

THE GUEST AT THE DINING TABLE: ECONOMIC TRANSITIONS AND THE RESHAPING OF HOSPITALITY—REFLECTIONS FROM BATUMI AND ODESSA*

Abel Polese

University of Edinburgh

Nashe delo predlozhit, vashe delo otkazatsya
(Rus. our task is to propose, yours to refuse)

Stumari ghvitsaa (Georgian, a guest comes from God)

Ne stesnyaysya, a to ostaneshsya golodny (Rus. do not be shy or you'll stay hungry)

November 8, 2005. Vasilevka, Odessa oblast', Saint Dmitri's day. A team of around 15 academics is invited to join a dining company outside the main church, where the locals have covered two 15-meter long tables with all the food one could imagine. A few steps away, on an improvised cooking-fire, cooking pots of one meter in diameter are used to prepare soup, meat and any other kind of food. On the tables all sorts of wines are offered; the wine is produced locally and stored in mineral water bottles.

The feast of Saint Dimitri is the apogee of food consumption in the village and will feed the locals for several days after its end. However, after the meal, some local women ask those who came from far away to take with them one or two bottles of wine and possibly some food. "There [in the city] everything is chemical," they say. "Take our food, it is homemade and genuine, good for your health."

The city-countryside contrast invoked above and the association of the city with artificial food, and the countryside with "genuine food" seems to suggest that changes in practices of food and alcohol consumption mirror a strong social and economical change in Eastern Europe. I propose to explore these changes through the lens of hospitality, defined here as a positive attitude towards strangers that generates relationships of dependence and potential reciprocity between the guest and the host. Following the approach that objects are not what they are but what they come to be (Thompson 1991), I intend to explore the changing role food and drinks have in different situations and the different value they are given according to the spatial context.

Looking at the social and cultural practices related to food consumption, and comparing them in different contexts, I suggest that it is possible to gain insight into other social practices such as the relationship with the other, with time and with local social habits. The kind of food offered, the way hosts are invited to the dining table, the amount of time spent in the kitchen, and the relationship with homemade food—all these variables permit us to feel a transition in Eastern Europe that, from public spaces, spreads to private ones and affect lifestyles and styles of consumerism (see Mesnil and Michailescu 1998, and Polese 2008). These transitions are increasingly visible when comparing urban and rural contexts.

From 2003 to 2008 I had the chance to experience different kinds of hospitality in a number of post-socialist regions, from Chisinau to Ulan-Ude, in both urban and rural settings, and compare my information with colleagues' and informants' opinions. This gave me a basis for comparison and prompted my further interest when, during my stay in Odessa, I happened to experience several different kinds of hospitality behaviour. I was based in Odessa for almost two years between 2003 and 2006 and as I began to identify some patterns of hospitality in the city, I started collecting ethnographic material. Most of it was through participant observation and informal interviews, sometimes during a dinner or just as a reflection with some informants. During my stay I had the chance to exchange opinions with other colleagues working in the region (and I am grateful to Deema Kaneff and Tanya Richardson) and on several occasions I visited the provinces, spending time in small towns. This gave me enough insight to start thinking comparatively about the differences in hospitality and the influence of urban culture on hospitality practices. In the summer of 2005 I had the chance to do some fieldwork in Georgia related to a project on hospitality on the Black Sea, and I became increasingly fascinated with the way hospitality was lived in that country. In particular I concentrated on the coastal region and visited Poti and Batumi, as urban centres,

stopping in several small settlements between the two cities.

Once based in Batumi, I felt an atmosphere similar to the one I was used to in Odessa. The city, capital of the Ajara autonomous republic, is the main Georgian port and an important intermediate port of call for those sailing on the Black sea. Thanks to their strategic location, both Odessa and Batumi cities enjoy an economic welfare that is not found elsewhere nearby, but they are still in regions that are less developed than the rest of the country. They have a high level of migration, and constant populations exchanges from the countryside to the rich urban areas, which makes the urban-rural contrast easier to notice.

Starting from the fact that food and drinks seem to have a different meaning in different contexts and they can be used to build up alliance and trust networks, I would suggest that a fast economic transition is urging a number of people to renegotiate the complex rituals linked with hospitality. More specifically, I find that people are proposing a re-elaborated version of local cultures in which traditional rituals become simplified. This, in turn, sheds some light on the ways in which, in urban cultures, hospitality practices developed over time get renegotiated, in terms of quality of food, quantity of time spent in cooking, and the perception of who is a stranger. Ultimately this may lead to the homemade food vs. supermarket food “dilemma.” The relationship between homemade and store-bought is ambiguous: on the one hand, homemade food represents genuineness, time and devotion invested into a social relationship; however supermarket food, in some manifestations, as symbol of modernity, can also be well valued in an elaborate code that mixes homemade and processed food.

The main point of this article is that hospitality rituals, although surviving marketization and modernization, have gone through a simplification process. This process of simplification is visible to different extents in urban and rural settings, but also in the two different regions analysed. While necessary to the perpetuation of social life and the creation of personal networks, these rituals have been brought into question and challenged by the economic transition. This, in turn, has led to the simplification of some aspects of the rituals, even as attempts are made to keep their core substance unaltered. In this respect food and drinks, the way they are lived and their

consumption, is strongly dependent on the economic settings. If we drew a continuum we could see at one extreme the situation in which ample time is available, and thus the cost of labour is very low, and it is possible to make the investments necessary to get fresh food (grow poultry, go fishing, prepare the food at home, produce homemade wine). On the other extreme of the continuum, the economic opportunity of an hour of labour is so high that one prefers to work the maximum amount of time and buy all the food in a supermarket. An intermediate situation may be having time to do shopping in a bazaar, or visiting friends and relatives in rural areas to get homemade food to be prepared at home. Those behaviours are indicative of an economics that is explorable through food and drinks, for people, no matter how busy they are, tend at least to preserve the basic meaning of such rituals and their socio-economic functions.

What's So Special about Eating? What All that Food Means

To understand the current meaning of food and drinks in Batumi and Odessa one needs to explore the social relationship with food and drinks over the past years. While during the Soviet period access to basic products was not a major problem, finding some specialised products was a matter of skills and risk. Contributing to this was a situation where the production of luxury goods was extremely specialised. In Riga it was possible to buy the most famous chocolate of the USSR. People traveling to and from Kiev had a chance to buy a Kiev cake, in Odessa visitors would try so secure a bottle of champagne of *Frantsuskii bulvar*, and in Moldova a bottle of *belyi aist* cognac (brandy) or homemade wine. Visiting the south of Ukraine it was possible to buy fresh fruits in spring or summer, in the Caucasus a visitor would buy dried fruits, and in the Far East it was possible to buy “red fish” (trout or salmon dried and salted) or *seledka* (pickled herring).

Such specialised goods were imbued with two kinds of prestige: one was given by the brand, well known throughout the country, and the other from the alleged quality of the product that was genuine and thus appreciated. Although their meaning was different, homemade and shop goods could both to some extent be used for a token of thanks or informal payment, for instance when thanking someone for a service. Little distinction was made between homemade and purchased goods as “substitutes” for money

(and perhaps for one another), a situation that changed with the introduction of free market economies (see below). Because of the high amount of forced savings in the Soviet Union, investing one's time in the production of goods revealed itself to be a good strategy. Apart from cash, one could start up a series of exchanges and barter with neighbours and friends that allowed people to acquire desirable things that were not necessarily on the market.

This also encouraged some leisure time practical activities. After the working day one could devote time to a social life and to "hobbies" like alcohol production so that in some cases goods as a commodity might replace money. Producing alcohol, collecting mushrooms or repairing clothes could be bartered with other services or goods, while developing networks of trust among different segments of the population. In addition, since time represented a widely available commodity, it was possible to prepare and exchange homemade food and goods, a practice that sometimes proved advantageous to buying them.

Odessa and Batumi were in a unique position. On the one hand their climate allowed people to take advantage of natural resources: both regions produce good vineyards and the soil is adequate to grow vegetables and fruits, at least some months of the year. They were, and are, also relatively close to other countries like Moldova or Armenia, which facilitates exchanges of different products. Finally, they were two important ports and most shipments to Moscow passed through one of those two cities (where, incidentally, a decent amount of goods disappeared on the way).

An initial change was introduced by the opening up of the countries in the early 1990s, for products became available on the market after an initial transition period, and choice widened rapidly, including Western foods. The symbolic meaning of these Western foods was such that they were sometimes bought for their origins rather than their quality (which was indeed dubious, according to Jennifer Patino (2002)). However, according to several informants, a number of local brands remained competitive with Western food. Going on a business trip to Odessa it was almost a moral obligation to come back with a bottle of *Shampanskoe* (champagne) from *Frantsuzski bulvar*, the name of the street where the factory is located. From Chisinau everybody was expected to bring back a bottle of *Cricova*, and

in Georgia wine was one of the national attractions, with bottles of *Saperavi* highly requested. While those goods were available in a limited quantity, there were a number of things that could be bought more easily from the locals themselves, like homemade wine, *nalivka* or *nastoika* (herbal and berry alcoholic drinks).

As a result, during Soviet times daily consumption and social relations tended to be based primarily on homemade alcohol and food. Marketization, introduced recently, has divided the population into at least two categories: those who have enough money to buy in a supermarket (where less time is spent) and those who have enough time to buy at the bazaar (where goods are cheaper). Time is not a commodity that everybody has, homemade food and supermarket food are no longer perfect substitutes for one another as they were in the past. Homemade food is cheaper and allegedly more genuine, but it costs more time, whether in terms of time taken to prepare it or to visit the person who prepared it instead of going to the supermarket. Supermarket food is likely to be more expensive or, at the very least, less "genuine" because it is not homemade, but it saves you much time. Since in urban areas wages have risen much faster than in the countryside, those whose urban dwellers whose earnings are rapidly growing prefer to have less time but more money at their disposal, which enables them to simply buy what they exchanged or bartered before. With leisure time one can buy extra working hours and thus extra earnings, and alcohol or food can be quickly bought in a supermarket.

Market laws therefore influence hospitality and food consumption, and the way food in hospitality rituals is used nowadays mirrors local customs while also unveiling the symbolic meaning of things used to construct alliances. In particular the growing gap between city and countryside can induce us to reflect on the compromises that urban constraints pose, which prompt people to renegotiate in order to accommodate tradition and conciliate it with a working life.

In the next sections, I explore two main themes in two regions, Odessa and Batumi: 1) the rituals associated to hospitality; and 2) the ways different people can be perceived as strangers and potential guests. In these two regions I have experienced hospitality and gathered information on hospitality related attitudes, both in the countryside and urban context, to "taste" the way economic

development, marketization and urbanization have reshaped cultural practices and alliance building in post-Soviet territories.

What is Hospitality?

Whilst it is accepted that hospitality rituals exist and are widely performed around the globe, the motivations for extending hospitality and engaging in hospitality practices at all seem only partially explored. Starting from a question a colleague asked some years ago, posed as the “Enigma of the gift” (Gerard 1998) I would introduce the “enigma of hospitality”: why does a person decide, apparently spontaneously, to offer hospitality to a stranger? How is this person going to choose the object of his or her hospitality? And finally, how is this person going to select the kind of hospitality to be offered?

Hospitality, just like gift exchange, may be regarded, from a Maussian perspective, as a social fact (1924) in which, although the formal obligations and forms of engaging in giving and taking rituals with foreigners can change across cultures, its substance seems quite stable. A gift, for Mauss, is a fundamental structure of the relationship between people in a society, which always retains an element of its giver and involves three obligations: the obligation to give, to receive, and to reciprocate. Whilst giving and receiving are quite straightforward as concepts, some questions may arise about reciprocating.

There is a tendency in anthropology to consider host-guest exchanges as binding and leading to a continuation of the relationship by causing new obligations (Lashley 2000), performing moral authority (Selwyn 2000) or confirming control of the other (Erb 2000). It has also been suggested that the host may expect to become a guest in the future and thus does what others should do with him like in the article ‘*la table sens dessus dessous*’ [a very broad translation would be: discovering what is really under the host’s table] in which Mesnil and Mihailescu (1998) suggest that some attitudes to strangers might reflect the host’s perceptions of the expectations he would have were he to become a guest (though they will be, most likely, deceived).

I would suggest that hospitality, and its rituals, aliment the already intense flow of informal economies and exchanges, though not necessarily in a direct way. In a long term perspective, in which the guest and the host are likely to engage in a lasting relationship, hospitality’s rationale may lay behind the fact

that such a relationship is supposed to strengthen social ties and boost trust networks among individuals (Heatherington 2001; Herzfeld 1998; Yang 1994). This can go further and generate a kind of favour exchange relationship destined to last (Ledeneva 1998; Lonkila 1997) or a more disengaged one in which commodities, money and favours are a way to pay back a “favour” (Patico 2002; Polese 2008b). However, there might be cases in which reciprocity may not apply, or might not even be expected, as when a host coming from far away is received and honoured and no continuation of the relationship is expected. What would push someone to give with no gain expected?

If we go beyond a materialistic conception of reciprocity, there are a number of ways hospitality can be reciprocated. It would become otherwise impossible to explain why some hosts may be ready to indebted themselves to provide their guests with the best of the best, be this a chicken or some sugar in places where this is a luxury (Cole 2006). In addition one might need to explain the aggressive manner in which hospitality can be manifested, becoming “hellspitality” (“you looked at it, it means you want to eat it!”) and obliging the guest to roll away, rather than walk away, from the dinner table (Zanca 2003). What is the gain of forcing guests to accept more food than they can swallow?

If we recall the idea of the “Indian gift” by Parry (1986) hospitality can be considered something that enriches the host morally, before his neighbours, his guest, or God, for the fact of having acted generously. Hospitality can thus be seen as cathartic or as a moral obligation of the host, who is supposed to share with the one who has less (and the guest, once outside his home, definitely has less). Only by taking complete care of the guest may the host present himself as respectable and respectful and fulfil his moral obligations. In addition, if a person is perceived as a prestigious guest in a particular setting, hosting this person will become a source of prestige for the household that hosted him or her, so that receiving guests might increase the respectability and reputation of the house and thus of its occupants (Cole 2006, Visser 1991, Zanca 2003). A guest also brings news and stories from the outside world, which is a way to break up the local routine, and is thus appreciated (Cole 2006). It may ultimately transform unknown people into friends (Selwyn 2000). All this suggests that reciprocity may be

achieved in several different ways and that the border between social relationships and money- (or commodity-) motivated exchanges is more blurred than is generally acknowledged (Patino 2002, Polese 2008b, Raheja 1988, Williams 2005).

In my study on hospitality to strangers on the Black Sea I have suggested some reasons why one might want to be generous to strangers (Polese 2006: 115); the next sections add to this by providing further evidence on practices and expectations of hospitality. While a religious component is certainly present, I had the impression that hospitality was more socially than a religiously motivated, being prompted by the following factors:

- 1) Curiosity: this may also mean that the obligation to reciprocate is respected—the guest can offer some information, anecdotes and stories to the host.
- 2) Human fellow-feelings: the basic principle that, if someone is in trouble, that person should be helped.
- 3) Limits of social welfare: in areas where the state is absent or too busy to take care of its citizens, citizens tend to interact more and create informal structures to make up for failure of formal ones. This applies also to the stranger, once he or she enters the circle.
- 4) The idea that hospitality is honourable behaviour: this will boost the respectfulness of the host, both in his or her own eyes and in the eyes of others.
- 5) The perception that a stranger's visit is a gift that produces trust and reciprocity: like in the 'Indian gift' (Parry 1996), the fact that the stranger accepts the host's gifts creates a relationship of trust and (potential) reciprocity

In such a context food (and drinks) comes to assume a symbolic meaning of primary importance, as anthropologists from Van Gennep on have acknowledged. Food becomes thus not the aim but the means to construct alliances and create dependence relationships (Menner, Murcott, and Van Otterloo 1992). The typology of food offered, the way it is prepared and presented, and the time devoted to the guest all become indicators of the perception of the guest, his or her potential prestige, and the gains the guest is expected to bring to the household or at least to the host.

The next sections will explore how social and cultural practices are negotiated and adapted to specific contexts, as well as the ways in which economic development and marketization impact such practices. In line with this, time devoted to the guest depends on the prestige a guest will bring and consequently the food offered will be chosen accordingly. In addition, the opening up of these formerly Soviet countries (Ukraine and Georgia) means that a much wider range and variety of food and drinks are available, so that imported and domestic foods today are systematically combined in various contexts so to provide the perfect combination for a given situation. Even though the substance of hospitality rituals has been altered, it becomes all the more important to preserve them, since they function as a starting point for further economic exchanges. To explore these nuances, I offer stories of my own personal experiences as the beneficiary of hospitality rituals, as well as the hospitality stories told me by friends, colleagues, and others.

Who is a Guest? Who is a Stranger?

There are places where hospitality enwraps you from the very moment you cross the border of a country, like I experienced in Batumi, where people seem ready to share with the guest whatever they have. As one informant (a French traveller) reported:

I stopped being a vegetarian when travelling in the former USSR. You know, a Westerner, easy to spot, hiking around in the mountains is pretty much an attraction. You are walking in the mountains and they see a foreigner...they look nearby and they see mutton...so on their right they have a foreigner and on their left mutton...the natural consequence is a mutton barbecue. And you cannot refuse that meat 'because you are a vegetarian' (personal communication, translated by the author from French)

I once was invited for a dinner in Batumi and, after a number of courses (I do not dare to count them!), while collapsing on my chair, incredibly the man of the house started looking around, asking what else he could offer. Such an engaged hospitality is time consuming and thus not possible (or not worth it) to offer to every person you come across. What to do if you do not have

enough time? The words of a Ukrainian friend provide some clues:

We went to use an international telephone and the lady asked where we were from. Once our status of 'guest of the country' was acknowledged, she wanted to act as host but could not close the shop and spend time with us. Her choice was to propose to us to come later in the day and she would make us try a real homemade *khachapuri* [Georgian oven baked bread with cheese inside](personal communication, translated by the author from Russian).

Walking in the centre of Odessa or Batumi it is not likely (though not excludable) that you will be invited into someone's house; such a scenario is, however, easily possible in the province (countryside). A Ukrainian colleague found a very singular way to provide a group of conference speakers (of which I was one) with accommodations in Odessa *oblast'*. We arrived in a small town and went straight to the Old Believers' Church, whose priest had been previously informed of the imminent arrival of around 20 people. After a few minutes I heard a loud voice from outside: 'Pilgrims have arrived!' and the local community of Old Believers come around to pick up two or more 'pilgrims' who would be their guest for two nights.

Hospitality may be considered a full time job by the host. However, under certain conditions this changes and may even be rather reversed, so that the best hospitality is considered to be the most unobtrusive one. In this scenario, the best thing to do when you have guests is to leave them alone as much as they want, not invade their personal space, and act upon the guest's request, not on one's (the host's) own initiative. The same is expected from guests, who should not be a burden to the daily life of their host.

Time that the host will devote to the guest is one of the main differences between urban and rural settings. In places where time is a cheap commodity, it will be relatively easy to dedicate more time to your guest; this can be performed by a few members of the family, with the working ones joining the company only in the evening. However in an urban context, which usually requires all members of the family to work, this will be lived differently. The host might apologize, or perceive this as natural, but

will not be able to spend all his or her time with the guest.

Where hospitality is a 'full time job', if the host is not able to provide the guest with 'minimal standards' or if his house is not 'honourable', he might then refrain from inviting a guest. Hospitality in this case is not perceived as a commodity (I give you my house) but as a service (I give you my house and put myself at your disposal), so that an 'empty' house (emptied from the host) is no commodity to be offered to strangers, as a fellow Georgian reported.

In Georgia the house is holy. If your enemy comes into your house you have to treat him like your guest, not your enemy. They may become again your enemy [hopefully not] once they leave your household (personal communication, translated by the author from Russian).

Engaging in a host-guest relationship ultimately depends on two things: the person's desire to be perceived as a guest, and the perception that locals have of that person. This will eventually determine the number of material contact points the potential guest and host will have. Locking oneself up in a hotel room certainly invites less hospitality than walking freely around, especially outside the city centre. Likewise, even in the most hospitable cultures, you are more likely to be perceived as a tourist than as a guest if you hang around in some specifically designated 'tourist areas'. Hospitality, once you are perceived as a guest, will concretise as an attitude that people would not direct towards locals. For example, people can smile at you for no reason, or show some interest and stop to talk to you.

Anton Krotov is not an anthropologist but one of the most hardcore hitchhikers in the world. His reflections on travelling are extremely useful to understanding how to enter a host-guest relationship. Born in Moscow, he should have passed one million kilometres hitchhiked at the time of writing, spending half the year on expeditions to Asia or Africa and the rest of the time writing books. Krotov writes books on how to get free rides not only by car, but also by train, ship, regular buses and even airplanes; he also suggests the easiest way to sleep or eat on a the minimal budget (his principle is 'spend on the road as much money you would spend at home'). His main advice to get a free ride is to "introduce

yourself as different, as not from the reality of your potential 'host' (driver). Win his interest somehow, with a story, an anecdote, a veiled request for help. Everybody is good in his heart, you just have to find the way to this person and this person will help you."

I consider this one of the main points underneath any host-guest relationship. Your host must become interested in you as a person, in your specific situation, and then will be willing to offer a gift of hospitality. Hospitality is not necessarily in the form of a dinner or a home stay. Hospitality is everywhere: it can be a smile, information, a small gift or hidden help that you will never discover. Once host and guest are interested, and ready, to engage in a relationship of reciprocity, a material point of contact has to be created; then one can begin the negotiations on which will depend the nature and the result of an exchange and its urgency, depending on how long the guest will stay, and how easy it will be for the guest and host to meet again. (However, in places where time is an expensive commodity, contact points with the locals or with neighbours tend to be reduced.) As a general rule, the smaller and the more relaxed the place, the more the potential contact points increase. But in some places it might be much easier than elsewhere, as two Russian informants reported:

Hitchhiking on the side of the road in Georgia you will most likely strike the attention of a local driver who will take you home, feed you, and then put you on the next coach to your destination, and there will be no way to refuse his hospitality without offending him (personal communication, translated from Russian by the author).

We were once hitchhiking from Batumi to Tbilisi. The police stopped us and asked what we were doing. We explained our aim and itinerary and they listened carefully. Then they stopped a car and told the driver (who seemed afraid of the 'police control'), that we were guests of their country and he had to take care of us and bring us to his final destination. They even said, "We are taking down your license plate number, because we want to be sure that everything will be okay with them" (personal communication).

Hospitality in Batumi, as in a number of other countries, may look almost aggressive. It is quite likely that the visitor can be "hijacked" from his destination and will have to change his plans. Once a truck driver who was to take me for 20 km offered to bring me with him to the border with Ossetia, a 12 hour drive; another time when travelling in the province I had to insist to be left at my destination and not be "kidnapped" to Batumi. In Odessa and surrounding areas this never happened: people will be much more reserved and, although you will enjoy genuine generosity once you pass their doorstep, this will be not as easy as in Ajara. It seems, thus, that a stranger and the company of a stranger, has a different value in the two regions.

Step I: Entertaining the Guest's Belly

Once perceived as a potential guest, one is likely to be invited to visit a household. The kind of attention the guest will receive and the kind of rituals in which he or she will be engaged are strongly dependent on the cultural context. In the city, where ancestral practices are often modified, coming for dinner means one arrives when the dinner is ready. In contrast, in the countryside one is more likely to be present during part of the food preparation process. If in the countryside homemade food is the rule, the city will be much more variable and time will be a more precious commodity, whether in terms of time devoted to cooking, to entertaining, or simply spending time together.

The man of the house will be expected to entertain 'his' guests with tea and conversation. The classic Soviet tea is black, and the custom has remained, although green tea is now available. A *zavarka*, in both Odessa and Batumi, will be prepared by pouring boiling water into a teapot well filled with tea to brew (tea can be in packets or loose); the brew is then poured into big cups or mugs and warm water is added. This gives each person the possibility to decide how strong to take his or her tea. Boiling water will be prepared and poured from a kettle or a samovar into the cups, which are brought from the kitchen or taken out of a glass shelf. A more modern alternative is a mug with a packet of tea and boiling water for each person.

The host (family) is meanwhile supposed to entertain their guests and cook at the same time. Gender specialization will help out in this. The man (or men) of the house will spend time with the guest and make sure the guest does

not feel lonely, whereas the women will have a double role of cooking and entertaining. A modern substitute for the host is a television, which sometimes seems to be perceived as part of the family. The guest will be placed in front of a screen with a remote control and told to “relax”. This will allow the host to keep the situation under control while doing other things and periodically entering the room to check that everything is okay.

It is not unlikely that more than one generation of women lives in the house and their roles are distinct. The owner of the house must take care of the whole preparation process whereas the other generations are supposed to help out. Female hosts younger than the ‘main host’ are supposed to prove their ability to be good wives and thus will help in the preparation, whereas females of the older generations have to make sure that everything is done properly.

The guest is hungry. This is a primary assumption and the guest has to eat as much as needed to placate his ravenous hunger. If visiting more than one household, the guest will be pulled into a spiral of endless eating with no possibility to refuse. The only exceptions are national feasts where it is understood that the guest might be visiting several households and will have to eat in each of them. Still, the host has to make sure the guest does not leave his household ‘hungry’.

Eating has two main symbolic meanings. The first one is mutual recognition as host and guest. By offering food the host is making clear that the guest is welcome and is building a relationship of trust. The second symbolic meaning has to do with duty. By feeding the guest the host is also fulfilling his duties; he is creating dependence and gratitude and is proposing himself as a honourable person. It is of no matter that this dependence might never be of use in his life; it is important to know that it exists.

Provisioning before the guest comes is a must, as long as it is possible. If not, the dinner has to look special somehow:

Two of us were picked up from the street and invited into a house in Batumi. This was a last minute invitation so that purchases for the dinner were already done. The man of the house asked his sons to go for some beer to distinguish the current dinner from the one they would have had

without us (personal communication, translated from Russian by the author).

Hospitality rituals come to be renegotiated once lack of time becomes evident. Not only is time short in the city, but also the renegotiation of gender roles means that some women now spend less time in the kitchen. Once when a woman in Odessa invited me to her home for dinner, she produced some *farshirovanaya ryba* (stuffed fish), joking that she had just prepared it and put into a supermarket box. This is a long and complicated dish to prepare and she was trying to explain in a polite way that her working life allowed no time for preparing such a dinner.

Food without Borders: The Dinner

As noted above, the main assumption nearly everywhere is that the guest is starving and has to be fed. This can play out in a more or less aggressive way but it will happen and the guest will be invited (or ordered) to eat beyond his or her capacities. The number of dishes in a meal varies and it is incremented according to the guest, his or her importance and the occasion. It might also depend on the family economic possibilities but there is the possibility that the family will indebt itself to provide the best food, a scenario more likely to take place in rural areas.

The first distinction that applies is the ‘home-supermarket’ distinction. It is considered much more ‘honourable’ to feed the host with homemade food. The more the process is retrievable to the house the better: a cake has to be home baked, it will be all the more valued if eggs are from the house and vegetables from the garden, or even if the chicken is from the courtyard (or some neighbours have them). In that case the host might insist even more strongly that the guest eat heartily, since the quality of the food is guaranteed: the host ‘knows the chicken that lay those eggs,’ or know that ‘they grow those vegetables with no chemical fertilisers’.

A second distinction (mentioned above), the city-countryside juxtaposition, might also morph into a distinction made between ‘developed countries’ versus ‘less developed but more natural ones,’ or simply a local versus non-local distinction. The guest will be advised to eat more because ‘it is all ours’, meaning that hosts are consciously offering products that are natural and prepared in a natural way, in contrast to those from the city.

In cities, distinctions are made between bazaars (open-air or covered markets) and supermarkets as sources for food. Shopping at the bazaar is more time consuming but quality is unreliable: food can be extremely fresh and made with love but also almost rotten. Western style supermarkets are perceived as generally safer and less time consuming, so in the city there might be a tendency to provision there. A general rule might be the following: as long as one has time and is able to tell good meat or vegetables from bad ones, the bazaar is preferred.

Dishes themselves are hierarchized. There should be a main dish, and a number of side dishes from which one is supposed to start. Usually the main dish will consist of meat or fish, but not both. In addition the classic barbecue (*shashlik*) is made of meat, despite the fact that both Batumi and Odessa are on the sea. The main host will then guide the guests by indicating the order and hierarchy of dishes to be consumed, but meat will be approached after a number of entrees, like salad, *khachapuri* (bread) and other vegetables. Once the dinner is over the tea ritual will start again but with less fear that the guests will eat too much so that more sweets may be served along with the tea.

Discovering your Limits: Drinking

As a general rule, eating and drinking are complementary ways to construct alliances, brotherhoods and trust relationships. Getting drunk with someone means coming to trust this person, to trust that even in weaker conditions this person will not abuse you, and you are mutually responsible for one another's safety. There is no rule on when to start drinking, even though one might prefer to drink at the end of the day, after all duties are over. There are numerous exceptions to this rule and the Russian saying 'drink in the morning and you will have the whole day free' warns the anthropologist that he or she is just as likely to be encouraged to begin drinking at 10am as at 10 pm. However, 'heavy' drinking usually is reserved for the evening, at least in the city.

In the Georgian countryside I was told by one villager, "I have friends who like to fight, and spend time fighting with one another, other friends like to smoke...but I just like getting drunk." Subsequently he sent a younger brother to buy some transparent alcohol (whose origins I dared not ask), bread, tomatoes and cucumbers so we could spend the rest of the afternoon toasting together. This scene seems rather absent

in the city, where the guest will be invited to drink mainly as a social occasion or to construct an alliance, during or after dinner, rather than as an alternative way of spending time.

On a train to Odessa I was approached by a soldier: "Excuse me...I do not want to bother you...would you mind drinking with me? My mother gave me a good bottle of cognac but I feel silly drinking alone." That was perhaps my longest night on a train and an anecdote to be told in future evenings.

There is a Russian saying, 'no matter how much vodka you buy, you will have to run to the shop twice anyway.' This seems to be incredibly true although in the countryside alcohol is stored in bigger quantities and one just has to run 'twice' to another room. The availability of products has prompted an elaboration of tastes and several kinds of alcohol may be at the disposal of the guest, who can choose between wine, vodka and cognac, and *shampanskoe*, *nalivka* or even beer may be an option.

Toasting is a complicated ritual and the length of toasts seems correlated with the quantity of alcohol already swallowed. But in my experience post-Soviet countries are unique for the fantasy and diversity people have for toasting, wishing all kinds of good to everybody, touching every aspect of people's life, from health to love to friendship. In Ajara I almost passed as impolite several times because toasts are long: the host might start telling a long story or making a long wish, stop, reflect for a while...and start again so that it was not clear to me when one should drink. In Odessa toasts might also be elaborate (with the third toast normally to love) but will rarely compare to Georgian ones in length.

If your glass is full you are supposed to drink, and refilling comes just before the toast. At any given moment, somebody will feel the urgent need to give a toast; people will hurriedly scan all the glasses on the table to spot those that need a refill. Sometimes this will mean that they will have to ask the toast-person to hold his toast for a few more seconds to allow time to refill.

Incidentally, drinking rarely comes alone. The Russian expression *zakuska* means something you can 'bite' (*zakusivat*) while drinking. It is habit in Odessa and Batumi to immediately fill your stomach with something to limit the effects of the alcohol. The classic *zakuska* will be salted cucumber or tomato but anything will do, from bread to fruit juices

(though I once was told of persons who used vodka as *zakuska* for vodka), the important thing is to stuff something down your stomach to better withstand alcohol's short and long term effects.

Final Reflections on Hospitality, Food and Guests

Following what I have called the "ethylic (al) transition" (meaning the change in production of alcohol) (Polese 2008), a hospitality transition is happening in Eastern Europe, prompting the host to adopt a more disengaged and time saving approach. Rituals are being renegotiated and cut shorter, while their modality and meaning seem to remain similar. Hospitality rituals thus become affected by a number of factors, including perceptions of neighbours and neighbourhood, conception and perception of time and space, and perception of oneself and the other in socio-economic relationships. In this context, the narrowing of distances has further altered the perception of guests and their importance in many in people's minds. The dichotomy 'homemade food vs. factory food' has acquired new significance and the social meaning of a purchased good lies in conferring social status to the giver and the taker, a distinction that is less visible with homemade alcohol or food. The compromise that the city seems to have found depends on time availability and use of time.

Recalling the most famous quote 'time is money' we can propose that the time devoted to a guest is a loss in economic opportunity, and thus when time becomes a precious commodity the host might be more reticent to spend copious amounts of time on a guest. Time is needed to cook homemade food, prepare homemade alcohol, entertain the guest and follow all the traditional rituals that were elaborated in a moment when time was abundant for ordinary people.

Hospitality rituals become then renegotiated, but their complexity remains. In some contexts the guest will be devoted all possible attention, but in other contexts where time is short the host will have to elaborate a new strategy: showing respect and devotion to the guest without taking too much time from income-related activities. The process of food preparation will be one of the first to be sacrificed, with less complex dishes and more supermarket ingredients. Drinking rituals might be reduced or circumscribed to the dinner, when

food will help to limit effects of alcohol better than *zakuski*. Finally, the perception of a stranger and the decision of whom is granted status as a guest will also be affected, and the number of times one becomes able to engage in such rituals will decrease. However the friendships, the genuineness and the good moments—these, at least, seem to remain.

* Part of this research was made possible thanks to a Marie Curie International Outgoing Fellowship (Grant Ref: 219691).

References

- Cole, Stroma. 2006. Hospitality and Tourism in Ngadha: An Ethnographic Exploration in Lashley, Conrad, Paul Lynch, Alison Morrison Hospitality: A Social Lens, London: Elsevier
- Du Boulay, Juliet. 1991. Strangers and gifts: Hostility and hospitality in rural Greece. *Journal of Mediterranean Studies* 1(1): 37-53
- Erb M .2000. Understanding Tourists, interpretations from Indonesia. *Annals of Tourism Research* 27(3) 709- 736
- Gerard, Marc. 1998. Essai sur le don. *Humanités Modernes* 113 :67-72
- Harrison, Graham. 1999. 'Corruption, development theory and the boundaries of social change.' *Contemporary Politics* 5(3):207-220
- Heatherington, Tracey. 2001. In the rustic kitchen: Real talk and reciprocity. *Ethnology* 40 (4): 329-345
- Herzfeld, Michael. 1988. The Poetics of Manhood: Contest and Identity in a Cretan Mountain Village. Princeton, Princeton University Press

- Lashley C. 2000. Towards a Theoretical Understanding. In C Lashley and E Morrison (eds.) *In Search of Hospitality: Theoretical Prospects and Debates* Oxford: Butterworth Heinemann
- Ledeneva, Alena. 1998. *Russia's Economy of Favours: 'Blat', Networking and Informal Exchange*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Lonkila, Markku. 1997. Informal exchange relations in post-soviet Russia: a comparative perspective. *Sociological Research Online* 2 (3) www.socresonline.org.uk/socresonline/2/2/9.html last retrieved 5 March 2007
- Malinowski, Bronislaw. 1922. *The Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul
- Mauss, Marcel. [1924], 1990. *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. London: Routledge
- Mennel S, Murcott A, Van Otterloo A. 1992. *The Sociology of Food: Eating, Eiet and Culture*. London: Sage
- Mesnil Marianne and Vintila Mihailescu. 1998. *La table sens dessus dessous*. MAUSS Recherches 12: 185-194
- Parry, Jonathan and Maurice Bloch (eds). 1989. *Money and the Morality of Exchange*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Parry, Jonathan. 1986. The gift, the Indian gift and the 'Indian gift'. *Man* 21:453-473
- Patino, Jennifer. 2002. Chocolate and Cognac: Gifts and the Recognition of Social Worlds in post-Soviet Russia. *Ethnos* 67(3): 345-368
- Pelkmans, Mathijs. 2006. *Defending the Border: Identity, Religion, and Modernity in the Republic of Georgia*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press
- Polese, Abel. 2008. Du samogon a la vodka de supermarche. *Regards sur est* 49, (July 2008)
- Polese, Abel. 2008b. 'If I Receive it, it is a gift; if I demand it, then it is a bribe' on the local meaning of economic transactions in post-soviet Ukraine. *Anthropology in Action* special issue: 'Reflections on gift exchange in the contemporary world' edited by Denise Carter and Michaela Benson (forthcoming)
- Polese, Abel. 2006. The Good Samaritan. In *Man of the Global South: A Reader*, ed. Adam Jones, 113-118. London: Zed Books
- Raheja, Gloria. 1988. *The Poison of the Gift*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Selwyn T. 2000. An Anthropology of Hospitality. In Lashley C (2000) *Towards a Theoretical Understanding*. In C Lashley and E Morrison (eds.) *In Search of Hospitality: Theoretical Prospects and Debates*. Oxford: Butterworth Heinemann
- Thomas, Nicholas. 1991. *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press
- Van Gennep, Arnold. [1909] 2004. *The Rites of Passage*. Routledge
- Van Gennep, Arnold. 1980. *Coutumes et croyances populaires en France*. Chemin vert
- Visser M. 1991. *The Rituals of Dinner*. London: Penguin
- Watson, James and Melissa Caldwell (eds.). 2004. *The Cultural Politics of Food and Eating*. London: Blackwell

- Werner, Cynthia A. (2002), 'Gifts, Bribes and Development in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan' in Jeffrey H. Cohen and Norbert Dannhaeuser (eds.) *Economic Development: An Anthropological Approach* (Walnut Creek, Lanham, New York, Oxford: Altamira Press): 183-208
- Weiner, Annette. 1992. *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping While Giving*. Berkley and Oxford: University of California Press
- Williams, Colin. 2005. *A Commodified World? Mapping the limits of Capitalism*. London: Zed
- Yang, Mayfair, Mei-hui. 1994. *Gifts, favours and banquets: the Art of social relationships in China*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press
- Zanca, Russel. 2003. 'Take! Take! Take!' Host Guest Relations and All That Food: Uzbek Hospitality Past and Present. *Anthropology of Eastern Europe Review* 21(1), available online at <http://condor.depaul.edu/%7Errotenbe/aer/V21n1/Zanca.pdf> last retrieved 20 May 2008