

CHAPTER ONE



1910s: THE LAST DAYS OF THE CZARS

My mother is expecting guests.

In just a few hours in this sweltering July heat wave, eight people will show up for an extravagant czarist-era dinner at her small Queens apartment. But her kitchen resembles a building site. Pots tower and teeter in the sink; the food processor and blender drone on in unison. In a shiny bowl on Mom's green faux-granite counter, a porous blob of yeast dough seems weirdly alive. I'm pretty sure it's breathing. Unfazed, Mother simultaneously blends, sautés, keeps an eye on Chris Matthews on MSNBC, and chatters away on her cordless phone. At this moment she suggests a plump modern-day elf, multitasking away in her orange Indian housedress.

Ever since I can remember, my mother has cooked like this, phone tucked under her chin. Of course, back in Brezhnev's Moscow in the seventies when I was a kid, the idea of an "extravagant czarist dinner" would have provoked sardonic laughter. And the cord of our antediluvian black Soviet *telefon* was so traitorously twisted, I once tripped on it while carrying a platter of Mom's lamb pilaf to the low three-legged table in the cluttered space where my parents did their living, sleeping, and entertaining.

Right now, as one of Mom's ancient émigré friends fills her ear with cultural gossip, that pilaf episode returns to me in cinematic slow motion. Masses of yellow rice cascade onto our Armenian carpet. Biddy,

Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking

my two-month-old puppy, greedily laps up every grain, her eyes and tongue swelling shockingly in an instant allergic reaction to lamb fat. I howl, fearing for Biddy's life. My father berates Mom for her phone habits.

Mom managed to rescue the disaster with her usual flair, dotty and determined. By the time guests arrived—with an extra four non-sober comrades—she'd conjured up a tasty fantasia from two pounds of the proletarian wurst called *sosiski*. These she'd cut into petal-like shapes, splayed in a skillet, and fried up with eggs. Her creation landed at table under provocative blood-red squiggles of ketchup, that decadent capitalist condiment. For dessert: Mom's equally spontaneous apple cake. "Guest-at-the-doorstep apple charlotte," she dubbed it.

Guests! They never stopped crowding Mom's doorstep, whether at our apartment in the center of Moscow or at the boxy immigrant dwelling in Philadelphia where she and I landed in 1974. Guests overrun her current home in New York, squatting for weeks, eating her out of the house, borrowing money and books. Every so often I Google "compulsive hospitality syndrome." But there's no cure. Not for Mom the old Russian adage "An uninvited guest is worse than an invading Tatar." Her parents' house was just like this, her sister's even more so.

Tonight's dinner, however, is different. It will mark our archival adieu to classic Russian cuisine. For such an important occasion Mom has agreed to keep the invitees to just eight after I slyly quoted a line from a Roman scholar and satirist: "The number of dinner guests should be more than the Graces and less than the Muses." Mom's quasi-religious respect for culture trumps even her passion for guests. Who is she to disagree with the ancients?

And so, on this diabolically torrid late afternoon in Queens, the two of us are sweating over a decadent feast set in the imagined 1910s—Russia's Silver Age, artistically speaking. The evening will mark our hail and farewell to a grandiose decade of Moscow gastronomy. To a food culture that flourished at the start of the twentieth century and disappeared abruptly when the 1917 revolution transformed Russian cuisine and culture into *Soviet* cuisine and culture—the only version we knew.

Mom and I have not taken the occasion lightly.

The horseradish and lemon vodkas that I've been steeping for days are chilling in their cut-crystal carafes. The caviar glistens. We've even gone to the absurd trouble of brewing our own kvass, a folkloric beverage from fermented black bread that's these days mostly just mass-produced fizz. Who knows? Besides communing with our ancestral stomachs, this might be our last chance on this culinary journey to eat *really well*.

"The burbot liver—*what* to do about the burbot liver?" Mom laments, finally off the phone.

Noticing how poignantly scratched her knuckles are from assorted gratings, I reply, for the umpteenth time, that burbot, noble member of the freshwater cod family so fetishized by pre-revolutionary Russian gourmands, is nowhere to be had in Jackson Heights, Queens. Frustrated sighing. As always, my pragmatism interferes with Mom's dreaming and scheming. And let's not even mention *vizíga*, the desiccated dorsal cord of a sturgeon. Burbot liver was the czarist foie gras, *vizíga* its shark's fin. Chances of finding either in any zip code hereabouts? Not slim—none.

But still, we've made progress.

Several test runs for crispy brains in brown butter have yielded smashing results. And despite the state of Mom's kitchen, and the homey, crepuscular clutter of her book-laden apartment, her dining table is a thing of great beauty. Crystal goblets preen on the floral, antique-looking tablecloth. Pale blue hydrangeas in an art nouveau pitcher I found at a flea market in Buenos Aires bestow a subtle fin-de-siècle opulence.

I unpack the cargo of plastic containers and bottles I've lugged over from my house two blocks away. Since Mom's galley kitchen is far too small for two cooks, much smaller than an aristocrat's broom closet, I've already brewed the kvass and prepared the trimmings for an anachronistic chilled fish and greens soup called *botvinya*. I was also designated steeper of vodkas and executer of Guriev kasha, a dessert loaded with deep historical meaning and a whole pound of home-candied nuts. Mom has taken charge of the main course and the array of *zakuski*, or appetizers.

Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking

A look at the clock and she gasps. “The *kulebiaka* dough! Check it!”

I check it. Still rising, still bubbling. I give it a bang to deflate—and the tang of fermenting yeast tickles my nostrils, evoking a fleeting collective memory. Or a memory of a received memory. I pinch off a piece of dough and hand it to Mom to assess. She gives me a shrug as if to say, “*You’re* the cookbook writer.”

But I’m glad I let her take charge of the *kulebiaka*. This extravagant Russian fish pie, this history lesson in a pastry case, will be the *pièce de résistance* of our banquet tonight.



“The *kulebiaka* must make your mouth water, it must lie before you, naked, shameless, a temptation. You wink at it, you cut off a sizeable slice, and you let your fingers just play over it. . . . You eat it, the butter drips from it like tears, and the filling is fat, juicy, rich with eggs, giblets, onions . . .”

So waxed Anton Pavlovich Chekhov in his little fiction “The Siren,” which Mom and I have been salivating over during our preparations, just as we first did back in our unglorious socialist pasts. It wasn’t only us Soviet-born who fixated on food. Chekhov’s satiric encomium to outsize Slavic appetite is a lover’s rapturous fantasy. Sometimes it seems that for nineteenth-century Russian writers, food was what landscape (or maybe class?) was for the English. Or war for the Germans, love for the French—a subject encompassing the great themes of comedy, tragedy, ecstasy, and doom. Or perhaps, as the contemporary author Tatyana Tolstaya suggests, the “orgiastic gorging” of Russian authors was a compensation for literary taboos on eroticism. One must note, too, alas, Russian writers’ peculiarly *Russian* propensity for moralizing. Rosy hams, amber fish broths, blini as plump as “the shoulder of a merchant’s daughter” (Chekhov again), such literary deliciousness often serves an ulterior agenda of exposing gluttons as spiritually bankrupt philistines—or lethargic losers such as the alpha glutton Oblomov. Is this a moral trap? I keep asking myself. Are we enticed to salivate at these lines so we’ll end up feeling guilty?

But it's hard not to salivate. Chekhov, Pushkin, Tolstoy—they all devote some of their most fetching pages to the gastronomical. As for Mom's beloved Nikolai Gogol, the author of *Dead Souls* anointed the stomach the body's "most noble" organ. Besotted with eating both on and off the page—sour cherry dumplings from his Ukrainian childhood, pastas from his sojourns in Rome—scrawny Gogol could polish off a gargantuan dinner and start right in again. While traveling he sometimes even churned his own butter. "The belly is the belle of his stories, the nose is their beau," declared Nabokov. In 1852, just short of his forty-third birthday, in the throes of religious mania and gastrointestinal torments, Nikolai Vasilievich committed a slow suicide rich in Gogolian irony: *he refused to eat*. Yes, a complicated, even tortured, relationship with food has long been a hallmark of our national character.

According to one scholarly count, no less than eighty-six kinds of edibles appear in *Dead Souls*, Gogol's chronicle of a grifter's circuit from dinner to dinner in the vast Russian countryside. Despairing over not being able to scale the heights of the novel's first volume, poor wretched Gogol burned most of the second. What survives includes the most famous literary ode to kulebiaka—replete with a virtual recipe.

"Make a four-cornered kulebiaka," instructs Petukh, a spiritually bankrupt glutton who made it through the flames. And then:

"In one corner put the cheeks and dried spine of a sturgeon, in another put some buckwheat, and some mushrooms and onion, and some soft fish roe, and brains, and something else as well. . . . As for the underneath . . . see that it's baked so that it's quite . . . well not done to the point of crumbling but so that it will melt in the mouth like snow and not make any crunching sound.

Petukh smacked his lips as he spoke."

Generations of Russians have smacked their own lips at this passage. Historians, though, suspect that this chimerical "four-cornered" kulebiaka might have been a Gogolian fiction. So what then of the genuine article, which is normally oblong and layered?

To telescope quickly: kulebiaka descends from the archaic Slavic *pírog* (filled pie). Humbly born, they say, in the 1600s, it had by its

Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking

turn-of-the-twentieth-century heyday evolved into a regal golden-brown case fancifully decorated with cut-out designs. Concealed within: aromatic layers of fish and *vizíga*, a cornucopia of forest-picked mushrooms, and butter-splashed buckwheat or rice, all the tiers separated by thin crepes called *blinchiki*—to soak up the juices.

Mom and I argued over every other dish on our menu. But on this we agreed: without kulebiaka, there could be no proper Silver Age Moscow repast.



When my mother, Larisa (Lara, Laročka) Frumkina—Frumkin in English—was growing up in the 1930s high Stalinist Moscow, the idea of a decadent czarist-era banquet constituted exactly what it would in the Brezhnevian seventies: laughable blue cheese from the moon. Sosiski were Mom's favorite food. I was hooked on them too, though Mom claims that the sosiski of my childhood couldn't hold a candle to the juicy Stalinist article. Why do these proletarian franks remain the madeleine of every *Homo sovieticus*? Because besides sosiski with canned peas and *kotletí* (minced meat patties) with kasha, cabbage-intensive soups, mayo-laden salads, and watery fruit *kompot* for dessert—there wasn't all that much to eat in the Land of the Soviets.

Unless, of course, you were privileged. In our joyous classless society, this all-important matter of privilege has nagged at me since my early childhood.

I first glimpsed—or rather *heard*—the world of privileged food consumption during my first three years of life, at the grotesque communal Moscow apartment into which I was born in 1963. The apartment sat so close to the Kremlin, we could practically hear the midnight chimes of the giant clock on the Spassky Tower. There was another sound too, keeping us up: the roaring *BLARGHHH* of our neighbor Misha puking his guts out. Misha, you see, was a food store manager with a proprietary attitude toward the socialist food supply, likely a black market millionaire who shared our communal lair only for fear that flaunting his wealth would attract the unwanted attention of the anti-embezzlement

1910s: The Last Days of the Czars

authorities. Misha and Musya, his blond, big-bosomed wife, lived out a Mature Socialist version of bygone decadence. Night after night they dined out at Moscow's few proper restaurants (accessible to party big-wigs, foreigners, and comrades with illegal rubles), dropping the equivalent of Mom's monthly salary on meals that Misha couldn't even keep in his stomach.

When the pair stayed home, they ate unspeakable delicacies—batter-fried chicken tenders, for instance—prepared for them by the loving hands of Musya's mom, Baba Mila, she a blubbery former peasant with one eye, four—or was it six?—gold front teeth, and a healthy contempt for the nonprivileged.

"So, making kotleti today," Mila would say in the kitchen we all shared, fixing her monocular gaze on the misshapen patties in Mom's chipped aluminum skillet. "Muuuuusya!" she'd holler to her daughter. "Larisa's making kotleti!"

"Good appetite, Larochka!" (Musya was fond of my mom.)

"Muuusya! Would *you* eat kotleti?"

"Me? Never!"

"Aha! You see?" And Mila would wag a swollen finger at Mom.

One day my tiny underfed mom couldn't restrain herself. Back from work, tired and ravenous, she pilfered a chicken nugget from a tray Mila had left in the kitchen. The next day I watched as, red-faced and teary-eyed, she knocked on Misha's door to confess her theft.

"The chicken?" cackled Mila, and I still recall being struck by how her twenty-four-karat mouth glinted in the dim hall light. "Help yourself anytime—we *dump that shit anyway*."

And so it was that about once a week we got to eat shit destined for the economic criminal's garbage. To us, it tasted pretty ambrosial.

In 1970, into the eleventh year of their on-and-off marriage, my parents got back together after a four-year separation and we moved to an apartment in the Arbat. And kulebiaka entered my life. Here, in Moscow's most aristocratic old neighborhood, I was shooed out of the house to buy the pie in its Soviet incarnation at the take-out store attached to

Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking

Praga, a restaurant famed “before historical materialism” (that’s ironic Sovietese for “distant past”) for its plate-size *rasstegai* pies with two fillings: sturgeon and sterlet.

Even in the dog days of Brezhnev, Praga was fairly dripping with *klass*—a fancy *restoran* where Misha types groped peroxide blondes while a band blasted, and third-world diplomats hosted receptions in a series of ornate private rooms.

“Car of Angola’s ambassador to the door!”

This was music to my seven-year-old ears.

If I loitered outside Praga intently enough, if my young smile and “*Khello, khau yoo laik Moskou?*” were sufficiently charming, a friendly diplomat might toss me a five-pack of Juicy Fruit. The next day, in the girls’ bathroom, aided by ruler and penknife, I would sell off the gum, millimeter by millimeter, to favored classmates. Even a chewed-up blob of Juicy Fruit had some value, say a kopek or two, as long as you didn’t masticate more than five times, leaving some of that floral Wrigley magic for the next masticator to savor. Our teacher’s grave warnings that sharing capitalist gum causes syphilis only added to the illegal thrill of it all.

I loved everything about shopping at Praga. Loved skipping over the surges of brown melted snow and sawdust that comrade janitors gleefully swept right over the customers’ feet. Loved inhaling the signature scent of stale pork fat, *peregar* (hangover breath), and the sickly sweet top notes of Red Moscow perfume. Loved Tyotyа Grusha (Aunt Pear), Praga’s potato-nosed saleslady, clacking away on her abacus with savage force. Once, guided by some profound late socialist instinct, I shared with Grusha a five-pack of Juicy Fruit. She snatched it without even a thank-you, but from then on she always made sure to reserve a kulebiaka for me. “Here, you loudmouthed infection,” she’d say, also slipping me a slab of raisin-studded poundcake under the counter.

And this is how I came to appreciate the importance of black marketeering, *blat* (connections), and bribery. I was now inching my own way toward privilege.

Wearing shiny black rubber galoshes over my *valenki* (felt boots) and a coat made of “mouse fur” (in the words of my dad), I toted the *Pravda*-wrapped kulebiaka back to our family table, usually taking the

long way home—past onion-domed churches now serving as warehouses, past gracious cream and green neoclassical facades scrawled with the unprintable slang that Russians call *mat*. I felt like Moscow belonged to me on those walks; along its frozen streetscape I was a flaneur flush with illicit cash. On Kalinin Prospect, the modernist grand boulevard that dissected the old neighborhood, I'd pull off my mittens in the unbearable cold to count out twenty icy kopeks for the blue-coated lady with her frosty zinc ice cream box. It was almost violent, the shock of pain on my teeth as I sank them into the waffle cup of vanilla *plombir* with a cream rosette, its concrete-like hardness defying the flat wooden scooping spoon. Left of Praga, the Arbatskaya metro station rose, star-shaped and maroon and art deco, harboring its squad of clunky gray *gazirovka* (soda) machines. One kopek for unflavored; three kopeks for a squirt of aromatic thick yellow syrup. Scoring the soda: a matter of anxious uncertainty. Not because soda or syrup ran out, but because *alkogoliks* were forever stealing the twelve-sided beveled drinking glass—that Soviet domestic icon. If, miraculously, the drunks had left the glass behind, I thrilled in pressing it hard upside down on the machine's slatted tray to watch the powerful water jet rinse the glass of alcoholic saliva. Who even needed the soda?

Deeper into Old Arbat, at the Konservi store with its friezes of socialist fruit cornucopias, I'd pause for my ritual twelve-kopek glass of sugary birch-tree juice dispensed from conical vintage glass vats with spigots. Then, sucking on a dirty icicle, I'd just wander off on a whim, lost in a delta of narrow side streets that weaved and twisted like braids, each bearing a name of the trade it once supported: Tablecloth Lane, Bread Alley. Back then, before capitalism disfigured Moscow's old center with billboards and neons and antihistorical historicist mansions, some Arbat streets did retain a certain nineteenth-century purity.

At home I usually found Mom in the kitchen, big black receiver under her chin, cooking while discussing a new play or a book with a girlfriend. Dad struck a languid Oblomovian pose on the couch, playing cards with himself, sipping cold tea from his orange cup with white polka-dots.

"And how was your walk?" Mother always wanted to know. "Did

Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking

you remember to stop by the house on Povarskaya Street where Natasha from *War and Peace* lived?” At the mention of Tolstoy, the Juicy Fruit in my pocket would congeal into a guilty yellow lump on my conscience. Natasha Rostova and my mom—they were so poetic, so gullible. And I? What was I but a crass mini-Misha? Dad usually came to the rescue: “So, let’s have the kulebiaka. Or did Praga run out?” For *me*, I wanted to reply, Praga never runs out! But it seemed wise not to boast of my special *blat* with Aunt Grusha, the saleslady, in the presence of my sweet innocent mother.

Eating kulebiaka on Sundays was our nod to a family ritual—even if the pie I’d deposit on the kitchen table of our five-hundred-square-foot two-room apartment shared only the name with the horn of plenty orgiastically celebrated by Gogol and Chekhov. More *bulka* (white breadroll) than *pirog*, late-socialist kulebiaka was a modest rectangle of yeast dough, true to Soviet form concealing a barely there layer of boiled ground meat or cabbage. It now occurs to me that our Sunday kulebiaka from Praga expressed the frugality of our lives as neatly as the grandiose version captured czarist excess. We liked our version just fine. The yeast dough was tasty, especially with Mom’s thin vegetarian borscht, and somehow the whole package was just suggestive enough to inspire feverish fantasies about pre-revolutionary Russian cuisine, so intimately familiar to us from books, and so unattainable.

Dreaming about food, I already knew, was just as rewarding as eating.



For my tenth birthday my parents gave me *Moscow and Muscovites*, a book by Vladimir Giliarovsky, darling of fin-de-siècle Moscow, who covered city affairs for several local newspapers. Combining a Dickensian eye with the racy style of a tabloid journalist, plus a dash of Zola-esque naturalism, Giliarovsky offered in *Moscow and Muscovites* an entertaining, if exhausting, panorama of our city at the turn of the century.

As a kid, I cut straight to the porn—the dining-out parts.

During the twentieth century’s opening decade, Moscow’s restaurant

scene approached a kind of Slavophilic ideal. Unlike the then-capital St. Petersburg—regarded as pompous, bureaucratic, and quintessentially foreign—Moscow worked hard to live up to its moniker “bread-and-salty” (hospitable)—a merchant city at heart, uncorrupted by the phony veneer of European manners and foods. In St. Petersburg you dressed up to nibble tiny portions of foie gras and oysters at a French restaurant. In Moscow you gorged, unabashedly, obliviously, orgiastically at a *traktir*, a vernacular Russian tavern. Originally of working-class origins, Moscow’s best *traktirs* in Giliarovsky’s days welcomed everyone: posh nobles and meek provincial landowners, loud-voiced actors from Moscow Art Theater, and merchants clinching the million-ruble deals that fueled this whole Slavophilic restaurant boom. You’d never see such a social cocktail in cold, classist St. Petersburg.

Stomach growling, I stayed up nights devouring Giliarovsky. From him I learned that the airiest blini were served at Egorov’s *traktir*, baked in a special stove that stood in the middle of the dining room. That at Lopashov *traktir*, run by a bearded, gruff Old Believer, the city’s plumpiest *pelmeni*—dumplings filled with meat, fish, or fruit in a bubbly rosé champagne sauce—were lapped up with folkloric wooden spoons by Siberian gold-mining merchants. That grand dukes from St. Petersburg endured the four-hundred-mile train journey southeast just to eat at Testov, Moscow’s most celebrated *traktir*. Testov was famed for its suckling pigs that the owner reared at his dacha (“like his own children,” except for the restraints around their trotters to prevent them from resisting being force-fed for plumpness); its three-hundred-pound sturgeons and sterlets transported live from the Volga; and Guriev kasha, a fanciful baked semolina sweet layered with candied nuts and slightly burnt cream skins, served in individual skillets.

And kulebiaka. The most obscenely decadent kulebiaka in town.

Offered under the special name of Baidakov’s Pie (nobody really knew who this Baidakov was) and ordered days in advance, Testov’s golden-cased tour de force was the creation of its 350-pound chef named Lyonechka. Among other things, Lyonechka was notorious for his habit of drinking *shchi* (cabbage soup) mixed with frozen champagne as a hangover remedy. His kulebiaka was a twelve-tiered skyscraper,

Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking

starting with the ground floor of burbot liver and topped with layers of fish, meat, game, mushrooms, and rice, all wrapped in dough, up, up, up to a penthouse of calf's brains in brown butter.



And then it all came crashing down.

In just a bony fistful of years, classical Russian food culture vanished, almost without a trace. The country's nationalistic euphoria on entering World War I in 1914 collapsed under nonstop disasters presided over by the "last of the Romanovs": clueless, autocratic czar Nicholas II and Alexandra, his reactionary, hysterical German-born wife. Imperial Russia went lurching toward breakdown and starvation. Golden pies, suckling pigs? In 1917 the insurgent Bolsheviks' banners demanded simply the most basic of staples—*khleb* (bread)—along with land (beleaguered peasants were 80 percent of Russia's population) and an end to the ruinous war. On the evening of October 25, hours before the coup by Lenin and his tiny cadre, ministers of Kerensky's foundering provisional government, which replaced the czar after the popular revolution of February 1917, dined finely at the Winter Palace: soup, artichokes, and fish. A doomed meal all around.

With rationing already in force, the Bolsheviks quickly introduced a harsher system of class-based food allotments. Heavy manual laborers became the new privileged; Testov's fancy diners plunged down the totem pole. Grigory Zinoviev, the head of local government in Petrograd (ex-St. Petersburg), announced rations for the bourgeoisie thusly: "We shall give them one ounce a day so they won't forget the smell of bread." He added with relish: "But if we must go over to milled straw, then we shall put the bourgeoisie on it first of all."

The country, engulfed now by civil war, was rushed toward a full-blown, and catastrophic, centralized communist model. War Communism (it was given that temporary-sounding tag *after* the fact) ran from mid-1918 through early 1921, when Lenin abandoned it for a more mixed economic approach. But from that time until the Soviet Union's very end, food was to be not just a matter of chronic uncertainty but a

stark tool of political and social control. To use a Russian phrase, *knut i prianik*: whip and gingerbread.

There was scarce gingerbread at this point.

Strikes in Petrograd in 1919 protested the taste (or lack thereof) of the new Soviet diet. Even revolutionary bigwigs at the city's Smolny canteen subsisted on vile herring soup and gluey millet. At the Kremlin in Moscow, the new seat of government, the situation was so awful that the famously ascetic Lenin—Mr. Stale Bread and Weak Tea, who ate mostly at home—ordered several investigations into why the Kremlyovka (Kremlin canteen) served such inedible stuff. Here's what the investigation found: the cooks couldn't actually cook. Most pre-revolutionary chefs, waiters, and other food types had been fired as part of the massive reorganization of labor, and the new ones had been hired from other professions to avoid using "czarist cadres." "Iron Felix" Dzerzhinsky, the dread founding maestro of Soviet terror, was besieged by requests from Kremlin staffers for towels for the Kremlyovka kitchens. Also aprons and jackets for cooks. Mrs. Trotsky kept asking for tea strainers. In vain.

Part of the Kremlyovka's troubles sprang from another of War Communism's policies: having declared itself the sole purveyor and marketer of food, and setter of food prices, the Kremlin was not supposed to procure from private sources. And yet. The black market that immediately sprang up became—and remained—a defining and permanent fixture of Soviet life. Lenin might have railed against petty speculators called *meshochniki* (bagmen), the private individuals who braved Dzerzhinsky's Cheka (secret police) roving patrols to bring back foodstuffs from the countryside, often for their own starving families. But in fact most of the calories consumed in Russia's cities during this dire period were supplied by such illegal operators. In the winter of 1919–20, they supplied as much as 75 percent of the food consumed, maybe more. By War Communism's end, an estimated 200,000 bagmen were riding the rails in the breadbasket of the Ukraine.

War Communism showed an especially harsh face to the peasantry. An emphatically urban party, the Bolsheviks had little grasp of peasant realities, despite all the hammer-and-sickle imagery and early nods toward land distribution. To combat drastic grain shortages—blamed

Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking

on speculative withholding—Lenin called down a “food dictatorship” and a “crusade for bread.” Armed detachments stalked the countryside, confiscating “surpluses” to feed the Red Army and the hungry, traumatically shrunken cities. This was the hated *prodrazverstka* (grain requisitioning)—a preview of the greater horrors to come under Stalin. There was more. To incite Marxist class warfare in villages, the poorest peasants were stirred up against their better-off kind, the so-called kulaks (“tight-fisted ones”)—vile bourgeois-like objects of Bolshevik venom. “Hang (hang without fail, so the people see) no fewer than one hundred known kulaks, rich men, bloodsuckers,” Lenin instructed provincial leaders in 1918. Though as Zinoviev later noted: “We are fond of describing any peasant who has enough to eat as a kulak.”

And so was launched a swelling, unevenly matched war by the radicalized, industrialized cities—the minority—to bring to heel the conservative, religion-saturated, profoundly mistrustful countryside—the vast majority. Who were never truly fervent Bolshevik supporters.

Agriculture under War Communism plummeted. By 1920, grain output was down to only 60 percent of pre-World War I levels, when Russia had been a significant exporter.

It goes without saying that the concept of cuisine went out the window in those ferocious times. The very notion of pleasure from flavorful food was reviled as capitalist degeneracy. Mayakovsky, brazen poet of the revolution, sicced his jeering muses on gourmet fancies:

*Eat your pineapples, gobble your grouse
Your last day is coming, you bourgeois louse!*

Food was fuel for survival and socialist labor. Food was a weapon of class struggle. Anything that smacked of Testov’s brand of lipsmacking—kulebiaka would be a buttery bull’s-eye—constituted a reactionary attack on the world being born. Some czarist *traktirs* and restaurants were shuttered and looted; others were nationalized and turned into public canteens with the utopian goal of serving new kinds of foods, supposedly futuristic and rational, to the newly *Soviet* masses.

Not until two decades later, following the abolition of yet another

1910s: The Last Days of the Czars

wave of rationing policies, did the state support efforts to seek out old professional chefs and revive some traditional recipes, at least in print. It was part of a whole new Soviet Cuisine project courtesy of Stalin's food-supply commissariat. A few czarist dishes came peeping back, tricked out in Soviet duds, right then and later.

But the bona fide, layered fish kulebiaka, darling of yore, resurfaced only in Putin's Moscow, at resurrect-the-Romanovs restaurants, ordered up by oligarch types clinching oil deals.



Mom and I have our own later history with kulebiaka.

After we emigrated to America in 1974, refugees arriving in Philadelphia with two tiny suitcases, Mom supported us by cleaning houses. Miraculously, she managed to save up for our first frugal visit to Paris two years later. The French capital I found haughty and underwhelming. Mom, on the other hand, was euphoric. Her decades-long Soviet dream had finally been realized, never mind the stale *saucissons* we fed on all week. On our last night she decided to splurge at a candlelit smoky bistro in the sixteenth arrondissement. And there it was! The most expensive dish on the menu—our fish-filled kulebiaka! That is, in its French incarnation, couloubiac—one of the handful of à la russe dishes to have made the journey from Russia in the mainly one-way nineteenth-century gastronomic traffic. Nervously counting our handful of tourist francs, we bit into this couloubiac with tongue-tingled anticipation and were instantly rewarded by the buttery puff pastry that shattered so pleasingly at the touch of the fork. The lovely coral pink of the salmon seemed to wink at us—scornfully?—from the opened pie on the plate as if to suggest France's gastronomic noblesse oblige. The Gauls, they just couldn't help being smug. We took a second bite, expecting total surrender. But something—wait, wait—was wrong. *Messieurs-dames!* Where did you hide the dusky wild mushrooms, the dilled rice, the *blinçhinki* to soak up all those Slavic juices? What of the magically controlled blend of tastes? This French couloubiac, we concluded, was a fraud: saumon en croute masquerading as Russian. We

Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking

paid the bill to the sneering garçon, unexpectedly wistful for our kulebiaka from Praga and the still-unfulfilled yearnings it had inspired.

It was back in Philadelphia that we finally found that elusive holy grail of Russian high cuisine—courtesy of some White Russian émigrés who’d escaped just before and after the revolution. These gray-haired folk had arrived via Paris or Berlin or Shanghai with noble Russian names out of novels—Golitsyn, Volkonsky. They grew black currants and Nabokovian lilacs in the gardens of their small houses outside Philadelphia or New York. Occasionally they’d attend balls—balls! To them, we escapees from the barbaric Imperium were a mild curiosity. Their conversations with Mother went something like this:

“Where did you weather the revolution?”

Mom: “I was born in 1934.”

“What do the Soviets think about Kerensky?”

Mom: “They don’t think of him much.”

“I heard there’ve been major changes in Russia since 1917.”

Mom: “Er . . . that’s right.”

“Is it really true that at the races you now can’t bet on more than one horse?”

The Russian we spoke seemed from a different planet. Here we were, with our self-consciously ironic appropriations of Sovietese, our twenty-seven shades of sarcasm injected into one simple word—*comrade*, say, or *homeland*. Talking to people who addressed us as *dushechka* (little soul) in pure, lilting, innocent Russian. Despite this cultural abyss, we cherished every moment at these people’s generous tables. Boy, they could cook! Suckling pig stuffed with kasha, wickedly rich Easter molds redolent of vanilla, the Chekhovian blini plumper than “the shoulder of a merchant’s daughter”—we tasted it all. Mom approached our dining sessions with an ethnographer’s zeal and a notebook. Examining the recipes later, she’d practically weep.

“Flour, milk, yeast, we had all those in Moscow. Why, why, couldn’t I ever make blini like this?”

One day, an old lady, a Smolianka—a graduate of the prestigious St.

Petersburg Smolny Institute for Young Women, where culinary skills were de rigueur—invited us over for kulebiaka. This was the moment we had been waiting for. As the pie baked, we chatted with an old countess with a name too grand to even pronounce. The countess recounted how hard she cried, back in 1914, when she received a diamond necklace as a birthday gift from her father. Apparently she had really wanted a puppy. The kulebiaka arrived. Our hearts raced. Here it was, the true, genuine kulebiaka—“naked, shameless, a temptation.” The mushrooms, the *blinchiki*, even *viziga*, that gelatinous dried sturgeon spine our hostess had unearthed somewhere in deepest Chinatown—all were drenched in splashes of butter inside a beautifully decorated yeast pastry mantle.

As I ate, Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* flashed into my mind. Because after some three hundred pages describing Vronsky’s passion for Anna, his endless pursuits, all her tortured denials, the consummation of their affair is allotted only one sentence. And so it was for us and the consummate kulebiaka. We ate; the pie was more than delicious; we were satisfied. Happily, nobody leapt under a train. And yet . . . assessing the kulebiaka and studying our hostess’s recipe later at home, Mom started scribbling over it furiously, crossing things out, shaking her head, muttering, “*Ne nashe*”—not ours. I’m pretty sure I know what she meant. Dried sturgeon spine? Who were we kidding? Whether we liked it or not, we were Soviets, not Russians. In place of the sturgeon, defrosted cod would do just fine.

It took us another three decades to develop a kulebiaka recipe to call our own—one that hinted at Russia’s turn-of-the-century excess, with a soupçon of that snooty French elegance, while staying true to our frugal past.

But that recipe just wouldn’t do for our 1910s feast tonight.
We needed to conjure up the real deal, the classic.



My mother is finally rolling out her kulebiaka dough, maneuvering intently on a dime-size oasis of kitchen counter. I inhale the sweetish tang of fermented yeast once again and try to plumb my unconscious

for some collective historical taste memory. No dice. There's no yeast in my DNA. No heirloom pie recipes passed down by generations of women in the yellowing pages of family notebooks, scribbled in pre-revolutionary Russian orthography. My two grandmothers were emancipated New Soviet women, meaning they barely baked, wouldn't be caught dead cooking "czarist." Curious and passionate about food all her life, Mom herself only became serious about baking after we emigrated. In the USSR she relied on a dough called *na skoruyu ruku* ("flick of a hand"), a version involving little kneading and no rising. It was a recipe she'd had to teach *her* mother. My paternal babushka, Alla, simply wasn't interested. She was a war widow and Soviet career woman whose idea of dinner was a box of frozen dumplings. "Why should I *bake*," she told Mother indignantly, "when I can be reading a book?" "What, a *detektiv*," Mom snorted. It was a pointed snort. Russia's top spy thriller writer, the Soviet version of John le Carré, was Grandma's secret lover.

Peering into the kitchen, I prod Mom for any scraps of pre-revolutionary-style baking memories she might retain. She pauses, then nods. "Da, listen!" There were these old ladies when she was a child. They were strikingly different from the usual bloblike proletarian babushkas. "I remember their hair," says Mom, almost dreamily. "Aristocratically simple. And the resentment and resignation on their ghostly faces. Something so sad and tragic. Perhaps they had grown up in mansions with servants. Now they were ending their days as kitchen slaves for their own Stalin-loving families."

My mom talks like that.

"And their *food*?" I keep prodding. She ponders again. "Their blini, their pirozhki (filled pastries), their *pirogs* . . . somehow they seemed airier, fluffier . . ." She shrugs. More she can't really articulate. Flour, yeast, butter. Much like their counterparts who had fled Bolshevik Russia, Mom's Moscow old ladies possessed the magic of yeast. And that magic was lost to us.

And that was the rub of tonight's project. Of the flavor of the layered Silver Age kulebiaka we had at least an inkling. But the botvinya

and the Guriev kasha dessert, my responsibilities—they were total conundrums. Neither I nor Mom had a clue how they were meant to taste.

There was a further problem: the stress and time required to prepare a czarist table extravaganza.

Over an entire day and most of the night preceding our guests' arrival, I sweated—and sweated—over my share of the meal. Have you ever tried making Guriev kasha during one of the worst New York heat waves in memory?

Thank you, Count Dmitry Guriev, you gourmandizing early-nineteenth-century Russian minister of finance, for the labor-intensive dessert bearing your name. Though actually by most accounts it was a serf chef named Zakhar Kuzmin who first concocted this particular kasha (*kasha* being the Russian word for almost any grain preparation both dry and porridgy). Guriev tasted the sweet at somebody's palace, summoned Kuzmin to the table, and gave him a kiss. Then he bought said serf-chef and his family.

Here is how Kuzmin's infernal inspiration is realized. Make a sweetened farina-like semolina kasha, called manna kasha in Russian. Then in a pan or skillet layer this manna with homemade candied nuts, and berries, and with plenty of *penki*, the rich, faintly burnished skins that form on cream when it's baked. Getting a hint of the labor required? For one panful of kasha, you need at least fifteen *penki*.

So for hour after hour I opened and closed the door of a 450-degree oven to skim off the cream skins. By two a.m. my kitchen throbbed like a furnace. Chained to the oven door, drenched in sweat, I was ready to assault palaces, smash Fabergé eggs. I cursed the Romanovs! I cheered the Russian Revolution!

“Send your maid to the cellar.” That charming instruction kicked off many of the recipes in the best surviving (and Rabelaisian) source of pre-revolutionary Russian recipes, *A Gift to Young Housewives* by Elena Molokhovets. How my heart went out to that suffering maid! Serfdom might have been abolished in Russia in 1861, but under the Romanovs the peasants—and, later, the industrial workers—continued to live like subhumans. Haute bourgeois housewives gorged on amber fish

Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking

broths, rosy hams, and live sterlets, while their domestics had to make do with *tyuria* (a porridgy soup made with stale bread and water), kvass, and bowlfuls of buckwheat groats. Yes, the revolution was necessary. But why, I pondered in my furnace kitchen, why did things have to go so terribly wrong? Woozy from the heat, I brooded on alternative histories:

Suppose Kerensky's provisional government had managed to stay in power?

Or suppose instead of Stalin, Trotsky had taken over from Lenin?

Or suppose—

Suddenly I realized I'd forgotten to skim off new *penki*. I wrenched open the oven. The cream had transformed into cascades of white sputtering lava covering every inside inch with scorched white goo. I'd need a whole cadre of serfs to clean it all off. I screamed in despair.

Somehow, at last, at five a.m., I was done. A version of Guriev kasha, no doubt ersatz, sat cooling in my fridge under a layer of foil. Falling asleep, I recalled how at the storming of the Winter Palace thirsty, violent mobs ransacked the Romanovs' wine cellar, reportedly the largest and the best-stocked in the world. I congratulated them across the century, from the bottom of my heart.

Unlike me, my septuagenarian mom actually relishes late-night kitchen heroics. And her political thinking is much clearer than mine. Yes, she loathes the Romanovs. But she despises the Bolsheviks even more. Plus she had no reason for pondering alternative histories; she was sailing along smoothly with her kulebiaka project.

Her dough, loaded with butter and sour cream, had risen beautifully. The fish, the dilled rice, the dusky wild mushrooms, the thin *blinchiki* for the filling layers, had all come out juicy and tasty. Only now, two hours before the party, right before constructing the pie, does Mom suddenly experience distress.

"Anyut, tell me," she says. "What's the point of the *blinchiki*? Filling dough with more dough!"

I blink blearily. Ah, the mysteries of the czarist stomach. “Maybe excess is the point?” I suggest meekly.

Mom shrugs. She goes ahead and arranges the filling and its antimush *blinchiki* into a majestic bulk. Not quite a Testov-style skyscraper, but a fine structure indeed. We decorate the pie together with fanciful cut-out designs before popping it into the oven. I’m proud of Mom. As we fan ourselves, our hearts race in anticipation, much like they did for our encounter decades ago with that true kulebiaka chez White Russian émigrés.

But the botvinya still hangs over me like a sword of doom.

A huge summer hit at Giliarovsky’s Moscow *traktirs*, this chilled kvass and fish potage—a weird hybrid of soup, beverage, fish dish, and salad—confounded most foreigners who encountered it. “Horrible mélange! Chaos of indigestion!” pronounced *All the Year Round*, Charles Dickens’s Victorian periodical. Me, I’m a foreigner to botvinya myself. On the evening’s table I set out a soup tureen filled with my homemade kvass and cooked greens (*botva* means vegetable tops), spiked with a horseradish sauce. Beside it, serving bowls of diced cucumbers, scallions, and dill. In the middle: a festive platter with poached salmon and shrimp (my stand-in for Slavic crayfish tails). You eat the botvinya by mixing all the elements in your soup bowl—to which you add, please, ice. A *Gift to Young Housewives* also recommends a splash of chilled champagne. Ah yes, booze! To drown out the promised “chaos of indigestion,” I’ll pour my horseradish vodka.

“Fish and kvass?” says my mother. “*Foo*.” (Russian for *EEK*.)

“Aga (Yeah),” I agree.

“*Foo*,” she insists. “Cause you know how I hate poached salmon.”

Mom harbors a competitive streak in the kitchen. I get the feeling she secretly wants my botvinya to fail.



“You’ve made what? A real botvinya? Homemade kvass?”

Our first guests, Sasha and Ira Genis, eyeball Mom’s table, in-

credulous. Mom hands them the welcome *kalach*, a traditional bread shaped like a purse. Their eyes grow wider.

Sasha (the diminutive of Alexander) is a freewheeling émigré essayist and cultural critic, something of a legend in Russia, where his radio broadcasts are adored by millions. He's a serious gourmet, too. Dinners at the Genis home in New Jersey feature mushrooms gathered under a Siberian moon and smoked lamprey eels smuggled from Latvia.

Mom's face blossoms with pride as Sasha confesses that, in his whole life, he's *never* tasted botvinya and tiered kulebiaka.

"And Guriev kasha?" he cries. "Does it really *exist* outside literature?"

Suddenly all the guests are here, crowding Mom's tiny foyer, kissing hello three times, handing over bouquets and bottles. At table, we are: a documentary filmmaker, Andrei, and his wife, Toma, sexy in her slinky, low-cut cocktail frock; my South African-born partner, Barry; and "distinguished American guests"—a couple from Brooklyn, both in the culture business.

"A proper fin-de-siècle *traktir* setting," Mom expounds to the Brooklynites in her museum-docent tones, "should be a blend of art nouveau and Russian folkloric." The Brooklynites nod respectfully.

Zakuski devoured, first vodkas downed, everyone addresses my botvinya. Mom barely touches hers, wrinkling her nose at the salmon. I both like the botvinya and don't: it tastes utterly alien.

And then, gasp, Mom carries out her kulebiaka. A choral whoop goes up. She cuts into the layers, releasing fishy, mushroomy steam into the candlelight. Slowly, bite by bite, I savor the voluptuousness of the dough-upon-dough Slavic excess. The fluffy layers put me in the mind of luxurious Oblomovian sloth, of collapsing into a huge feather bed. I think I finally get the point of the *blinchiki*. They're like marbling in a steak.

Sasha Genis raises his vodka glass to Larisa. "This is the most patriotic meal of my life!" he enthuses. "Putin should be taking note!"

His toast puzzles me. More, it perplexes, touching on what I've been turning over in my mind. Patriotic about what? The hated czarist regime? The repressive State we fled decades ago? Or some collective

ur-memory of a cuisine never rightfully ours? Back in the USSR, *patriotism* was a dirty word in our dissident circles. And for that matter, what of our supposed *Russianness*? At table we're a typical pan-Soviet émigré crew. Andrei is a Ukrainian Jew; his wife, Toma, is Russian; both are from Kiev. Although the Genises hail from Riga, they're not Latvian. Mom, also Jewish, was born in Odessa and lived in Murmansk and Leningrad before moving to Moscow. I'm the only born Muscovite among us.

My ruminations on patriotism are drowned out by more toasts. Mom's air conditioner chugs and strains; the toasts grow more ironic, more Soviet, more "ours" . . .

What was going on in the Russia we're bidding adieu to here, in the year 1910? our Brooklyn culturati are asking. "Well, Chekhov has been dead for six years," answers Sasha. "Tolstoy has just died at a remote railway station."

"His strange death a major cultural milestone," Mother chimes in, not to be outdone. "It caused a massive media frenzy."

In 1913, I add myself, revisiting my patriotism theme, the tone-deaf Czar Nicholas II created a minor public relations disaster by serving a Frenchified menu at the banquet celebrating three hundred years of the Romanov dynasty. *Potage a tortue*—definitely not patriotic.

Cautiously I dig my spoon now into my Guriev kasha. Rich yet light, with a texture somewhere between pudding and torte, it tastes like a celestial version of my dreaded kindergarten breakfast farina. The guests giggle at my three a.m. *penki* fiasco.

And then it's suddenly time for au revoirs. To Mom, to me, to czarist excess. The Genises head off down the hallway to the elevator. Suddenly Sasha comes running back.

"*Devochki* (Girls)! The kulebiaka, I just have to say again: wow! Inserting blini into yeast pastry!? Unreal."

Maybe I do understand Sasha's brand of patriotism and nostalgia. It's patriotism for that nineteenth-century Russian idea of Culture with a capital C—an idea, and an ideal, that we ex-Soviets from Ukraine and Moscow and Latvia have never abandoned. They

Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking

still stir us, those memories of savoring orgiastic descriptions of edibles in Chekhov and Gogol while dunking stale socialist pies into penitentiary-style soups.

I want to ask Mom what she thinks of all this, but she looks too exhausted. And sweaty. I have a feeling she's welcoming the seven and a half decades of frugal Soviet eating ahead of us.