



Gastrodiplomacy Spotlight: Russia

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Abstract

The diplomatic relationship between the United States and Russia is constantly changing, and food diplomacy is no exception. One day we have a successful agricultural trade agreement with the largest country in the world, and the next we are imposing harsh sanctions on them to assert our dominance in international politics. In this article, I highlight Russia's views on genetically modified organisms, fast food, and maintaining a culinary culture in America.

Genetically Modified Organisms

The United States promotes American food to Russian through the use of agricultural specialists from the Foreign Agricultural Service, stationed in the embassy in Moscow and in the consulates in St. Petersburg and Vladivostok^[1]. Normally, these marketing specialists push foods such as Washington apples and California prunes into the Russia market, but after Russia's annexation of Crimea in March and President Vladimir Putin's subsequent actions of using force in Ukraine, the United States imposed strict sanctions on Putin and his top men, which include both travel and trade sanctions. Part of the trade sanctions are focused on food. While the European Union has outlawed the import of genetically modified organisms, Russia imposed no such laws and has imported GMO products as part of their United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) marketing program^[2].

Since the imposition of the trade sanctions, Russia has announced that it will no longer import GMO crops in favor of greater food sovereignty. Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev announced this in early April, claiming: "if the Americans like to eat GMO products, let them eat it then. We don't need to do that; we have enough space and opportunities to produce organic food"^[3]. Now the question stands of whether Russia's new push to be GMO-free is a strategic political move due purely to the sanctions we have imposed, or if the Russian government really believes in food sovereignty and being proud of their own national agriculture.

Fast Food

Russia has welcomed many American fast food restaurants throughout the years. McDonalds, which was the first US chain in Russia, opened in Moscow in 1990 to gigantic lines. This sparked subsequent Burger Kings, Subways, and KFCs throughout the country. These restaurants are successful because Russians tend to spend more of each paycheck on eating out than Americans do. In addition, although Russian culture advocates eating meals together as a family, consumers are beginning to enjoy the idea of eating on the go and ordering pizza right to their doors^[4].

Now, Russia has its focus on the United States, looking to open their most popular fast food chain restaurant, Teremok, in New York this year. Teremok serves classic Russian blini, or thin pancakes than can be filled with meat, chocolate, caviar, or many other things. They plan on opening two restaurants with the hopes that Americans will pick up on Russian food just as they have embraced Mexican, Chinese, and Italian fast food^[5].

Culinary Culture

Brighton Beach is a neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York that is filled with Russian Jewish immigrants. The bulk of Soviet migration to Brighton Beach began when Jewish people were given permission to emigrate in the late 1980s and really erupted after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 90s. During this time, there was intense anti-Semitism in Europe, and many felt that it was necessary to escape and find a better way of life for their families. The Russian Jews who moved to America, as opposed to Israel, were mostly secular and many did not have organized religion to fall back on to keep their community tight-knit and maintain their heritage – in this situation, food is a common subject to turn to in dealing with nostalgia, social connections, and community interaction.

Recipes are something passed down from generation to generation and provide a way to bond with family members and learn about your culture. The immigrants of Brighton Beach took the same opportunity when they moved to have a connection to their

culture by opening up Russian restaurants and continuing to serve their favorite ethnic foods around their kitchen tables instead of giving in to American fast food. Russian culture is very focused on social interactions with all of your friends and family around a big dining room table, and that is exactly what has kept Brighton Beach filled with Russian-Jewish culture till today^[6].

Conclusion

Food is something that naturally brings people together, building bridges both within and between cultures. Not only is learning about cultures and politics through food more interesting than reading a textbook – it can also inspire us to make food a more important part of our lives than just the basic consumption of calories. This has been just a small taste of how Russia reacts to outside food influences and to food in their own society.

[1] “Consulate General of the United States – St. Petersburg, Russia.” Foreign Agricultural Service. US Department of State. Web. 12 May 2014.

[2] “????? ??????????!” USDA.ru. United States Department of Agriculture, 2012. Web. 12 May 2014.

[3] Bogodvid, Maksim. “Russia Will Not Import GMO Products – PM Medvedev.” RT News. Russia Today, 6 Apr. 2014. Web. 12 May 2014.

[4] Kramer, Andrew E. “Russia Becomes a Magnet for U.S. Fast-Food Chains.” New York Times. 3 Aug. 2011. Web. 12 May 2014.

[5] Kalashnikova, Olga. “Teremok Sets Its Sights on New York City.” Saint Petersburg Times. 19 Feb. 2014. Web. 12 May 2014.