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Russian Dining: Theatre of the Gastronomic Absurd

Pork is the hero of the feast. Like an
ardent youth, it wears all sorts of
masks, but its originality is revealed
even beneath the most beautiful
dressings....

-- Nikita Vsevolozhsky

One of the greatest dramas in Russian history was played out in 945, when Princess Olga avenged the death of her husband, Igor, by inviting his killers, the fierce Derevlans, to a funeral feast in his memory. Invoking the great tradition of Russian hospitality, Olga plied them with vast quantities of mead, and when they were thoroughly drunk, she had them massacred, five thousand in all. Olga's combination of great acting and great savagery has earned her a secure place in Russian history, but her story also reveals an important site for the enactment of societal relations in Russia: the communal table.

Over the centuries foreign travelers to Russia have commented on the sense of excess in Russian culture, expressed more frequently through the country's extraordinary hospitality than its scale of massacre. By examining the shared table as a mode of cultural performance, we find that Russian dining practices signal a great deal about the Russians's sense of themselves. The excess perceived by outsiders is not simply an expression of vulgar ostentation; it also comprises an expansive generosity and a fatalism about life. Historically,

Russians have celebrated the moment and aestheticized their otherwise often deprived lives by dramatizing the ordinarily quotidian meal.

The performance of a meal also serves as a vivid means of self-promotion and advertisement. The tables of the wealthy publicly announce a host's power and prestige even as their surfeit expresses the host's personal fantasies and desire to manipulate societal standing. Whether a magnificent feast staged by nobleman to consolidate his political power, or a restaurant debauch of a parvenu merchant, Russian dinners are consciously performative. This essay will examine a few dazzling dinner performances that took place in settings no less exquisitely conceived than in the theater.

In medieval Europe, the formal banquet offered guests a variety of entertainments, which constituted a highly anticipated part of the meal. During *interludes* (brief plays performed during breaks between courses), carts carrying actors and musicians were wheeled in to distract guests from the clearing of dishes and the setting out of the next course. The Russian table, by contrast, *was* the performance, attention being focused on the groaning board and the actual service of the meal, rather than on any extrinsic entertainment. Although Russia had its share of dwarves and jesters to entertain and mediate among guests, noble Russians in the era of Muscovy did not develop the art of mealtime pageantry as diversion. Instead, the meal itself served as spectacle through the sumptuous presentation of a multitude of dishes.

Early travellers to Russia frequently found this abundance 'excessive and vulgar', filling even 'the most courageous stomachs...with horror' (Segur 1865: 41). Overly ample portions of beef, wildfowl, fish, eggs, and pies were brought to table in seemingly random order, and seemingly without end. This distinctive Russian style of service contrasted markedly from the more restrained French style of service accepted at noble tables throughout western Europe. The French

banquet table entailed an exquisite set-piece, intended primarily to delight the eye. On entering the banquet hall, diners found tables already set with an artful array of dishes, many of them in fanciful *trompe l'oeil*. An entire course comprising dozens of dishes may have been beautiful to behold, but eating it was likely another matter. The preset display, a pretense, meant that hot foods were no longer hot; fats were congealed. And each time a course concluded, the table had to be fully rearranged. Thus mealtime entertainments were requisite to guard against the guests's boredom.

Russian service differed profoundly. On entering the hall, diners found only salt and pepper cellars and vinegar cruets on the table (although sideboards at the tsar's banquets did sag under the immense weight of the royal gold plate). Once the guests were seated, each dish was brought individually to table and presented with great fanfare. Considering that banquets consisted of no less than four courses, with up to one hundred dishes in each course, royal feasts could be an ordeal, especially for foreign visitors used to the orderliness and self-containment of a French-style meal. However, the Russian style of service kept the food hot, since each dish was served at its peak of readiness. Russian practice also provided live performance as liveried waiters -- often one for each guest -- paraded repeatedly into the banquet hall with platters held high. Chroniclers tell of a single huge sturgeon brought to table by four dozen cooks struggling to hold the immense fish steady (Pyliaev 1897: 8); or of great silver vats that required three hundred men to fill with mead (Tereshchenko 1848: 249).

If invited guests were unable to attend a royal banquet, the old Russian custom of the *podacha* or presentation ensured that they would still receive food, because their portions were delivered to them at home. The *podacha* indicated the degree of the tsar's favor (or lack thereof) and simultaneously represented an important show of hospitality. In a peculiarly Russian form of street theatre,

presentations could occur up to several times a day, with hundreds of men filing through Moscow's narrow alleyways bearing food. On a mid-sixteenth-century embassy to Moscow, the Frenchman Margaret witnessed presentations:

The Emperor sends to each noble at home, and to all whom he favours, a dish of meat called Podatdh [*podacha*]...First, he sends him some chief gentleman in cloth of gold, his mantle and hat decorated with pearls; he rides on horseback...He has fifteen or twenty servants around his horse; two men walk behind him, each carrying a cloth rolled like a bale; two more follow carrying salt-cellars; then two with containers full of vinegar; then two others, one carrying two knives and the other two spoons, all richly decorated; the bread follows this, carried by six men, two by two; then follows the spirits and after this a dozen men each carrying a silver pot...full of various kinds of wine...after these as many large cups of German work are carried; then follow the meats, that is, first, those that are eaten cold, then the boiled and the roast and, last, the pies; all these meats are carried on great silver plates, but if the Emperor favors the Ambassador, all the plate put on his table is of gold. After come eighteen or twenty large vessels, each carried by two men, full of various kinds of mead; then follow a dozen men carrying five or six large drinking cups; and, after everything else, two or three carts follow full of mead and beer for the commons; everything is carried by the musket-men who have been entrusted with this and who are very well-dressed. I have seen up to three or four hundred carry meats and drinks for a single dinner in the manner described and have seen three dinners sent to different Ambassadors in one day.

(Margaret 1607: 32- 3, in Smith and Christian 1984: 117)

Such thrilling visual displays could not appease the stomachs of the hungry commoners, who knew little more than oatmeal gruel and coarse rye bread. But to palliate the people's thirst and disaffection, the tsar wisely provided mead and beer to this street-level audience. In the tsar's gesture to his people and to the foreign envoys, the *podacha* served social, as well as political, ends.

Royal largesse played an important role in Russian society through its periodic, if fleeting, amelioration of public hunger. As time passed, food, as well as drink, was distributed on special occasions such as coronations, marriages, and victory celebrations. But by the late eighteenth century the common folk, previously passive recipients of royal favor, became active players in performances for the amusement of their benefactors, who sought to alleviate their own boredom with droll social drama.

One such boisterous entertainment took place during the reign of Catherine the Great, in celebration of Grand Prince Constantine's wedding. As backdrop to Saint Petersburg's Palace Square, the Neva River was illuminated with brilliant fireworks. On the square itself workmen constructed a high, stepped platform, which they enclosed with a green taffeta curtain. Behind the curtain, on each step, lay roast geese, ducks, chickens, hams, and other meats. At the very top of the platform stood a steer with gilded horns, its head secured with an iron bolt to make it difficult to remove. Opposite this golden steer was positioned a second steer, this one with silvered horns. Nearby fountains gushed with red and white wine, and police had to restrain the throng. A young guardsman describes the scene that ensued once the empress signalled for the show to begin. Ostensibly devised for the pleasure of the people, this merrymaking in fact appropriated spectacle for the service of the state, translating power into art by means of entertainment:

With a cry the people threw themselves at the meat, tearing the curtain to shreds within minutes. Most of the participants in this peculiar drama were young butchers who formed teams with their co-workers. Each team raced to reach the steers first and set to work trying to sever the heads from the bodies, eager for the reward of 100 rubles for the gold horns, 50 for the silver. While a few men sawed, the rest tried to beat back their rivals by throwing the hams, geese, and turkeys at them. The successful team carried the severed heads in triumphant procession to the palace. However, they were not safe until they reached the entrance, since a rival team might attack and try to wrest the heads from them, which they sometimes succeeding in doing. The sight was, of course, barbaric, but it was fun to watch from the palace.

It was even more entertaining to watch the drunkards who had no interest in steers or monetary rewards -- all they wanted were the fountains of wine. They caroused in the fountains, splashing wine on the crowd, and sometimes plugging up the pipes until the flow stopped. Then they were forced off the pipes by the aggrieved revelers, who got the wine flowing again (Brusilov 1893: 19-20).

The nobility certainly enjoyed watching such spectacles, but they did not publicly participate in free-for-alls. Instead they indulged their gastronomic fantasies within the privacy of their homes. And although their actions proceeded from boredom rather than want, their performances were no less excessive than those of their poorer countrymen. The needs of the gentry were largely taken care of by the many "souls" they owned, which left the less resourceful among them with too much spare time and prompted them to seek

ever more novel diversions. Ennui may be endemic to wealth, but the idea of *pokazukha* or illusion is especially appealing to Russians, whose lives are defined by a severe climate and isolation. At the least, simulated environments offer an antidote to otherwise bleak routine. Thus profligate Russians served fresh hothouse strawberries in December to spite the elements and surprise their guests. Or, like Princess Zinaida Yusupova, they created the wintertime illusion of blossom-laden orange trees growing right through the dining table by covering the entire length of the table with mirrored glass encasing the trunks of the trees -- a victory over seasonal darkness (Kamenskaia 1894: 254).

In the wake of Peter the Great's westernizing reforms in the first quarter of the eighteenth century, the Russian nobility worked hard to be as sophisticated as their European counterparts, avidly imitating the latest European trends. They particularly enjoyed creating magical, neo-classical settings that transported guests to distant places and times. Count Grigory Potemkin, Catherine the Great's favorite, understood fantasy's special allure and spared no cost to elicit Catherine's delight. For one famous party he transformed his dining room into a Caucasian grotto complete with a fully-engineered stream spilling down an artificial mountainside. Roses and other fragrant flowers grew in profusion, while myrtle and laurel trees were resplendent with fruits crafted of gems. On Catherine's arrival, a chorus broke into song, limning her praises in ancient Greek (Lotman and Pogosian 1996: 28-30).

Even among the moneyed nobility, few families could rival Potemkin's wealth, yet his peers still managed to stage fabulous dinners of their own. Count Alexander Stroganov, in particular, seems to have lived by Aristotle's teaching that lavish expenditure leads to greatness and prestige. Stroganov decorated his dining room to recall the magnificence of ancient Rome, with pillows and mattresses stuffed with swan's down and tables of marble and mozaic. He even

constructed a triclinium so that, like the spoiled ancients, his dinner guests could recline during their meal. Each guest was served by a beautiful young boy, who brought in one exquisite dish after another. The most extravagant appetizers were the herring cheeks, for which more than one thousand herrings were required to compose a single plate. The second course included salmon lips, boiled bears' paws, and roast lynx, with exceptionally white flesh. Cuckoos roasted in honey and butter, cod milt and fresh turbot liver, oysters, wildfowl stuffed with nuts and fresh figs, salted peaches, and pickled pineapples (still a rarity in Russia) rounded out the meal. When Stroganov's guests felt sated, he encouraged them, as the ancients did, to tickle their throat with a feather to vomit and make room for more food. Drinking took on a specifically Russian character as the diners retired to the steam baths to eat salty pressed caviar and to sweat -- in order that they might thirst for more alcohol. When the drinking got out of hand, Stroganov sometimes ordered a skull brought to table to remind his guests of their mortality. More often than not, however, the sight of the skull merely caused them to drink all the more, out of grief over their inevitable demise (Pyliaev 1897: 11).

By loosening inhibitions, drinking enabled performance, and the antics of Russian tipplers are legendary. One famous drinker from Catherine's time was the Tula merchant Ivan Rozhkov, whose daring inspired huge bets, which he never lost. Once, on a thousand-ruble wager, Rozhkov rode his horse right up the stairway to the top floor of a fancy Moscow house. There, in the parlor, he drank down a bottle of champagne in a single gulp and without dismounting galloped back down to the street (Pyliaev 1897: 12). Even though Rozhkov's companions knew they were betting in vain, they continued to wager against him, because his performances were so intemperate and diverting.

Individuals like Rozhkov may appear larger than life, but they are very much in the Russian mold, born of boredom and despair. Tolstoy, Turgenev, and Chekhov all created memorable portraits of the 'superfluous man' so prevalent in nineteenth-century Russian society. Spurred on by little more than boredom, and with money to spare, these men led idle lives, their interest piqued only by excessive behavior. Thus Count Musin-Pushkin spent more than 100,000 rubles a year on the pleasures of his table, with at least 30,000 expended on confections alone. His profligacy was so great that he raised his turkeys on truffles and his calves on cream, and even ordered them kept in cradles like infants. Musin-Pushkin's chickens enjoyed cedar nuts and walnuts rather than oats and grains; instead of water they drank heavy cream and Rhine wine. With 40,000 serfs, it was easy enough for the count to lavish this sort of attention on his domestic animals (Pyliaev 1897: 15). Yet the extravagance of Musin-Pushkin's table indicates far more than his wealth. It bespeaks a deeper need to regale with excess, to live a life outside of prudence, or even the bounds of reality, to enact one's personal obsessions.

The Russian table provides plenty of examples of obsession. A certain nobleman, Golovin, regularly ordered thirty different dishes for dinner, employing a separate cook for each dish. When the meal was ready, each cook in white apron and hat filed into the dining room to present his dish to the master. After setting the food on the table, the cooks exited with deep bows and a ritual doffing of hats. (Pyliaev 1897: 17) The eccentric Demidov forced his table servants to dress in strange livery. Half of each man's shirt was sewn of lace, the other of the coarsest cloth. A silk stocking and an elegant shoe covered one leg and foot; the other foot was shod in a peasant's bast sandal. The guests's surprise at this unusual costume contributed to the pleasure of the meal.

Demidov liked to play with his guests's expectations. He owned a magnificent garden with over two thousand rare plants and generously allowed his guests to roam freely through it. But after losing too many fruits and flowers to the sticky fingers of female guests, Demidov one evening replaced the garden statuary with naked peasant men. The filching came to an abrupt stop. Another time he invited the cream of local society to dinner. On the eve of the party he hired painters to whitewash all of his rooms, except for the dining room, and had them place scaffolding in front of every door. When the guests arrived in their finest attire, Demidov apologized that workmen had appeared unannounced and set up scaffolding throughout the house, forcing the diners to make their way through the obstacles, bending repeatedly under scaffolding until they finally reached the dining room (Pyliaev 1897: 16).

These antics would be little more than mildly amusing footnotes to Russian history if they did not represent an identifiable cultural trait. Russians consider trickery an art form, and those who practice it well (like Princess Olga) are, if not always universally esteemed, then certainly appreciated. During the nineteenth century, mealtime escapades among the leisured class became as common as medieval entertainments had been in Europe. But a crucial difference attended them. If earlier the display had focused largely on audience response, it now shifted to the self as hosts sought to prove their worth, projecting their desired public image onto a metaphorical stage. And as both actor and self-observer, they engaged in ever more outrageous behavior.

Immoderate as the behavior of the bored nobility may have been, it paled in comparison to that of the merchants, who found themselves newly (and often fabulously) rich as the nineteenth century wore on. The merchants chose to entertain in taverns or restaurants, rather than in the strict environment of their homes. Many of their families were religiously conservative. Far from the

watchful eyes of their wives, however, they frequently reserved private restaurant rooms for their entertainments and spent inordinate amounts of money on dishes like *ukha*, a soup of sterlet poached in imported champagne, which could cost up to 300 gold rubles (Ivanov 1982: 286). According to Ivan Pavlov, a seasoned waiter who often attended the merchant carousals at the Nizhny Novgorod fair, the food itself was secondary to the mealtime amusements. In an oral history Pavlov confessed that some of the merchants's recreations were too appalling to mention (Ivanov 1982: 288). His list of their more benign pastimes includes performances of 'the mermaid's funeral', for which the host ordered a coffin in which a nubile 'mermaid' would lie down. Candles were lit to make the atmosphere properly macabre. As a Gypsy chorus sang mournful songs, the drunken merchants would sob. A more upbeat diversion required that the maitre d' bring in a large tray of food garnished with flowers and greens. On a bed of napkins lay the centerpiece, a naked woman, the exotic dish of the day. While an orchestra played, the merchants showered the woman with rubles and poured wine and champagne over her, nibbling all the while on the surrounding food. At nearly 5,000 rubles, this entertainment did not come cheaply (Ivanov 1982: 287-8).

When thoroughly drunk, the merchants enjoyed playing 'going through purgatory (or plates)', a prandial twist on the biblical theme. All of the dinnerware and food from the table was arranged in a single row on the floor. Then, to the accompaniment of music, the drunken diners had to walk a straight line along the plates, carelessly soiling their boots with food. Whoever walked the entire path without faltering won the game (Ivanov 1982: 289). For 'aquarium', a grand piano was moved to the middle of the room and filled with several dozen bottles of champagne, after which sardines or sprats were added. The poor pianist had to play a rousing march as the fish swam frantically in the

roiling champagne. But the fish had it easy compared to the young women who agreed to participate in the merchants's games. For the 'living swings' the men gathered in a circle to swing a naked woman from arm to arm; one woman was tossed for so long that she lost consciousness. Naked women also figured in a variation on the mermaid theme. A girl was thrown into a large tub of champagne so that the merchants could enjoy watching her float in the liquid (an occupation that might seem to us tame enough, but since the wine was often highly chilled, the young woman risked illness).

Merchants were not the only carousers. The Russian literati also liked to gather in taverns or restaurants, though more often for camaraderie than serious debate. In the late 1880s the writer Nikolai Leskov and his circle frequented a rather disreputable tavern by the name of Grigoriev's. Here, in a private room, this group of talented men liked to indulge in food and drink, then act out "Golgotha," a sort of passion play. More often than not, the pale, bearded S.V. Maksimov played the part of Christ, with the actor I.F. Gorbunov in Pilate's role. After demanding Maksimov's crucifixion, the other players led him, hands tied with a napkin, to an adjoining room, where Gorbunov actually nailed him onto the wall. As a parting gesture, Maksimov was brought vinegar from a cruet to moisten his lips, and then his chest was 'pierced' with a spear -- Leskov's famous walking-stick that sported a *memento mori* in place of a handle. Once Maksimov's head had dropped to his chest, he was removed from the cross and wrapped in a 'shroud' -- a tablecloth from one of the tables -- then laid in a 'grave' (an ottoman). As a chorus broke into song, a guard stood watch until Maksimov miraculously rose from the grave. The performance over, everyone repaired to the table to resume their interrupted feast and to drink away the sorrows of Christ's passion (Leskov 236-7).

Revelry and sorrow typically coincided at the tables of Russia, yet the great public feast arranged in honor of Tsar Nicholas II's coronation in 1896 seems to have presaged the end of an era. Long tables were set up on a Moscow military training ground whose trenches had been covered over with boards. The scene, with its bonfires, carousels, and performance tents, exhibited the gaiety of a fair. Hundreds of thousands of commoners eagerly awaited the free food and beer being dispensed from kiosks along the field. But as the people thronged toward the food, the makeshift boards gave way. Thousands fell and were trampled. Thirteen hundred people died; another 1,300 were injured. In the meantime, the upper classes sat at the reviewing stands enjoying a concert, oblivious to all that was taking place just beyond their field of vision. On learning of the disaster, Nicholas refused to cancel any of the coronation celebrations. His people -- at the moment merely performers enlisted in the spectacle of his royal largesse -- were altogether dispensable.

In the aftermath of the 1917 revolution illusion took on new meaning as store windows were decorated with abundant food displays that masked the empty shelves inside. Restaurant menus listed dozens of dishes, but only one was usually available. These were the twentieth-century Potemkin villages, created not by the idle rich for their sovereign's indulgence but by the state in an effort to hide its failures. This pretense culminated in the famous Stalin-era cookbook, *A Book of Tasty and Healthy Food*, a purely performative gesture in its depiction of happy, healthy people enjoying tremendous bounty. Along with the early Soviet mandate to establish communal kitchens, this book reveals the government's attempt to script an entirely new way of life. The players had to learn their lines, the right way to perform in a socialist society, which included the proper preparation and consumption of food (never mind when there wasn't any). The director of this great public drama was shrewd and farseeing, as his

cast was continually reminded. Thus before offering up its recipes for a good life, A Book of Tasty and Healthy Food proclaims:

Under the direction of our glorious Communist Party, its Central Committee and the Soviet government, the people of our immense and powerful socialist Motherland, through heroic and creative labor, are erecting the majestic edifice of communism, creating in life mankind's age-old dream of building a communist society and an abundant, happy, and joyous life (Sivolap 17).

The history of Russian dining can be read as theatre, repeated with varying portions of tragedy and farce.

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