presented a different culinary adventure involving the seeking out of foods

8 'Herring under a fur coat', also known as *shuba*, is a traditional Russian appetiser made of layers of herring, vegetables, egg, and mayonnaise.

9 This and the following excerpts from internet posts were translated by the authors.

reminiscent of home – perfect herring and raw beets in neighboring towns, splurging on familiar gingerbread, and hunting for cucumbers evocative of her childhood.

Summers in France posed other challenges – like finding radishes for *okroshka* – a cold soup in which *kvas*, a bread-based fermented drink, is added to a mixture of boiled meat and potatoes, hard-boiled eggs, cucumbers, spring onions, dill and parsley – or dealing with disappointing locally-grown cucumbers, which led her to grow her own on the terrace. Being in France ensured that there was no shortage of eggs, though selecting the right boiled sausage required careful deliberation and considerable expense. Her children began to favour sausage purchased for omelettes over ham and prosciutto, while she still searched for her ideal yogurt and even invested in a soda machine for sparkling water. The absence of smoked mackerel prompted her to craft an *Olivier* salad. Gathering tender peas, reliable sausage, and pickles marinated according to her mother's recipe, she added walnuts and a tangy Canadian apple, resulting in a dish devoured eagerly by her children. Despite planning a feast with a young farm rooster stuffed with Corsican oranges, she served a generous portion of nougat and raspberry ice cream which unexpectedly stole the show.

Galeeva's post received 1.5k likes and 719 comments. Russophone diasporans from all over the world compared the names they applied to similar dishes and ingredients that they could buy in their local shops, and the poor or successful recipe replacements which they made. Modifications of traditional recipes were proposed, e.g.:

> This year, I made a healthier version of *Olivier* salad, using duck and avoiding any pro-inflammatory ingredients. The recipe included boiled duck, fermented or pickled cucumbers (but not in vinegar), sweet potato, chicken eggs (or quail eggs for those with autoimmune issues), avocado, onions, green peas (without added sugar), and optionally, boiled carrots. For the dressing, I used mayonnaise made from purified butter. My husband said it was the best he'd ever had, and judging by how quickly the bowl was emptied in two sittings, I believe him![10]

In relation to *Olivier* salad, there are people who question the right to call anything *Olivier*, other than what was traditionally prepared. As always, there are those who matter-of-factly remind the audience of the pre-1917 (pre-Bolshevik revolution) classic recipe; but this implied reproach remains ignored. The assortment of foods

10 Although these excerpts appeared in public groups, we anonymise their authors and do not provide any demographic data in order to make them unrecognisable.

in the 'Russian' shops is praised. Most discussions are centred around the sort of meat to use, and how to cook it; how to make, or where to get, the best mayonnaise, and whether or not to include an apple in *Olivier* salad. Participant A mentioned that although they had the option of including quail and crab in a traditional *Olivier* salad, the emotional memory of childhood is strong. While her husband, who is a chef, will prepare a culinary masterpiece with aspic, caviar, and quail for the guests, she will be happy with the Soviet sausage version. For her, the taste is tied to emotional memories rather than to just flavour. Participant B agreed with these sentiments but expressed a personal dislike for calling the salad with sausage *Olivier*, while the version with meat is part of her childhood memory. Commentator C observed that historically, society was divided into those who used sausage and those who used beef or chicken in *Olivier*, hinting at a subtle snobbery from the Soviet past. Nowadays, anyone can afford any version of the salad, as there are no longer food shortages, but there is a scarcity of simplicity, warmth, and tolerance of different tastes. D shared her experience of living in rural Mexico, with limited product-variety, for four years, and of how they miss simple foods from home that are unavailable there. They made *Olivier* once but did not repeat the adventure; instead, they rediscovered 'herring under a fur coat' – ***shuba*** salad. Without access to herring, they used canned tuna and found it even tastier. Nowadays, they roast vegetables in foil instead of boiling them, which enhances the flavour, and they make their own mayonnaise – thus relying on creativity and local ingredients to make delicious dishes.

Emotional and nostalgic sides of food preparation and reminiscences from childhood ('my mother/grandmother has done it this way, that is why I like it') are frequently displayed online. One participant asks how *Olivier* is made, which triggers a storm because other participants cannot believe one could be so inexperienced:

> My husband is asking for (demanding!) *Olivier* salad. I have never made it in my life. For me, it's like climbing Everest. And I need to choose the right sausage too. My husband wants to stand and chop all the ingredients together! With 'The Irony of Fate' [a cult love story movie by Ryazanov], playing in the background. He wants to experience the happiness of [us] cooking together and then eating together. I've never made *Olivier* salad. I don't even know which cucumbers, sausages, and peas to use. My husband's friends are very suspicious of me, calling me a 'Western plant'. There are many things I don't know, I haven't tried, or seen. I didn't even know what 'herring under a fur coat' was, or had ever tried it. My husband scratched his head and gave me a pass on the herring, but he's adamant about *Olivier*! 'In what part of the USSR did you grow up not to inherit love for mayonnaise salads? Moldova, perhaps?' Well [...] I don't know

> what to say: either it's nostalgia or old age setting in. And the main thing is, we are in Spain right now, there's so much delicious Spanish food to enjoy!

Participants from Moldova protested that she must be joking about Moldova, because here, everyone always made, and still makes *Olivier*, they said, as well as 'herring under a fur coat', Mimosa salad, and so on, and these dishes have spread to Romania, where they were previously unknown. Traditionally, mayonnaise was not common in Moldavian cuisine, but it adopted trends from Ukrainian, Russian, and Jewish cuisines. E writes: 'We have been living in Europe for 20 years, but we don't change our traditions. Our menu is Georgian.'

In the blog entitled 'Russophone France', posts claim that French people like everything that is not mass-produced but rather cooked 'by hand'. F was fed up hearing praise of old Soviet food habits. She is convinced that if you move to another country, you should embrace its cuisine and traditions. She has been living in France for 30 years, and on the New Year's Eve, her family and friends have champagne and oysters, along with some other delicacies. The festive dinner is usually from 8.00 p.m. to 9.00 p.m., and then everyone goes to bars to dance and drink, having a great time. She admonishes group members to 'finally learn to live in a civilised manner'. Some participants agree with her, but G finds it strange that someone who is clearly 'uncivilised' should presume to teach others how to become civilised instead of learning the French culture of polite communication. Other participants ask rhetorical questions: ['Why] get rid of childhood memories?' ['Why] abandon your traditions?' 'Are you seriously considering depriving yourself of such pleasure?' 'Why get rid of things you love?'

In a multilingual and multicultural world, this is similar to the question often asked by Russian-speaking parents: 'How do you handle the issue of Santa (or his equivalent) and the Russian *Ded Moroz* ('Grandfather Frost')?' Specifically, when, and by whom, are the gifts brought and how do you explain this to your children? Parents with small children usually talk about *Ded Moroz*, read books, and attend holiday parties. Yet, customs differ in bi-ethnic and monoethnic families. In these, they may also serve different dishes for Christmas following local traditions but then cook other dishes, in the Soviet tradition, for a New Year feast.

Fig. 1. A shop in Varna, Bulgaria (2024). Traditional post-Soviet salads and other dishes. (Photo by the authors)

Russophones' passion for buckwheat

On the Russian segment of the internet, discussions as to which foods Russian émigrés miss most, are to be found. Almost all of them mention buckwheat. Historically, buckwheat was cultivated in different parts of the Russian empire, including Altay and Siberia. The proverb *grechnevaia kasha – matushka nasha, a khlebets rzhanoi – otec nash rodnoi* ('buckwheat is our dear mother, and rye bread is our own father') suggests that it was one of the staple foods of the people. In Soviet times, buckwheat cultivation endured periods of both good and bad luck – the latter, when zigzags in agricultural policy drastically reduced the lands allocated to the growing of buckwheat by replacing it with other plants, thereby eventually causing it to be added to the list of foods in short supply. In many areas of the Soviet Union, in the late 1970s and in the 1980s, buckwheat was freely available only for people suffering from diabetes. Others considered themselves lucky if they managed to buy this cereal after queueing for its purchase. It is noteworthy that, at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, when people were afraid that there would be food shortages, buckwheat was among the first foods to be sold out.[11] While in the past, the popularity of buckwheat was explained by it being undemanding in terms of its cultivation (it does not require rich soils or fertilising), and it was inexpensive, today's people rate it highly for its nutritional value.

Discussions focusing on the best ways to cook buckwheat and suggestions about how to serve it, illustrate its popularity among the Russophone diaspora. We find many different recipes in blogs and in online culinary forums in this connection. Someone even started a Facebook community entitled *Grechnevaya kasha* ('Buckwheat porridge'). We will now analyse two Facebook discussions about buckwheat that appeared in a public group whose members post their favourite recipes, exchange cooking tips, and ask top contributors for culinary advice. The first discussion followed a post in which a participant described her way of cooking buckwheat. All the commentators mention that they love buckwheat. Some agree that the posted recipe is reliable, but others suggest modifications, including preparing buckwheat without thermal processing, by just soaking it in hot water. In describing the process of preparation, some mention that when the water evaporates, they wrap the pot containing the buckwheat in newspapers, and then put it under pillows or blankets to keep it warm for several hours. Nobody is shocked by such a

11 Lokalov, Artiom: 'Do you like buckwheat? I love it!' *Rodina* <https://rodina-history.ru/2020/03/26/pochemu-grechka-byla-i-ostaetsia-glavnoj-antikrizisnoj-krupoj-na-rusi.html> accessed 26 October 2024.

peculiar utilisation of the public press, and one of the users of such a method even remarks that it is the only reason why she keeps newspapers in the house. Some commentators refer to recipes 'tested for years, passed from generation to generation', and some mention that they cook buckwheat exactly like their mothers, fathers and grandmothers, did. Clearly, it is important for these commentators to continue family traditions even when they are far from their mother country. In the description of the results of cooking buckwheat, we find characteristics, such as 'beautiful', 'velvety' and 'with creamy taste', 'soft and tender', and 'fluffy', mentioned – all of them pointing to a positive evaluation of the dish.

The second discussion thread we chose for analysis started with a provocative question: 'Can buckwheat be tasty? What is the secret?' Indeed, a few commentators said they did not like buckwheat. One participant claims that 'to make buckwheat tasty, you have to have eaten it since childhood'. Some say that they like it only with milk and sugar, while others agree that they eat it only in combination with stewed vegetables, or with meat and vegetables or by adding onions and mushrooms to it. But most of the discussants are buckwheat enthusiasts: "Buckwheat is always tasty!"; "It cannot fail to be tasty"; "It's my favourite cereal!!!'; 'It is tasty even without any additions'; 'Boiled buckwheat with butter, one can eat it even at night'. Moreover, some claim they would be happy to eat it every day.

Some commentators describe their innovations, such as mixing buckwheat with other cereals, or with fish, making it the basis of a cold appetiser with vegetables, or with dried fruit and cranberries. Some say that they replace rice with buckwheat to make *pilaf* or use buckwheat instead of pasta in the dish known as *makarony po-flotski* ('navy style pasta'). When a suggested modification of the traditional dish sounds appealing, commentators express their surprise: 'Imagine this! I would never invent such a thing! I'll try [it]!", or they ask for a more detailed description alluding to a formula of a TV 'Brain Ring': 'Recipe to the studio' please', which has become a speech cliché. Only one commentator expresses her disapproval of a recipe violating the 'canon' by saying that it caused a 'cultural shock'.

Several participants draw attention of the discussants to the health benefits of buckwheat and its value for weight-watchers – "for those who follow healthy nutritional rules, it's simply a treasure". In this discussion thread, there are also references to the recipes learned from parents and grandparents, and which are viewed as family traditions to be valued and preserved. There is also a nostalgic allusion to the past: "Since my childhood, I've loved buckwheat with butter and milk

sausages (a brand of sausages made from boiled beef and pork and mixed with eggs and milk), like those they sold in the USSR[12]." Another participant responds ironically: "It is still very tasty today, even after the USSR, happily, collapsed."

In describing their love for buckwheat, some participants are emotional, and use: 'love' and 'adore', in this context. "When I first found buckwheat here, I was as happy as a child," says one participant. And another one exclaims, *Grechka forever!* ('Buckwheat forever!') We also see the idiomatic expressions, *menia za ushi ne ottaschish'* – literally, 'one cannot tear me away from this food even by pulling me by my ears' – which implies that some food is irresistible, and *otpad bashki* ('jaw dropping') with a similar inference. Finally, to express their emotions, participants also use multiple exclamation marks.

Conclusion

In Russophone diaspora communities, holiday meals, and particularly the iconic *Olivier* salad, serve as emotional touchstones that connect émigrés to cherished traditions and childhood memories. Conversations among diaspora members highlight the careful sourcing of ingredients, creative substitutions, and nostalgia-fuelled modifications, underscoring the central role of familiar dishes in maintaining cultural continuity. Despite an array of culinary options in their host countries, many immigrants still yearn for the flavours and customs of their homeland. This longing also extends to other Russian staples, such as buckwheat, the preparation and presentation of which reflect deep-seated family traditions and cultural pride. Through these discussions, diasporic communities not only share culinary tips but also reinforce a collective identity. While some advocate for integration into local customs, others see retaining these traditions as essential, with recipes often modified to suit individual preferences or local availability, blending memories of the past with the realities of the present.

12 USSR: The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (The Soviet Union), 1922–1991. <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=ussr> accessed 26 November 2024.

Fig. 2. A shop in Budapest, Hungary (2024). Sunflower seeds and buckwheat from Ukraine, Russia and Germany. (Photo by the authors)

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