Melissa Caldwell — ORIAS Summer Institute 2014

"Food for the Nation: Understanding Russia's Post-Soviet Transition"
Melissa Caldwell, Anthropology, UC Santa Cruz
Summarized by Stephen Pitcher

Professor Caldwell opened her presentation with a slide showing the central telegraph and telephone office in Moscow, situated just two blocks from Red Square, upon whose walls a pair of strange iconographic bedfellows may be seen: the hammer and sickle and the Coca Cola logo—a pairing emblematic of current Russia. Caldwell's work engages the questions: Why is food important to nations? What is a "national" cuisine? What does a nation *taste* like? And what, in all its savory, pervasive richness, does the word "taste" really mean? *Do* Russian taste buds (as some Russians assert), prefer Russian flavors, perhaps for biologically determined reasons? Where do "tastes" exist—in the soil, palate, gut, imagination? In one's personal or national relationships? Is "taste" a form of citizenship or civic life, and if so, could "taste" be a political value, a political tool, a political weapon? There is a political dimension to food in Russia, its complex social organization and mix of class distinctions and emergent ethnicities reflected in its cuisine.

The idea of a Russian cuisine matched to a Russian digestive system goes back at least to the sixteenth century, when it was popularly opined that Russian stomachs found French food too refined to digest. This notion of a national culinary identity wound through the variously imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet epochs, gaining considerable ideological content in the socialist period, when food production and consumption became wedded to theories of social equality and communal labor, and official heed was paid to the relationship between nutrition and such doctrinal ideals as economic and reproductive goals.

On a more universal note, food, said Caldwell, is a civic, and a human, right, recognized as being intrinsic to life. The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights asserts a "right to a standard of living adequate for . . . health and wellbeing . . . including food"; the UN High Commissioner for Refugees recognized a "right to freedom from hunger and malnutrition." Yet food is always strongly bound to the land from which it sprang: victory gardens reinforce nationalism; farmers markets and Community Supported Agriculture promote local awareness, guerrilla gardening supports members of a specific polity fighting for change. Food is a biological resource, but it is also a political tool, and a powerful talisman evoking memories, associations, and ideals. Professor Caldwell adduced the example of South Koreans patronizing a Popeye's Chicken establishment on the North Korean border so that they could view the land to the north while savoring food its inhabitants could not.

Food and food practices have played a central role in Russian state making. Two major revolutions—those of 1905 and 1917—began with public protests over inadequate food supply. This led in turn to a Soviet preoccupation with ensuring a stable means of producing and distributing food, and to a panoply of bureaucratic mechanisms designed to make the Soviet Union "the most modern, civilized, technologically and scientifically

advanced society in the world," primary among whose accomplishments would be the provision to its citizenry of an adequate and reliable food supply. Massive collectivization projects sought to create an agricultural system belonging to the populace and administered by the state. In the pursuit of optimum efficiency, Soviet planners wrested land from the peasantry, evicting and/or exterminating the latter and replacing them with randomly denominated professional agricultural workers, many of whom were neither qualified nor inclined to adopt the tasks involved. Ambitious five-year production quotas were often thus met with ignorance, ineptitude, and inefficiency. The ideals of egalitarianism, gender equality, and classlessness were likewise finding stony soil in a Russian society traditionally separated by class and gender. Replacing private kitchens with modern, more efficient and ideologically correct communal ones did, theoretically, have the effect of relieving women of the burden of being solely responsible for food preparation; but neither public canteen food nor the company of complete strangers at the dinner table was found agreeable. Exacerbating these disappointments were a series of food shortages, some attributable to the irresponsible use of food resources. The diversion of sugar for production of alcohol, in particular, fueled a vigorous temperance movement, whose ostensible goal of preserving resources to some extent camouflaged official concern that the workforce not become too drunk to work. Gallivanting through the countryside playing one's accordion (a caprice depicted in one of Caldwell's slides), in all likelihood under the influence of bootleg vodka, in lieu of sowing one's allotment was an act of criminal irresponsibility which, given the nation's utter dependence on each citizen's devotion to their appointed task, amounted almost to genocide.

Rewards for responsible consumption and sober diligence were countered by punishments meted out to idlers and gluttons—"parasites," to use the technical term. The rewards included access to collective—yet *comparatively* private—dachas, at which supplemental food could be grown or gathered. A dacha's "private" clientele might well include a KGB informer or three, and state taxation and tithing were levied on crops grown (inspiring a degree of creative evasion on the part of these otherwise virtuous citizens); yet the foods from the gardens and mushrooms from the woods were a cherished, and envied, addition to the official Soviet diet.

Alongside the auxiliary foodstuffs to which obedient citizens were thus entitled, another form of diet enhancement was available to the needy—single mothers, invalids, the poor—in the form of food supplements, access to soup kitchens, and compensation; while extra food rations were available to veterans and to multiple mothers ("Reproducing the Nation!"). This usage of food as the currency in a system of entitlement and compensation was framed as "Social Support / Social Defense"— assistance *to the nation*, rather than to needy or deserving individuals: the entire society benefited when weakness was protected and industry repaid.

The transition from the Soviet to the post-Soviet epoch caused systemic ruptures, but among the things surviving the rift were, predictably enough, food brands. The premier candy manufacturer of the Soviet Union, Red October, continues to thrive, as do competing confectioners Bolshevik and Red Front. The Champion brand of juice, popular since Soviet times, continues to adorn grocery counters with its cover images of wrestlers

and athletes (think Wheaties in Cyrillic). But in a nation that went to bed communist and got up capitalist, a number of systems simply disintegrated. All forms of benefits, welfare, and supplements were immediately withdrawn, and all programs for job security, housing, and food provision to the poor were closed. There was an influx of Western industry and investment, much of it having to do with food, and a number of private charities stepped in to fill the gap left by state programs. And, inevitably, McDonald's made its entrance.

In fact, the golden arches were erected in Moscow in 1990, prior to the collapse of the USSR in 1991. The corporation had been reaching for a foothold in the region for fourteen years at that point, and it was a Canadian, not a U.S., franchise that ultimately received the Soviet blessing, due to vestigial Cold War politics. Regardless of its specific North American provenance, McDonald's was the first Western company allowed entry into the USSR, and its management took pains to present it as a Russian, not a Western, enterprise. McDonald's was soon followed by Pizza Hut and a number of Western supermarkets, and by the late 1990's a nationalist backlash had arisen in response, the content of which appeared to be that Russian consumers were tired not only of Western products but of the implication of Russian inferiority they conveyed. This resentment quickly ascended to the political stage, with the Fatherland political party declaring that buying nationally produced goods was helping yourself, in a campaign all of whose imagery dealt with food. Ad campaigns arose employing mottoes such as "Support the Russian Nation!" alongside patriotic, especially Soviet-era, imagery; the "When I Return" series featured heroic Soviet aviators, cosmonauts, and soldiers. This irate nostalgia provoked by Western imports ran to imperial-period figures in advertisements, and, perhaps less surprisingly, historically themed beers. There was much utilization of the words "Our" and "We," pronouns uniquely endowed in Russian to convey an explicit inclusivity, a sort of bone-deep Russianness. An entire brand of *Nash* ("Our") products sprang up: the *Nasha* pizza concern not only prospered in competition with Pizza Hut, but, when that company along with many other restaurants departed following the economic collapse in 1998, "Our Pizza" took over the former Pizza Hut site.

The word *nash* connotes a certain range of values: the buyer knows where products are coming from—they are coming from a nearby farm, not some distant land; from farmers, or farmers markets, known to the buyer; and passed on from hand to hand. (Indeed money would *not* be passed hand to hand, as to do so would violate the sanctity of hand-to-hand commerce; money would be laid on the counter and then picked up.) *Nash* products are home-made or hand-made, not mass-produced. Nostalgic imagery plays a role here too, with a grandmother in a "little house in the village" purveying milk, and beer sold with the inspiring slogan "A Summer Without Old Miller Beer Is Just A Soulless Accumulation Of Vitamins!"

McDonald's has proved successful in presenting itself as a Russian company, aping Soviet practices such as rewarding workers and participating in the community; Caldwell termed their business style "ultra faux-Soviet." They emphasize hospitality, in contrast to the American McDonald's model of minimal-comfort, fast-food accommodations: people

have birthday parties there, with outside food and champagne. There is even a sign in Cyrillic reading “McDonald’s: It’s Our [*Nasha*] Company”.

So the transition is being played out in food, and people are somehow making sense of it all, whatever the sociopolitical terms involved. Professor Caldwell’s final slide showed twelve of her friends crammed around a tiny table in a tiny apartment, all proud to be part of the inner circle that is *nasha* even if it does entail a little crowding: the formal dining room (and, perhaps, the imported food) is for *guests.*

Q&A

Participant: What’s involved in people’s recently having a nostalgia for communal kitchens?
Caldwell: Russians have a love-hate relationship with past things—they have a lot of nostalgia for really awful things. They don’t *really* want to go back to communal kitchens or gardens.

Participant: With the communal kitchens, I wonder if there was a difference between making the same recipes, but making them badly, and making things which were *supposed* to taste different [ethnic specialties, for instance]. Did they shift the palate in Russia to incorporate ethnic cuisines, or just make the same things badly?
Caldwell: One of the ministries monitored recipes in the Soviet Union. It approved everything (like school lunches) centrally. Even today, the menu will tell you the exact weights involved in each dish; variation is impossible. Soviet kitchens were taught to follow the rules, so most potential diversity was eliminated.

Participant: In some ways the Soviet Union standardized visual art, too, as they did with the Russian palate. There have been so many regional cuisines: did they pick one?
Caldwell: There was a several-centuries-long process, collecting cuisines, standardizing, and redisseminating them—homogenizing them: Latvians eating the same as Kazakhs. Now they’re trying to go back to ethnic cuisines, and to reintroduce other seasonings (there are just salt and vinegar now).

Participant: Is “*nasha*” state or people—political or ethnic?
Caldwell: It’s all of that, a flexible term of inclusivity. It can be political philosophy; it can be ethnicity; it’s seen in racist taunts about skin color, about age, about one’s network of friends or colleagues (in which case foreigners are included): people you *trust.* It’s a loose term.

Participant: When they ceased collectivizing farms, and now it’s agribusiness, how has that affected production?
Caldwell: After the chaos of the early years of Soviet transition, there are now laws about how private property would occur and no regulation; so in some cases people rewrote deeds in their own names. With state farms, in the legal system, people share, but the parcels are not even adjacent, so people sell them off. There’s a lot of mobility in the

property market, and a lot of grabbing. Wealthy oligarchs are strategically positioned to grab and transform [state farm resales] into housing developments. Corporations bought some of the farms, and some got corporatized. There's a push now to deal with agricultural production—Soviet practices were bad for the environment. Some big farms are being built but not enough for macro-agriculture. Lots of different things [are being tried]. Corporate farms are trying to get a toehold alongside the developers.

Participant: The idea that Russian food is good for you in some abstract way because you are Russian [relates to] arguments we're having here about the impact of globalization and the problem of obesity.
Caldwell: There is a lot of scientific expertise coming out suggesting that locally grown foods are healthier and better, because Russian soil is bursting with vitamins, and embargoes against organic produce coming in from the EU because European produce is not healthy: it's very patriotized. There are other questions around health concerns, concerning disease, childhood, intelligence. There's a resistance to foreign products—they're not familiar to Russians, especially Western products, and they have values/qualities in them of individualism and selfishness, so children shouldn't eat them because they'll grow up to be selfish. It comes back to the question of the "National Body." I did research for a large national food corporation asking what healthy food Russians would buy; Western researchers were saying low sodium, low whatever. The Russian women just want to cook it at home: "Kids shouldn't eat out."

Participant: With the historic aspect of food marketing, what about foods—tomatoes—not indigenous to Russia? Were they consciously going for a particular time, the indigenization of food? Does marketing outside Moscow address regional differences, or does it go with Moscow models?
Caldwell: The model of emphasizing local is reproduced elsewhere; it's not just in Moscow: there's a Vladivostok *nasha*, not just a Moscow *nasha.* With many foods—cheese, produce—people know which regions are better, so those are marketed and bought with regional branding. As to historical moments, yes, they were being aimed at. But Russian history is really deep: every philosophical or political group has a moment to reach back to. There's a huge push for WWII deprivation food, Imperial Russia moments . . . recasting historical facts to rewrite narratives. Most wouldn't even think about tomatoes not being Russian; [from a marketing standpoint] that's just food-blind casting.