

À la russe

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HIGH SOCIETY DINNERS

Dining in tsarist Russia
Translated by Marian Schwartz
and edited by Darra Goldstein
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Since it was founded in 1979 by Jane and Alan Davidson, Prospect Books, run from a house in Devon, has issued hundreds of titles, presumably on small print runs, which many publishers would ignore. *High Society Dinners: Dining in Tsarist Russia*, a translation (by Marian Schwartz) of a volume which originally appeared in Russian in 1996, falls into this category. The book is divided into three sections. First comes a necessary introduction by the editor, Darra Goldstein, a Russian food specialist, who, as she explains, played the main role in bringing the book to an English-language audience. Next comes an introduction by the late Yuri Lotman (and his then research assistant, Jelena Pogosjan), the Russian academic responsible for the acquisition of a complete set of menus running to almost a year (1857–8), which had belonged to Petr Pavlovich Durnovo, Adjutant-General of the Tsar's Imperial Suite. In order to make a volume from these menus, Lotman and Pogosjan combined them with diary entries written by Petr's father Pavel, who was living in France at the time; letters sent by Petr to Pavel in the same period; and news items from contemporary newspapers. These elements constitute the rather disjointed narrative of the book's third part.

Goldstein uses her introduction to outline the nature and evolution of dining in nineteenth-century Russia; as the Durnovo menus make clear, service had by this point become *à la russe*, involving six courses arriving sequentially. She also warns the readers of the difficulties of Lotman's "discursive" prose style.

Indeed, Lotman's introduction constitutes a narrative without any obvious thematic order and with only a vague sense of chronology. He provides a rather breathless background on the evolution of high-society dining incorporating numerous references to Russian literature, ranging from Tolstoy and Pushkin to much more obscure authors. Goldstein is also right to mention that while "Lotman was a brilliant theoretician . . . he was no culinarian".

After the relative purgatory of that section, the documents themselves prove rewarding, especially for dipping in and out of. Though the six-course menus themselves make for rather dry and repetitive reading, often simply listing the foods consumed ("Soup Joinville, Stuffed whitefish, Duck with red cabbage, Roasted hazel grouse, Jerusalem artichokes, Macédoine jelly"), food historians will find much to interest them in the detail and in the generous

commentary by Lotman and Goldstein (with the latter often correcting the former's mistakes). From their footnotes we learn the history and methods of preparation of a variety of dishes. For example, *Boeuf à la cuillère* is described by Lotman as follows: "From à la Colbert (Fr.). This method was used most often in preparing fish; less often meat. A beef fillet is sliced thinly, an incision is made in the centre. And it is rolled up into a 'bow'. Then it is dipped in beaten egg, coated with breadcrumbs, and fried". Goldstein follows this with a similar recipe from George Augustus Sala, a friend of the great French chef and Anglophile Alexis Soyer.

The menus also point to the inflexibility of mealtimes in the Durnovo household, in which six courses were required whatever the occasion: perhaps this rigidity reflects the unchanging nature of Russian aristocratic life against the background of the mass exploitation and poverty which plagued most of the population before (and after) the emancipation of the serfs in 1861. The items eaten by Durnovo and his guests (mainly friends and relatives) range from dishes one could expect to find on any upper-class European table of the period, such as *pot-au-feu*, roast beef, and various types of jelly, to specifically Russian dishes, including *kaimak gaufre* (the skin of boiled milk served on a waffle; described as being of Tatar origin) and "lazy cabbage soup". Many dishes appear

regularly, including pike-perch or beef cooked in various ways, snipe and hazel grouse.

The letters from Petr to his father prove relatively banal, with felicitations playing a large role ("Regards to the Barres. If Uncle Anatole is still in Paris, please embrace him for me. I embrace you tenderly and remain steadfastly your most respectful and deeply indebted son"), while the diary kept by Pavel during his sojourn in Paris focuses partly on stock-market gambling and descriptions of beauty (or the lack of it, as he sees it) in the women he meets. It is the newspaper extracts which provide the most colour, consisting of a combination of stories on domestic Russian developments on the eve of emancipation, the major international events of the day (including the Orsini plot and the suppression of the Indian Mutiny) and comments on female fashion. In September 1857, Pavel writes: "Full skirts, no matter how they have been attacked and ridiculed, have come into general use. Actually, this could have been expected, because present-day fashions for all ladies' attire can only look good with full skirts. But does this in fact require the wearing of crinoline or wire hoops with ribbons?"

Though *High Society Dinners* is not always easy to read, it provides a fascinating insight into the lives of the mid-nineteenth-century Russian aristocracy – and because of its focus on a fortunate minority, one finds oneself wondering about the unmentioned majority: while the Durnovos were having consecutive sumptuous delicacies placed before them, what was on the tables of the poor?