
Russian National Cuisine: A View from Outside

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Abstract – The article tackles the issue of how Russian national cuisine is perceived by foreigners. It compares Russians’ beliefs about their own national cuisine with foreigners’ observations about it and some encyclopedic facts about a number of “traditional” Russian dishes. As a research method, the cross-cultural comparison is used. As a result, it proves that some Russian dishes are not so Russian in origin and states that foreigners often find the taste of these dishes unusual. So, it may be challenging for representatives of one culture to adjust to another national cuisine.

Keywords – Cultural Anthropology, Foreigners’ Travel-Notes and Observations, National Cuisines and Russian National Cuisine.

I. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays we live in a global world or so called “global village” connected with each other by different means of transport and communication. It’s becoming incredibly easy to explore other nations and cultures either by travelling or by using social media. It has resulted in such branches of humanities as cross-cultural studies and cultural anthropology being on peak of their demand.

Here I would like to pay special attention to cultural anthropology. As a branch of academia it tackles the issue of a person’s cultural development including all knowledge from Humanities. (1)

In this paper I will stick to a relatively new field of cultural anthropology called history of everyday life culture. It deals with all aspects of person’s everyday routine including food, clothing, housing, family, friends, hobbies etc. (2)

Interestingly enough all nations and peoples acknowledge food as a very important element of culture, because it is vital for human health and life. Nowadays French, Mexican, Japanese and Mediterranean cuisines (Morocco, Italy, Spain, Greece) have become a part of UNESCO’s cultural heritage. When it comes to Russian national cuisine, it has been formed and shaped for centuries in its unique way and with its own special traditions is a part of Russian and world cultural heritage. This fact just proves the tendency that in the era of globalization many nations try to preserve their national peculiarities (3). As Anna V. Pavlovskaya, a very famous researcher of Russian national cuisine, writes “nowadays national cuisines has become eclectic in nature. Being influenced by many other world cuisines a particular county’s national cuisine tends to incorporate the element of world’s cuisine still trying to keep its unique features. (4)

We as people tend to believe that our own national cuisine is the most healthiest, nutritious and delicious in the whole world. In other words, we perceive it as given and take it for granted, since we soak up our national cuisine throughout the lifespan. When we are abroad and try, for example, some exotic fruits or dishes we often find them unusual or surprising. That is why we tend to think that our own national cuisine could be perceived as a bit unusual, surprising or even strange by foreigners. Let’s take a look at Russian national cuisine through the eyes of foreigners.

II. THEORY AND METHODS

There are several ways of forming a country's image in the eyes of foreigners: stereotypes, national classical literature, folklore, press, national language, national academic lectures and papers, tourist guide-books, local guides, and personal travel-notes and observations. (5, 6)

In addition, personal travel-notes and observations can be considered an important means of forming the image of Russian national cuisine in the eyes of foreigners. As a way to research national cuisine personal travel-notes and observations are obviously valuable, on the one hand, since they are a first-hand experience gained by being immersed in another culture. They are full of emotions and personal comments, so it brings culture – cuisine in our case– to real life. On the other hand, they are *personal* travel– notes and observations. The key word here is personal, which means that being personal they could be very subjective. However, statistics and a number of repetitions could make it more objective.

As a method a cross-cultural comparison is used, when the foreigners' observations about Russian national cuisine are compared both with the Russians' beliefs about it and some encyclopedic facts about it.

III. GOALS AND HYPOTHESIS

With this very purpose foreigners travel-notes and observations were studied and compared both with what the Russians think of their national cuisine and some encyclopedic facts about it.

During the study the following hypothesis were made: 1) the foreigners' perception of Russian national cuisine does not coincide with the Russian one. 2) The Russians do not know some encyclopedic facts about Russian national dishes.

Objectives of the Studies

- 1) To identify foreigners' perceptions of Russian national cuisine;
- 2) To find out whether foreigners' perceptions of Russian national cuisine are like Russian ones or different ;
- 3) Specify some encyclopedic facts about Russian national cuisine that are unknown to most Russian people.

Procedure

At the first stage the foreigners' observations of Russian national cuisine were taken from their travel-notes or personal interactions with them.

At the second stage I compared them with what the Russians think about their national dishes.

At the second stage the encyclopedic facts about Russian national dishes were studied and added to the research.

IV. RESULTS

As a result "top" 11 Russian national dishes among foreigners were selected. (7)

Number-1 Borsch (beat soup)

In Russian culture borsch is one of the most popular and commonly served soups, though it is considered not really Russian but Ukrainian. However, the first borsch appeared a long time ago not in Russia or the Ukraine, but in Mediterranean countries such as Greece. Later the Roman legions brought borsch to the Crimea and it was

spread in the Ukraine and Russia due to them. So, it is a common mistake to think that borsch is a really Russian national dish. Anyway, foreigners try borsch in Russia many times and consider it “Russian”. Mary Nelson, the USA, says: “I liked this wonderful beat soup from the very first try. It has a “soil” aftertaste, - that people, who don’t like borsch – are called the aftertaste of “mud”. A very prominent taste of vinegar and sour cream create an unusual, but very tasty combination.” (8)

Number-2 Pelmeni (Meatballs in Dough or Dumplings)

Pelmeni as a dish is represented in many national cuisines. In many cultures they are called in different ways: vontony, momo, hinkaly, ravioli, manti, pozi etc. In Russian cuisine pelmeni were brought from the Urals in the beginning of XV-the century. The actual word pelmeni has a Komi-Permyak origin and means “bread ear”. Formaldehyd3 says the following about pelmeni: “I pigged out every pelmen and wanted some more. I like it the most as a soup with dill and rye bread. In Russia pelmeni is usually a holiday dish. They are traditionally made by a whole family. So, pelmeni is a great family business that helps to overcome the generation gap and unites a family. (9)

Number-3 Dill.

Foreigners point out that Russian people use a lot of dill while cooking and put it into unexpected dishes. According to Reuters the Russians eat about 1.6 kg of dill per person in a year. Dill has many useful medical properties: it is full of vitamins, good for blood, brain, digestion and sight. However, a lot of foreigners strongly dislike it. “Dill is terrible. I can’t eat it any more. I’m fed up with it. I can’t believe that they put it practically in everything” – says reluctant_redditer. “I hate dill, but the Russians use in it every dish they can!” – writes King Carnivore. “The Russians eat a lot of dill. I wish they put a bit less of it into their dishes” – stated a Fulbright Assistant, Odekirk Connor. (10)

Number-4 Holodets

Holodets is a meat jelly. It is a cold appetizer made from meat broth and jelly. It is hard to name the reasons but holodets is one of the most suspicious and disgusting dishes for foreigners. Alok Matyr from India says: “I recommend avoiding this cold meat jelly that Russian people make for holidays... It’s very traditional Russian dish that foreigners, especially Indians don’t find appetizing at all.” On the other hand, jellies are popular in many countries. The USA is one of them. In the US jellies have to be sweet. Jellies don’t suppose to have something like meat in them in foreign cultures. In Russian national cuisine holodets is a very popular holiday dish, especially on New Year’s and Christmas.

Number-5 Herring under the Coat

Herring under the coat is a mixture of herring, potato, carrots, eggs, and beats. It appeared in the 1960-s. Nowadays it is a very popular everyday salad in Russia. As for foreigners, this salad is as weird for them as holodets, though some of them really like it, and some hate it.

“I like this salad. It was hard to try it for me for me for the very first time, but now I’m glad I did it”, -“It has too much mayonnaise in it” – says iseztomabel.

My American friends, Dave and Debbie Sechrist, a missionary couple that lived in Russia, pointed out that it is OK for them without herring. It is herring that makes it really weird.

Number-6 Buckwheat

Buckwheat originated from India and Nepal. It appeared in Russia in the 15th century. Besides Russia, buckwheat is known in Israel, China, Korea, and Japan. Now In European countries buckwheat is gaining popularity, because it is hypoallergenic, nutritious, and dietary. In the US it is still hard to find it and it is an expense. A Mormon missionary, who served in Russia, used to cook buckwheat with onion, carrots and meat. He liked it a lot and called it “super buckwheat”, because he managed to lose a good amount of weight being on this diet.

However, a person who is not used to it from childhood would find buckwheat bitter and strange to taste.

Number-7 Syrniki (Cottage cheese crepes).

Cottage cheese which syrniki are made of was first known in ancient Rome, but in Russia it was still named “syr” (cheese –En). Cottage cheese began to be called tvorog (cottage cheese, not just cheese En) in Russia in the 18th century. Peter the Great brought different kinds of cheese to Russia from Europe at that time. Syrniki is a light dish normally served as a dessert or as a main meal for breakfast. “I spent 2 weeks in Russia with my ex-boyfriend. His grandmother cooked syrniki for us. We ate them with berry-jam. The family picked berries for syrniki itself. They were just out of this world. I became addicted to them!” – says la pluie.

Number-8 Solyanka.

Solyanka is a cabbage soup with pickles and smoke products. Solyanka was mentioned in the 18th century for the first time. As a historian of Russian cuisine Pavel Sytkin writes “at that time it wasn’t a sort of soup, but a warm dish with cabbage, cucumbers, meat, poultry, fish, mushrooms and some other ingredients. As soup, solyanka appeared in the second half of the 19th century. Laura Hancock from Detroit says “Well, solyanka is my favorite Russian soup, because it’s very salty for the most part. It has pickles, sausage, bacon, chicken, cabbage, and capers in it”. Now Solyanka is a very traditional everyday soup in Russia.

Number-9 Okroshka.

Okroshka is a cold soup with potatoes, eggs, cucumbers, radishes, dill and sausage that goes with kvass or kefir. Normally in Russia people eat it in summertime, because it quenches thirst very well and is rather nutritious. The traditional recipe of Okroshka mentioned above appeared in Russia in the 18th century.

As for foreigners, they do not always understand why Russian people turn Russian salad into soup. They also question the taste of kvass. Nevertheless, James Hyneman – a very popular American TV-star and showman – when he was in St. Petersburg happened to like Okroshka a lot. He says: “It’s good. Very good. Savory kvass add taste a tasteless base of Okroshka”.

Number-10 Squash caviar

For the first time squash caviar was produced in the USSR in the 1930-s. It is low in calories, has lots of useful vitamins and microelements.

Marco Nort, New York, says: “ You buy it in cans and keep it nearby to quench your night appetite. It’s kind of a paradox, that Russian people call it caviar, because it has no shape or form at all. Like pure for children. Squash caviar with bread recalls childish memories in every Russian person.”

Befstroganov is stewed beef in a sour cream source. There are several theories about the origin of this dish and they all are connected with the Stroganovs, a very famous Russian dynasty. After the second world war Befstroganov gained its popularity as a Russian dish and became well-known abroad. Amanda Brown writes: “I like its “Russianness”: small pieces of meat, mushrooms, noodles, and a very rich taste.”

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analyzing the results of the study, it has become obvious that foreigners’ perceptions of Russian national cuisine contradict the Russians’ beliefs about it. As a very famous saying goes: “Tastes are different” and it is always advisable to respect another person’s food choice, especially if this person is from another country and culture. The thing here may be that our food choice is highly influenced by the climate, local food culture and local products we are used to. Sometimes it even lies in our genes: it is a proven medical fact that a particular person’s digestive system is initially adapted to the region where this person is going to live.

VI. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I would like to quote Nill Hynem, who said the following: “Not all Russian food is soaked in buckets of mayonnaise, and spiced with bushes of dill. As in many counties, you will find many delicious things and dishes if you immerse deeper into local cuisine and will stay away from your usual and known food choices”. I would say it is a very useful recommendation for any foreigner who would like to really explore the local cuisine. It will require some courage, tolerance and readiness to try something new, but the result is worth it. Thanks to it, you will enrich your taste scale, and look at your own national cuisine from another perspective.

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AUTHOR’S PROFILE



Natalya V. Kravchenko was born on December, 25 in the Crimea, Ukraine, in 1984. Currently I’m a first year PhD student at Lomonosov Moscow State University, Russia. My major field of study is cross-cultural communication and methodology of teaching ESL. Recently she has done some research in the field of how Russian and British are perceived through Russian and English idioms and how the symbol @ is interpreted in different cultures.