

## A TRINITY OF SIBERIAN EASTER-SEASON MEALS

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After the breakup of the Soviet Union in late 1991, a number of major social, political, and economic changes began to occur in the newly established Russian Federation, the largest successor state to the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Democratic elections were held, many restrictions on foreign travel and on religious institutions were lifted, and both a market economy and a free press began to develop. A new class of relatively wealthy business-people (legitimate and otherwise) soon emerged, with plenty of Russian rubles (and foreign hard currency) to spend at home and abroad. An increasing number of Russians started traveling to countries that had previously been off-limits to all but a few select citizens of the Soviet Union. A wide variety of imported consumer goods--including foodstuffs that Russians had never tasted before--began appearing on the dusty shelves of former state stores and in the open-air markets of every sizable city. Church attendance rose dramatically, and the public observance of religious holidays was renewed throughout the country.

Many of these factors also began to have an effect, directly or indirectly, on the gastronomy of Russia. Russians who traveled abroad discovered new kinds of foods that had been unavailable in the Soviet Union. Eating in Spanish or French or Greek restaurants, they encountered new dishes and different ways in which meals could be served. Those who were interested in cooking brought back foreign recipes and new culinary ideas when they returned to Russia. And at home, even those Russians who never traveled to other countries could now purchase a wide range of new food products imported from a large number of nations around the world.<sup>1</sup>

With the increase of interest in religion, and the concomitant public observance of Russian Orthodox religious holidays, many culinary customs associated with these holidays were also resurrected. During much of the Communist era, when religious practices were often actively discouraged by the government,

special foods that were traditionally eaten on Russian Orthodox holidays were prepared, sometimes surreptitiously, by far fewer cooks than in earlier tsarist times. In many families, culinary-religious traditions were not passed on from one generation to the next, and many personal recipes for dishes with religious significance were lost when women of the older generation passed away.<sup>2</sup> In the 1990s, however, after seven decades of relative dormancy, interest in these holiday foods began to increase as more and more Russians began returning to the religious practices of their ancestors--or, if they were already believers, now more openly practiced their religion and followed the culinary traditions associated with it.<sup>3</sup>

This paper focuses on three very different types of meals that I ate (and, in one case, also cooked) in Irkutsk, Siberia, during a specific period of time in the spring of 1994, corresponding to pre-Lenten Carnival, Lent, and Orthodox Easter Sunday. Each meal illustrates several aspects of the changes that were occurring in the society and economy of Eastern Siberia during the early post-Soviet period.

### **Maslenitsa: Festival Food in Irkutsk**

After several long months of Siberian winter, March brought not only a gradually perceptible lengthening of the daylight hours, but also the festival of *Maslenitsa*, the seven-day "Butter Week" celebration that immediately precedes the seven-week fasting period leading up to Easter.<sup>4</sup> *Maslenitsa* itself is a secular festival--equivalent to Shrovetide in Britain, *Fasching* (*Fasnacht*, *Fasnet*) in Germanic countries, and Carnival or Mardi Gras in many Latin countries. All of these festivals date from pagan times, when people gathered during the spring equinox to chase away the evil spirits of winter, to make offerings to the sun, to celebrate the regeneration of life, and to welcome the return of warmer weather.

In the Christian era, Russian *Maslenitsa* evolved into a period of last-minute merrymaking the week before Lent--a culinary orgy during which people devoured huge

quantities of circular *bliny* (yeast-raised pancakes, golden rounds symbolizing the sun), drenched in melted butter or smothered in sour cream.<sup>5</sup> The name of the festival comes from *maslo*, the Russian word for "butter" (and "oil"), in reference to the richest food consumed during the week before the beginning of the Great Fast, when believers abstained from eating meat, fish, eggs, animal fats, and dairy products for the next seven weeks. Russian Orthodox fasting guidelines also traditionally proscribed the consumption of meat during *Maslenitsa*, which only reinforced people's desire to fill up on rich dairy foods during that time, before all animal products were prohibited during the Great Fast of Lent and Holy Week.<sup>6</sup>

The *Maslenitsa* celebration I attended in Irkutsk on Forgiveness Sunday in March, 1994, was the first major public observance of that festival within memory of the middle-aged Russians I knew in the city. Throngs filled the public square in front of the municipal sports stadium downtown, where the main events were being held. Hundreds of people in fur hats and fur coats, their breath forming clouds of condensation in the frosty air, milled about in front of an outdoor stage that had been set up on the square. Over the stage, a row of huge animal masks made of red-painted papier-mâché perched above big signs advertising furniture, clothing, sports events, and investment companies. Folk dancers in colorful costumes from different parts of Eastern Siberia performed to live and recorded music, while jesters and clowns worked the crowd. Handsome horses, with rows of brass bells on their harnesses, provided pony rides for the kids and pulled sleighs full of revelers. And towering over the multitude was a giant effigy of *Maslenitsa*--the Old Witch of Winter herself--constructed of paper, cloth, and wood, her grotesque form covered with long red ribbons and straw streamers that rustled like whispered warnings in the chilly wind.

Opposite the stage, a long row of gaily decorated food stalls provided portable sustenance for the merrymakers. Children and adults wandered from one display of food to the next, dividing their attention between the wares being hawked and the entertainers on stage--their ears tuned to the sounds of celebration, their noses turned toward the aromas of freshly cooked foods.

At one stall, a hefty woman in a karakul-lamb coat cooked *bliny* on a tiny, four-burner, white-enameled gas stove that looked

like it belonged in a museum of early twentieth-century kitchen appliances. Fresh from the skillet, the hot *bliny* were slathered with butter, sour cream, or jam, then handed to the customers on squares of hand-cut paper, while the vendor totaled up the bills on a wooden abacus. Nearby, aluminum trays full of extra *bliny*, folded into quarters, awaited re-heating on the stove. And still other trays held *bliny* rolled into cones and filled with sweetened pastry cream.

Women wrapped in floral-printed shawls sold the most extensive array of baked goods I had ever seen in Irkutsk: sweet and savory pastries, small rolls and buns, giant cookies and gooey layer cakes, all displayed on folding tables set up in the snow. Other food stalls offered meat products traditionally prohibited by Russian Orthodox fasting guidelines during *Maslenitsa* week: skewers of *shashlik* grilled over hot coals, small meatballs and large rissoles, savory buns with bits of fried bacon on top, cylinders of bread dough with a forcemeat filling. One vendor sold shiny boxes of commercially made candies. Another stood stoically beside several cardboard boxes of unwrapped chocolate ice cream cones, with no fear of their melting in the frigid air. From the back of a truck, a woman handed out hot pizzas baked in a portable oven. And all this festive fare was washed down with cans of Coca-Cola for the kids, cups of hot tea for the women, and shots of vodka for the men.

Suddenly, at 2:30 in the afternoon on that snowy square in Irkutsk, a big bonfire was set ablaze at the foot of the *Maslenitsa* witch, and five minutes later all that remained of the frightening figure was a pile of harmless ashes. That entire day, the sky had been gray and cloudy, the weather cold and windy. But just after the witch's effigy burned to the ground, the clouds suddenly broke, the sun came out, and the snow began to melt, as if cued by God himself. March 13, that *Maslenitsa* Sunday, was the first day the temperature rose above freezing in Irkutsk that year--once again confirming the ancient Siberians' belief that banishing the barren witch of winter brings the onset of fertile spring.

### **Palm Sunday Weekend: A Spanish Meal in Siberia**

The night before Palm Sunday, my husband and I had hosted a large dinner party at our apartment in Irkutsk, for several of our Russian and American colleagues from the university where we taught. For that special occasion, we wanted to serve a meal composed

of dishes that none of our guests were likely to have eaten before. As always in Irkutsk, however, the ingredients available that time of year at the city's cavernous Central Market established the culinary parameters within which we could plan our menu. But our own knowledge of several foreign cuisines, coupled with the seasonal products and new imported goods that were finding their way into Siberia's emerging market economy, made it possible for us to construct a Spanish menu featuring a range of dishes from different regions of Spain--even if it did take two weeks of diligent shopping to assemble all the ingredients needed for the dinner.

Despite the Spanish theme, I wanted to serve for dessert a traditional Russian Easter *paskha*, a cheesecake-like pudding chock full of ingredients forbidden during Lent: *tvorog* (a type of fresh white curd cheese), butter, egg yolks, and sour cream, the mixture sweetened with sugar and enhanced with vanilla, grated lemon zest, candied orange peel, and raisins soaked in brandy.<sup>7</sup> A *paskha* is customarily formed in a *pasochmitsa*, a tall, four-sided wooden or plastic mold shaped like a truncated pyramid, or simply made in a ceramic or plastic flower pot if a special *paskha* mold is unavailable. But I had to improvise with the only mold I could find that spring, a 2.5-liter black plastic bucket. I poked holes in the bottom of the container, lined it with cheesecloth, packed the *paskha* mixture into it, placed a weight on top to compress the cheesy mass, and put the *paskha* into the refrigerator overnight, to let any liquid drain out through the holes. Then, on the day of the dinner party, I inverted the *paskha* onto a serving plate, carefully slipped off the bucket, and decorated the cylinder of cheesecake with dark raisins, golden sultanas, and toasted almonds, forming flowers on one side of the *paskha* and the Cyrillic letters "XB"--for "*Khristos voskrese*" ("Christ is risen")--on the other.<sup>8</sup>

The guests arrived at our apartment that evening not knowing what to expect for dinner. I presented each of them with a menu, in Spanish, listing all the dishes we planned to serve, along with a Russian Easter card on which I had written, in English, the recipe for the dessert that night. Lacking an appropriate Spanish sherry for the aperitif, we began the meal with the only dry alcoholic beverages I could find in Irkutsk, Russian champagne and Bulgarian white wine. These accompanied a selection of hot and cold Spanish *tapas*: slices of Spanish *chorizo* sausage and Russian aged

yellow cheese; fresh mushrooms sauteed in Turkish olive oil with garlic and ham; Galician-style squid seasoned with onions, sweet red peppers, paprika, olive oil, and lemon juice; baked white fish, served cold, garnished with onions, lemon, and fresh cilantro; a pseudo-*romesco* sauce richly flavored with dried *chipotle* peppers that I'd brought from the United States; *ensalada rusa*, the Spanish version of Russian potato salad, bound with garlic mayonnaise; and plenty of fresh, chewy, yeasty flatbread, much like flatbreads I'd eaten in the eastern part of Spain. After we had finished these *tapas*, I ladeled out bowls of cold Andalusian *gazpacho*, showing our guests how to sprinkle the top of their soup with herb-seasoned croutons and finely chopped bell peppers, cucumbers, and onions.

Although none of these Spanish-inspired dishes were familiar to the six Russians seated at the table, they were at least familiar with the sequence in which the courses were being served, equating the Spanish *tapas* with their own *zakuski*. (Russian *zakuski* were originally served as before- or between-meal tidbits, eaten with drinks, like Spanish *tapas*, while standing up--but now they are customarily served as a kind of multi-dish first course of the meal itself, eaten as hors d'oeuvres at the table.) Similarly, the serving of a soup course after the hors d'oeuvres and before the main dish was in keeping with the way that contemporary Russians sometimes sequence the courses of a meal (if the meal is served in courses at all). And the idea of a cold soup for that course did not seem "foreign" to the Russians (as cold soups do to many Americans), because Russian cuisine includes a number of cold soups made from beets, fruits, berries, and a wide variety of other ingredients. But tomato-based Andalusian *gazpacho* was a revelation to our Russian guests, who liked it so much they asked, rather sheepishly, if they could have second helpings of it.

The main course was Catalan-style *pollo con vino tinto*--American chicken leg quarters braised in Hungarian red wine with local Russian onions, garlic, and mushrooms, and slivers of Danish ham--accompanied by a Valencian-style rice cooked in Israeli chicken stock with raisins, dried apricots, and walnuts from the Caucasus. With this course we served a red-wine *sangria*, redolent of oranges and lemons steeped in brandy and mixed with a dry, fruity Hungarian red wine. That Spanish-style *sangria* turned out to be a special treat for the

Siberians, who all said they'd never tasted anything like it before.

But dessert was the biggest surprise of all. To a chorus of delighted exclamations from all the guests, I placed the *paskha* in the center of the table for everyone to see before I scooped it into servings. But it was my turn to be surprised: None of the Russians knew what it was. When I explained that *paskha* was a traditional Russian Easter dessert, dating back centuries into Russian history, they all looked at me with blank faces. I went on to say that *paskha* is normally served with *kulich*--a tall, cylindrical, cardamom- or saffron-scented, yeast bread, with white icing drizzled over its dome-like top. But only three of the Russians were even vaguely aware of what a *kulich* was, even though several bakeries in Irkutsk were selling *kulich* that spring.<sup>9</sup> As I explained the significance of these traditional Easter desserts, I couldn't help but note to myself the irony of an American from Texas introducing these sophisticated, highly educated, middle-aged Russians to the Easter foods that had once been well known to their own Christian ancestors.

I spooned the creamy *paskha* into individual dessert bowls and--continuing the Iberian theme--surrounded each portion with a pool of Spanish orange custard sauce, while my husband poured out more white wine and champagne.<sup>10</sup> And three hours after sitting down to that Spanish dinner, we all genially concluded the meal with glasses of Osborne Veterano Spanish brandy (from a single bottle we'd found in the market the day before)--a familiar taste of Spain that I certainly had never expected to experience while living in Siberia.

### **Easter Sunday: A Siberian Fusion-Food Feast**

The following Saturday, the day before Easter, I spent most of the day dyeing Easter eggs to decorate our apartment and give as gifts to our friends. Like most people in Siberia, I had to improvise with whatever materials were at hand: onion skins tied onto some of the eggs with jute twine, strands of colored cotton yarn wrapped around other eggs, and a dye bath made of chopped beets boiled in water with vinegar, salt, and a touch of vodka for mordant. By the end of the day, I had bowls full of beautiful eggs, in colors ranging from various shades of brown to rose pink to bright red, with abstract designs printed on them by the onion skins and the yarn. A few minutes after I took some of the Easter eggs to our Russian neighbors, the *babushka*

from next door presented me with two large duck eggs dyed a subtle beige color, with motifs like rice grains speckling the entire surface of the shells.

At eleven o'clock that Saturday night, my husband and I squeezed into a small car with our Russian friends Gennadi and Natalia and their teenage daughter, Iulia, to drive to the eighteenth-century Znamensky Convent church for the Easter midnight service. The most important festival on the religious calendar, Easter is celebrated at Orthodox churches all over Russia with a magnificent Divine Liturgy lasting several hours, culminating in the annual revelation of Christ's resurrection. And afterward, at the homes of millions of believers, no expense has been spared for the special Easter meal that breaks the long Lenten fast--actually or only symbolically--a feast unequalled during the rest of the year.<sup>11</sup>

Inside the church, in a small anteroom adjacent to the sanctuary, long boards set up on sawhorses and covered with white cloth served as temporary tables for the *kulich* and baskets of eggs that had been brought to the church to be blessed. Fifty or sixty *kulich* of several sizes filled the tables, with more *kulich* sitting in the deep window recesses of the room's thick stone walls. Some of the *kulich* were baked in the traditional tall cylindrical shape, but most were wider and shorter, made in fluted brioche pans. Their rounded tops were decorated in a variety of ways: One was crowned with a cross made out of dough; another had "XB" traced on it with colored sugar granules; and many had white icing drizzled over the domes. Stuck into the top of each was a tall, ivory-colored, pencil-thin, lighted taper, the cumulative candlelight casting flickering shadows like fitful spirits against the plain plaster walls. Easter eggs surrounded many of the *kulich*, and more eggs were displayed separately on plates and in glass jars. Most of the eggs were medium brown, their color imparted by onion skins; only a few had been dyed with commercial colors--a yellow one here, a turquoise one there, standing out from the others like painted ladies at a prayer meeting. I was surprised there were no *paskhi*, however, because in many parts of Russia *paskhi* are brought to the church along with the *kulich* and dyed eggs, to be blessed before the traditional Easter feast.<sup>12</sup>

Gennadi and Natalia had invited us and three other American colleagues to Easter dinner at their home the next day. At one o'clock in the afternoon, with gifts of vodka and Easter eggs in

hand, we arrived at their small apartment in a typical Soviet-era highrise building that looked much like the ugly, crumbling, gray apartment building where we ourselves lived. But I was pleasantly surprised when I walked through their front door. Gennadi and Natalia's home was so strikingly stylish in decor that it could have been located in northern Europe instead of southern Siberia. Boldly colored modern art hung on the white walls, some of the paintings done by Gennadi himself. The tiny living room was almost filled by a divan and matching chair covered with a black-and-white zebra-striped cotton fabric. A black, upright, Jugendstil-era German piano stood at one end of the room, while the remaining space was taken up by two tables pushed together to accommodate the eight of us gathered for the Easter feast. On a small serving cart in the corner, a Ukrainian Easter bread, baked in a Bundt pan and decorated with white icing and colored sugar sprinkles, sat on a cake plate covered with bright green paper cut to resemble grass, surrounded by several dyed Easter eggs. Three small candles stuck into the bread symbolized the Holy Trinity, and one large candle in the center signified the Resurrection.

Never had I seen a Russian dinner table set so beautifully. Dainty white cloths had been spread over the surface. Pretty pink-and-silver Japanese porcelain plates defined each place setting, along with silver-plated flatware, pastel paper napkins, and the most extensive array of stemmed wine glasses I had ever encountered in a Russian home: heavy cut-crystal sherry glasses from Eastern Europe, modern balloon-shaped red-wine glasses, and black-stemmed champagne flutes from France. (Natalia was the only Russian I knew who served champagne in flutes.) Handmade, tulip-shaped place cards--cut from bright green, orange, and pink paper--indicated where each guest should sit. A crystal vase of silk daffodils graced the center of the table--the first time I had seen any flowers, real or silk, on a dinner table in a Russian home. And a basket of five hand-painted, lacquered wooden eggs--each one a gift for a guest--completed the artistic table setting.

Competing for space on that elegant Easter table were bottles of Russian champagne, imported white wine, and vodka (both domestic and foreign), as well as the first-course *zakuski* that Natalia brought out from the kitchen. Gennadi began the festive midday meal with a formal champagne toast, after which we slowly drank the bubbly brew on empty stomachs as we savored the sunshine streaming through the

picture window, warming our skin while the wine worked its wonders within. Next came sherry glasses topped up with locally produced Baikalskaia vodka, the smoothest vodka I had ever tasted. Already giddy from these potent aperitifs, none of us refused a glass of imported lemon-flavored vodka, which we all proclaimed to be the best fruit-flavored vodka we had ever drunk.

By that time, Natalia was insisting that we eat some of the *zakuski* set out on the table: a large whole baked salmon, served cold, garnished with pickled green peppers and swimming in a red sea of *lecho* (the Slavic rendition of French *ratatouille*); "herring in a coat," a cold appetizer from the Baltic, made of salted herring fillets layered with sliced boiled potatoes and beets, all nestled beneath a mantle of mixed mayonnaise and sour cream; and a platter piled high with small rounds of flat pastry, each topped with mushrooms and red kidney beans combined with a thick sauce of pureed garlic, walnuts, tomatoes, and sour cream--a Georgian specialty baked by Siberian Gennadi, and one of the most delectable *zakuski* that I ate during my entire stay in Irkutsk.

Soon after we began nibbling on those hors d'oeuvres, Gennadi and Natalia suggested that we all drink a round of Bloody Marys, "Russian-style." Gennadi filled each balloon glass halfway with tomato juice, sprinkled in some salt and pepper, then placed a dinner knife at a 45-degree angle into the glass and slowly poured vodka down the knife blade until the clear liquor floated in a half-inch layer on top of the tomato juice. We all sipped this concoction as if it were another of the cold foods among the *zakuski* spread, as we complemented our hosts on their culinary accomplishments. Perhaps we were too effusive in our praise, however, because when we finished those potent cocktails, Gennadi insisted that--purely for purposes of comparison--we drink another round of Bloody Marys, this time "Maryland-style." None of the five Americans at the table knew what he was talking about. But who were we to refuse balloon glasses half-filled with a mixture of vodka and tomato juice, with chopped fresh cilantro on top? (*Cilantro?* The style in *Maryland?*) By that point, none of us was sober enough to dispute Gennadi's assertion that these gargantuan cocktails had to be drunk the Russian way, in one draw. Once again Russian reality had outpaced my expectations: Never before in my life had I envisioned starting an Easter dinner chug-a-lugging Bloody Marys in Siberia.

My husband and I knew that all those delicious dishes on the table were merely a prelude to the main course. But our American colleagues--who had never been invited to a Russian home for such a feast--ate and drank their fill of all the *zakuski*, with no notion of what was to come. So they were genuinely surprised when Natalia brought out the next course: German-style beef *Rouladen*, pounded pieces of flank steak with julienned carrots and pickled cucumbers rolled up inside, braised in the oven. The *Rouladen* were accompanied somewhat incongruously by commercial shrimp chips from Vietnam and crunchy potato sticks, like crinkle-cut French fries, from Korea. As that multi-course Easter meal progressed, I reflected that it might well prefigure the urban Siberian cuisine of the future: a fusion of East and West, Asia and Europe, the old and the new, as forgotten recipes are resurrected, as a wider range of foodstuffs is imported into Russia, and as more Russians become acquainted with the cooking of other countries (through travel, cookbooks, culinary magazines, and foreign television shows).<sup>13</sup>

For the dessert course, Natalia completely changed the table settings, once again demonstrating her flair for design. Modern black, white, and gold porcelain chargers supported dessert plates dished up with molded pink gelatin topped with banana slices and slabs of rich Russian vanilla ice cream. (For a moment I felt as if I'd been transported back to the America of my childhood in the 1950s, when such gaudily colored gelatin desserts were *de rigueur* at church socials and school cafeterias.) As if all this bounty were not sufficient to celebrate the resurrection of Christ, Natalia also passed around her own sweet Ukrainian Easter bread, as well as three desserts baked by Gennadi's mother: a traditional Russian *kulich*, hers crowned with raspberries; light, fluffy meringue cookies, made with the many egg whites left over from baking the *kulich*; and a large, rectangular, richly flavored blackberry pie, with lattice-work pastry on top. Gennadi offered us snifters of Remy Martin cognac to complete the meal, but none of us was willing to waste such a treasure on our overloaded palates. So--six hours after we had arrived for that midday feast--we all sat around the table and finished off the remaining bottles of champagne and white wine, as the sky darkened outside, and Natalia lighted the candles in the brass sconces on the piano, and Iulia entertained us with selections from Borodin and Bach, ending with a rousing

rendition of a Scott Joplin rag.

### Conclusion

These descriptions of three very different springtime meals in early post-Soviet Siberia illustrate a number of factors about foods in that region of Russia at that particular time: (1) the kinds of commercially prepared foods, both traditional and modern, sold at *Maslenitsa*, a municipally sponsored public street festival, recently revived in the post-Soviet era, which is directly related to the religious season of Lent that defines the dates of *Maslenitsa* on the secular calendar; (2) the range of domestic and imported food products available in a major Siberian city (Irkutsk, population 650,000) in 1994; (3) the ways in which we (Americans) were able to use ingredients available in Siberia to produce a relatively authentic-tasting meal featuring dishes from another country and another climate (Spain) half a world away; (4) the fact that some Russians, whose ancestors were practicing Christians, are no longer aware of the particular foods, such as *paskha* and *kulich*, that have traditionally been associated with Easter, the most important religious feast day of the year; and (5) the ways in which a cosmopolitan, well-educated Siberian couple combined the ingredients available to them, and their own knowledge of local and foreign cuisines, to produce an eclectic Easter feast that incorporated culinary elements, both traditional and modern, from many parts of the world.

Although the optimism of the early post-Soviet period has waned considerably as a result of subsequent economic, social, and political difficulties in the Russian Federation, I think it is reasonable to predict that Russians' exposure to new food products, new prepared dishes, a wider range (and better quality) of cookware, tableware, and kitchen appliances, and different ways of constructing and serving the components of a meal--all may have at least some effect on the palates and culinary habits of those Russians who are open to new ideas and experiences, and who are willing to experiment with the new, imported ingredients available to them. If the economic woes of the past few years prove to be only temporary, then the foodways of some Russians may eventually be influenced even more--and in some cases, changed--by the increased importation of foods from all over the world, by the culinary experiences of foreign travel, by foods seen on foreign television shows broadcast in Russia, and by the publication of more cookbooks and

culinary articles about cuisines from countries beyond the borders of the Russian Federation.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Onions with No Bottoms and Chickens with No Tops: Shopping for Food in the Emerging Market Economy of Siberia and the Russian Far East, by Tom Hudgins, in Food on the Move: Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery 1996, pp. 157-176.

<sup>2</sup> This is not to imply that all of these religious culinary traditions were dormant or lost during the Soviet era. Many older women still prepared certain traditional dishes for important holidays such as Christmas and Easter. But these practices were less widespread than before the Communists came to power in 1917. In the Soviet Union, many adherents of Christian

religions (Russian Orthodox and others) kept their beliefs hidden from colleagues and friends, fearing reprisals from the state if their religious affiliation were discovered. Hence, many of them also refrained from preparing and eating foods traditionally associated with Christian holidays--or, if they did prepare foods such as *paskha* and *kulich* (associated with Easter), they did not make a point of their religious significance. On the other hand, Russian Orthodox emigre communities around the world have maintained their religious culinary traditions, often as an important part of their Russian identity, passing these traditions on from one generation to the next.

<sup>3</sup> This paper focuses on culinary traditions associated with the Russian Orthodox Church, which is by far the dominant religion in the Russian Federation. Members of other Christian churches in Russia (e.g., Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Baptist), as well as adherents to Judaism, Buddhism, and Islam in Russia, have their own culinary traditions associated with particular religious holidays.

<sup>4</sup> In the Russian Orthodox Church, the period of Lent is preceded by the secular festival of Maslenitsa, which begins after Vespers on Meat Fare Sunday, the last day on which meat can be eaten before Easter, eight weeks away. Maslenitsa lasts for one week, until after Vespers on the following Sunday, known as Forgiveness Sunday. The seven-week Great Fast then begins, during which all animal products, including fish, are proscribed, except on Annunciation Day and Palm Sunday, when fish may be eaten, and on Lazarus Saturday (the day before Palm Sunday), when caviar may be consumed--these exceptions permitted as a foretaste of the Resurrection. Good Friday is the strictest fast day of the year, with no food eaten at all.

<sup>5</sup> Russian *bliny* are medium-thin, yeast-raised pancakes, about 5 to 7 inches in diameter, made with buckwheat flour, wheat flour, or a combination of the two. They can be topped with many kinds of garnishes, including melted butter, sour cream, curd cheese, smoked or pickled fish, caviar, chopped hard-boiled eggs, mushrooms, chopped green onions, syrups, jams, and preserves.

<sup>6</sup> Russian Orthodox fasting guidelines are meant to assist believers in their spiritual growth and, in the case of the Great Fast of Lent and Holy Week, to prepare for *Paskha* (Easter), the greatest feast day (both spiritually and materially) on the church calendar.

<sup>7</sup> There are many versions of Russian *paskha*, both cooked and uncooked. In *Classic Russian Cuisine*, pp. 233-239, Alla Sacharow provides recipes for fourteen different variations of *paskha*. Many cooks have their own favorite recipe for this dish, often an old family recipe from which they never deviate. I have a Siberian friend, born in Irkutsk and raised farther north in Yakutsk, who remembers her grandmother decorating their annual Easter *paskha* with grains of millet colored with natural vegetable dyes (beets, berries, etc.). When making *paskha*, her grandmother always wore clean clothes and covered her head with a kerchief. She also believed that a woman having her menstrual period should never be allowed to make the family's *paskha*, because the *paskha* would spoil.

<sup>8</sup> The Russian Easter cheesecake *paskha* should not be confused with the Ukrainian Easter cake-like bread called *paska* (note the different spellings; the words mean "Easter" in Russian and Ukrainian respectively). Ukrainian *paska* is a fat round loaf made from a yeast-raised dough often studded with raisins, which is shaped somewhat like Italian *panettone* and usually topped with symbolic decorations made of dough, much like Greek Easter breads. (Other Ukrainian *paski* look almost identical to the slimmer Russian Easter bread *kulich*, which is a traditional accompaniment to the creamy *paskha* cheesecake in Russia. See footnote number 9.) However, in some parts of central and eastern Ukraine, where the ethnic Russian and ethnic Ukrainian communities overlap geographically, some Ukrainians also call an Easter cheesecake *paska* (note spelling again), the same term they use for their own Ukrainian yeast-raised loaf--two very different types of foods. See Norma Jost Voth's descriptions of different types of Ukrainian Easter *paska* in *Mennonite Foods & Folkways from South Russia, Vol. I*, pp. 96-102, as well as *paska* and other Easter foods in *Vol. II*, pp. 113-129.

<sup>9</sup> Tall, cylindrical *kulich*, with their puffy, mushroom-shaped tops and drizzles of white icing are unmistakably phallic in appearance--a visual reference to the regeneration of life every springtime. (Certain Easter breads in France and Italy also share this same anatomical form.) Not surprisingly, there are a number of superstitions surrounding the preparation and baking of *kulich*. In earlier times, large quantities of *kulich* were baked for Easter, and women competed with their friends, relatives, and

neighbors to see who could make the biggest, tallest, lightest, and puffiest *kulich*--surely also a not-too-subtle reflection on the manliness of their husbands, given the suggestive shape of *kulich*. (I have a recipe for *kulich*, published in 1924, that calls for 10 pounds of flour and 100 egg yolks, with the dough kneaded by hand for 1-1/2 hours.) The dough must also rise three times--not only a method of producing the tender, light texture desired, but also a symbolic reference to the Holy Trinity. The dough was often made on Good Friday, and the girls in the family stayed up all night with it, singing hymns while it was rising. It was considered bad luck if the *kulich* dough did not rise properly, or if the loaves fell during baking. So the women said a prayer and crossed themselves before putting the loaves into the oven, and they forbade any loud noises or disturbances in the house that might cause the *kulich* to collapse. When the *kulich* came out of the oven, some people placed them on their sides on a down pillow covered with a kitchen cloth and rotated the *kulich* occasionally while they cooled, to keep them from collapsing. Yet descriptions of this practice fly in the face of an old Russian superstition which holds that a pillow on the table is a bad omen (perhaps because the dead are laid out on a table, too, with a pillow under their heads). Could this custom for cooling *kulich* have a double meaning: death (the pillow) and resurrection (the risen *kulich*)? Perhaps as a way around this, another cook suggests letting the *kulich* cool, on their sides, in a little hammock made by stretching a kitchen towel between two chairs. Interestingly, I have Soviet-era cookbooks published in Russia in the second half of the twentieth century that contain recipes for *kulich* (with no reference to its Easter or religious significance), but do not have any recipes for *paskha* (probably because the name of this dish means "Easter")--although some do have recipes for *paskha*-like dishes that are not identified by that specific name. On the other hand, I also have Russian cookbooks published in the late Gorbachev-era and the early post-Soviet period that do give recipes for (and have photographs or drawings of) both *paskha* and *kulich*, with explanations of their significance for the Easter table. And I have three cookbooks, published in Russia in 1990, 1991, and 1993, solely on the topic of Russian Orthodox ceremonial foods. (See Bibliography.)

<sup>10</sup> In Russian households, *paskha* is always served with *kulich* (unlike the way I served it at

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our Spanish meal). First, the dome of the *kulich* is sliced off, horizontally, and set aside. Then 1/2-inch-thick rounds are sliced off the *kulich* by cutting it horizontally, from the top down, and the dome is placed back on top of the remaining bread to keep it fresh. The *paskha* is either spread on the piece of *kulich* or served separately on the same dessert plate with a slice of *kulich*.

<sup>11</sup> The only other holiday feast that rivals Easter is the meal eaten on New Year's Eve, the most important secular holiday of the year, which is celebrated by many more Russians than those who observe Easter.

<sup>12</sup> Many sources depict, verbally or pictorially, *paskhi*, *kulich*, and colored eggs taken to Russian Orthodox churches on Holy Saturday evening to be blessed by the priest. In some Orthodox churches, believers take an entire Easter basket of foods that will later be eaten to break the Great Fast of Lent and Holy Week. These may include, according to local customs, not only *paskha*, *kulich*, and hard-boiled eggs (often dyed red, or ornately decorated with folk art motifs), but also butter (sometimes molded into the shape of a paschal lamb), bread, salt, horseradish, sausages, ham, and other meats--all carried to church in a basket used only for these blessed foods, covered with an ornately embroidered cloth used only for this purpose at Easter-time.

<sup>13</sup> In the Soviet Union, cookbooks were published about the cuisines of the various republics, and some of the ethnic groups, that made up the U. S. S. R., as well as recipe books about the cuisines of the Eastern and Central European countries allied with the Soviet Union. (My own collection of cookbooks published in the Soviet Union and in the Russian Federation of the early post-Soviet period includes books on the cooking of the Caucasus, Estonia, Belorussia, the Kuban region, Rumania, Moldavia, Czechoslovakia, Uzbekistan, the Tartar people, and the Buriat people.) Since citizens of the Soviet Union could travel more easily to the Warsaw Pact countries than to other countries of the world, they were much more familiar with the foods of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and in some cases Central Asia, than they were with the cuisines of Western Europe, North and South America, and many Asian countries. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, however--and along with the influence of the Internet--there has been more opportunity for people living in the Russian Federation to access information, including culinary information, about countries

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throughout the world. And within Russia itself, more cookbooks about foreign cuisines are being published (some are translations from books published in other countries), as well as culinary magazines such as the glitzy *Gastronom* and the more down-home *Priiatnogo appetita!*