INTERNATIONAL OUTREACH

CULTUREGUIDE

Russia

Series 1
Secondary (7–12)
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Food

The Flavor of Russia

Russia’s climate and economic structure directly affect the methods of production and preservation of food. As there is much interdependence between the economy and agriculture, one may better understand the traditional Russian way of life by studying their attitudes about food.

Starting Points

1. Make or purchase Russian food such as borsch or pilmyeni. What are the students’ impressions?

2. Ask the students if their families have gardens. Have they ever had to rely on a garden to feed the family? What kinds of food would they be limited to if they only ate what they grew?

3. Have students write down a typical daily menu. As you study Russian food, have students compare the Russian diet with their own. Look for specific reasons that may account for similarities and differences.

Information

The Russian Diet

Most Russian food is homemade. Women begin making dinner shortly after they return from work each day. The Russian diet is, for the most part, based on simple foods that are suitable for production in Russia’s climate. Vegetables that can be stored during the winter, including cucumbers, tomatoes, beets, onions, radishes, and cabbage, are the most common. Beef, chicken, pork, and fish are popular main dishes. Fruit is extremely expensive because it does not grow well in Russia’s climate, and so is rarely eaten.

Perhaps one of the most common foods in Russia, borsch, is made with a meat broth and vegetables, including shredded cabbage and beets, which give the soup a dark red color. A small amount of sour cream is usually added just before serving. If borsch is not part of a meal, it is likely that some other soup will be served. Russians feel that a meal is not complete without soup, and it is unacceptable to serve soup without bread.

Bread is so important that it has been incorporated into various elements of Russian customs. For example, bread and salt are always presented upon the arrival of an important visitor as a sign of openness and hospitality. Russian bread, like many European breads, is heavier than the bread most Americans are accustomed to. Russians make and eat white bread, wheat bread, round bread, square bread, long round bread, and flat bread, but Russia is especially known for its dark, rich, black
rye bread. For Russians, fresh bread has always been a delight. It is unheard of to add preservatives or additives to prolong the life of a loaf. This means that most people stop daily at a local bread store.

Most Russian produce is grown at individual summer homes called dachas (see Food Visual 1). Many families spend the warm months between April and October living in and maintaining a dacha. Staple foods such as potatoes, onions, and cabbages grow well in Russia, despite its harsh climate. Many Russians will either grow these foods in their own gardens, or buy them at an inexpensive local open market. After Russians have harvested their produce, many preserve the surplus in jars. This means that many pots of borsch come from preserved ingredients.

Cabbage is frequently used in Russian cooking because it is easy to grow and fairly inexpensive. Russians make cabbage soup, cabbage pie, cabbage dumplings, and cabbage salads. The most popular cabbage dish is cabbage soup, or shchi. It is made with chicken broth, chopped carrots, onions, some kind of meat, and lots of cabbage.

Potatoes are another staple food that is plentiful in Russia. Russians use potatoes to make perashkee (which look like scones). Older women (babooshkas) make perashkee in the morning and sell it on street corners throughout the day. Another food made from potatoes is varenikee. Varenikee are like ravioli with potatoes inside. Russians like to put butter and sour cream on it.

Russians also consume a lot of dairy products. Milk, cheese, and sour cream are common at almost every meal. Tvorog is a dairy product similar to cottage cheese, but with less liquid. It can be eaten on its own, used as a filling, or added as an ingredient to many other dishes. In addition to dairy products, Russians traditionally eat a lot of meat; however, economic problems in recent years have limited its consumption.

Pilmyeni are similar to ravioli, filled with ground beef or pork that is mixed with various seasonings and then formed into small dumplings from one to three inches in diameter. Unlike ravioli, dough for the dumplings is more like bread dough than pasta. Pelmyeni are boiled and served with sour cream. Russians use various methods of preservation to keep their food during the winter months. Hundreds of pilmyeni are made at a time and then placed out on the frozen ground to freeze. They are stored until needed and then added to a hot broth, making the soup heartier and more filling in the cold winter months. Pilmyeni accompany many meals, sometimes as an appetizer, and sometimes as part of the main dish. Today pilmyeni have also become a popular fast food dish and are served in cafeterias around the country. It is traditional for many people to brag about how many pilmyeni they can eat in one sitting, occasionally extending into the hundreds.

The Russian Market

Only since the fall of the Soviet Union have stores similar to American supermarkets appeared in Russia. However, these stores are often quite small, lack fresh produce, and carry mostly imported luxury goods that the average Russian cannot afford. Most shopping is still done in the outdoor market (see Food Visual 2). A large city will have various markets, but nearly all cities have one large market in the central area of the city.
The market is often divided into various areas of selling: fruits and vegetables, meats, dairy products, and prepackaged goods. Because the goods brought to the market are sold by many different vendors, each item must be purchased separately. This can greatly extend the amount of time it takes to go shopping because a grocery list may contain items that require the buyer to go to many different areas of the market. Another outcome of this system is that produce prices and availability tend to increase and decrease dramatically from season to season. The system can also make purchases difficult because vendors change places and offer different products. Before buying a product, the buyer must first find the vendors who actually have what they are looking for, and then compare prices.

Many people spend their summers working at their dachas, returning in the fall to sell their fruits and vegetables at their local markets. In many Russian neighborhoods, there are smaller open-air markets where people set up booths to sell their goods. Meat, bread, dairy, pasta, rice, flour, and juices are also sold here. Early in the morning, trucks stop at these markets to deposit large bags of products. People sell food in the rain, snow, heat, and cold. At about eight or nine o’clock in the evening, merchants either box up what didn’t sell or load the products back onto the trucks for the night. They then return early the next morning to start all over again.

**Recipe for Borsch**

**You will need:**

- 3 C potatoes, peeled and cubed, salt to taste
- 1/2 tsp each dill, parsley, thyme
- 3 C cabbage, shredded
- 1 T garlic powder
- 1/2 C onions, minced
- 3 C beets, grated
- 2 T butter, lard, or oil
- 1 C carrots, grated
- sour cream
- 2 qt beef broth*
- Russian black bread
- 2 tomatoes, peeled and cubed
- 6 T red wine vinegar
- 2 bay leaves
- 12 peppercorns
- large pot and frying pan

**Preparation**

1. Boil potatoes.
2. While potatoes are boiling, chop cabbage and onion and fry in oil.
3. Add grated carrots and beets to the frying mixture. Cabbage should be tender when the potatoes are about done (which is about the same time it takes to peel and grate the carrots and beets).
4. Drain potatoes and add to broth.
5. Add vegetables to beef broth.
6. Bring to a boil.
7. Add tomatoes, vinegar, and seasonings. Let simmer at least 45 minutes.
8. Serve hot with a spoonful of sour cream.

Yield: approximately 36 servings

Slice bread, and cut each slice in half vertically so that it fits in one hand while you eat your soup with the other.
*The easiest way to make beef broth is to use beef bullion. Follow the directions on the package for 2 quarts of beef broth. If you don’t want to use bullion, buy soup bones at the grocery store and boil them until the flavor reaches desired strength, usually 2–3 hours.

Some tasty variations include adding one cup of kidney beans, chopped pickles, green peppers, or parsley root to the borsch.

**Recipe for Russian Salad**

**You will need:**

- 5 potatoes
- 5 carrots
- 4 eggs
- 2 onions
- 1 12 oz jar dill pickles
- 1 can peas
- 1 T salt
- 1 tsp pepper
- 1 C mayonnaise

**Preparation**

1. Boil potatoes and carrots until soft. Cool, peel, and chop into small pieces.
2. Boil eggs, peel, and cut into small pieces.
3. Chop onions and pickles.
4. Combine all ingredients in large bowl.
5. Add salt, pepper, and mayonnaise.
6. Chill and serve.

**Recipe for Pilmyeni (Siberian Dumplings)**

**You will need:**

- 6 C bleached flour
- 1 lb ground sausage
- 2 tsp salt
- 1 1/2 lbs ground beef
- 2 eggs
- 2–3 medium onions, diced
- 2 C cold water
- salt to taste

**Preparation**

**Dough**

1. Combine flour and salt in large bowl.
2. Add eggs and beat. Continue to stir mixture while slowly adding water.
3. Mix until dough forms a ball (it will be like bread dough).
4. Place dough on a floured surface and knead until dough is smooth.
5. Cover and let stand until ready to use.

**Filling**

1. In another large bowl, combine sausage, beef, and onions. Mix thoroughly. Add salt.
2. Divide dough into several small balls. Place dough ball on a floured surface and roll into a very thin layer, making sure dough doesn’t tear. With a round cookie cutter or cup, cut dough into 2-inch circles.
3. In a large pot, or a few small pots, bring some water to a boil.
4. On the cut-out circles of dough, place a teaspoon of filling on one half. Fold the other half of dough over and pinch the edges shut. Seal the edges by pressing the tines of a fork all the way around the edges.
5. Carefully drop the formed pilmyeni into the boiling water, stirring occasionally, until thoroughly cooked (about eight minutes).
6. Serve with sour cream and enjoy!

Recipe for *Bleeni* (Russian Pancakes)

**You will need:**

- 1/2 C water
- 1 T butter, melted
- 1/2 C milk
- 2 eggs
- 1 C flour
- 1 1/4 C raisins
- 1/2 tsp salt
- 2 T sour cream
- 1 egg
- 1/4 C sugar

**Preparation**

1. Mix water, milk, flour, salt, and 1 egg in bowl. Beat until smooth.
2. Add 1 T melted butter to batter.
3. Pour 1/4 C batter into heated skillet. Tip pan to spread the batter.
4. Cook until light brown, turn, and brown other side.
5. Repeat with remaining batter, adding butter to skillet as needed.
6. For topping, blend the eggs, raisins, sour cream, and sugar.

Recipe for *Varenekee*

**You will need:**

- 1 C milk
- 1 egg
- dash of salt
- 3–4 C flour
- 5–6 C mashed potatoes (you may want to add grated cheese and/or chopped onions and mushrooms that have been sauteed in oil)

**Preparation**

1. Combine milk, salt, and egg.
2. Add flour until dough is firm. It should stick together and handle easily.
3. Place dough on a floured surface and roll to approximately 1/4 inch thick.
4. Cut dough into circles with a glass or cookie cutter.
5. Place a spoonful of potatoes on one half of the dough. Fold other half over and seal the edges.
6. Add these dumplings to boiling water and cook for 3 minutes, stirring so that they do not stick to the pan.

Note: If you want to save varenekee until later, completely cover them in flour, place in plastic bag (uncooked) and freeze.
Activities

1. Cook and eat a Russian meal. You may want to go to a local specialty store and purchase Russian bread to go with your soup.

2. Market Day Simulation. You will need: 1) A shopping list for each group member with five or six of the items discussed in the rynok section including bread, dairy, vegetables, meat, and packaged goods; 2) Twenty-five rubles cut out of paper for each individual consisting of three 5p coins, three 2p coins, and four 1p coins (the Russian “r” for ruble looks like an English “p”); 3) Cans of food, wooden blocks, or other heavy goods; 4) A paket (plastic shopping bag) for each participant. Set up ten to twelve booths on desks or tables, and designate group members as salespeople for each.

Some suggested prices:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Price</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 kg of beets</td>
<td>6 rubles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 kg of chicken</td>
<td>18 rubles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 kg of potatoes</td>
<td>8 rubles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 kg of pork</td>
<td>15 rubles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 head of cabbage</td>
<td>3 rubles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>250 g of butter</td>
<td>1 ruble</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 kg of sugar</td>
<td>16 rubles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>250 g of cheese</td>
<td>9 rubles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 kg of macaroni</td>
<td>10 rubles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 eggs</td>
<td>6 rubles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 kg of beef</td>
<td>24 rubles</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These prices are not unrealistic, but they are rather high for a twenty-five ruble budget. Encourage participants to haggle over prices. Also, remind them that they don’t have to buy a whole kilogram. At the market, salespeople frequently cut portions of meat and cheese, open packages, and hand out individual eggs. After fifteen minutes, switch roles. If you run out of food, just remember, that is part of Russia, too.

3. Pretend you are going to open a Russian restaurant. After doing additional research on Russian foods, design a menu. Each dish should include a short explanation as well as an interesting fact about the history or preparation of the dish.

Discussion Questions

1. How is Russian food different from a common American diet? Why do these differences exist?

2. What kinds of food would you not have if you only ate what you could grow or make yourself?

3. What are some of the advantages of buying fresh foods daily from a local market? What are some of the disadvantages?

4. How does Russia’s food reflect the traditions and values of the Russian people? What does your diet say about your culture?
Food Visual 2: Rynok—The Russian Market