CONSUMING THE WEST BUT BECOMING THIRD WORLD:FOOD IMPORTS AND THE EXPERIENCE OF RUSSIANNESS

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In contemporary St. Petersburg, one can hardly help but notice how often all things "European" and "Western" are heralded for their stylishness, dependable quality, and prestige value. Shop windows and the billboards that line city avenues promote their wares – from furniture to electronics to cigarettes – by highlighting their connection with (often, their origination from) the U.S., Italy, Sweden, Germany, or simply a generic "Europe." In conversation, people describe apartment renovation projects (*remont*) as *either* cosmetic and inexpensive *or* thoroughgoing, high-quality, expensive, and "Eurostandard" (*evrostandart*). Yet when it comes to foodstuffs, many speakers are at least as likely to discuss the merits of domestic production over European and American analogues. Likewise, food companies – including some based outside of Russia[1] – frequently center their advertising and marketing campaigns around recognizably Russian places and pasts, such as the scenes of simple and hearty village life used to sell "Sweet Mila" milk and the imperial balls and Pushkin-esque gun duels portrayed in commercials for "*Rossiia*" chocolate. (The slogan for this last product plays on a classic trope of Russia's national identity: "*Rossiia – shchedraia dusha*," or "Russia – generous soul.").

For anyone who has spent much time in Russian homes, enjoying *borshch* or cabbage soup (*shchi*), buckwheat kasha or black bread, *vinegret* and "Olivier" salads, and endless cups of tea, it may come as no great surprise that food should be singled out for association with homey tradition and an essential sort of Russianness. "This is a *purely Russian* dish...Take some more! Don't be shy!" – are among the encouragements and admonitions a foreign visitor is likely to hear in a Russian kitchen. Certainly there, as elsewhere in the world, cooking and cuisine can become powerful vehicles for nostalgia and for the maintenance of identities conceived as national or "traditional" (e.g., Appadurai 1988, Leitch 2000, West 2002) – perhaps especially in the face of perceived threats to cultural continuity, such as the marketization that has so transformed Russian life in recent years.[2]

Yet having examined this issue within the wider context of an ethnography of consumer practice and ideology in post-Soviet St. Petersburg (1998-99), I have found that such an explanation cannot account very well for the ways in which people's opinions about food imports reflect their more generalized ambivalence about the far-reaching changes wrought in their lives since the collapse of the USSR; nor does it shed sufficient light on the full range of concrete concerns that factor into people's evaluations of food commodities. Given the scarcity of consumer goods that prevailed in the Soviet Union, the problem of choice itself is in some ways a novel one. That is, there is a new need to develop dependable criteria for identification of those commodities, from among a wide range of largely unfamiliar options, which represent an optimal combination of quality, prestige, and affordability. Many people assume that labels and even brands cannot always be trusted to provide assurance of consistency. In this context, careful consumer decision-making partly depends upon reference to the countries in which specific items have been manufactured, for these are held to be relatively good predictors of quality and other characteristics. The logics according to which urbanites differentiate among food products say much about how those actors construct a sense of what it means to be Russian in a globalizing world. However, as we shall see, the choice of Russian-made foods over imports should not necessarily be read as symbolically equivalent to a defense of "Russian tradition" against external forces of change. Rather, as I will show, at play are considerably more complex "geographical knowledges" (Cook and Crang 1996: 132), that is, local understandings of the origins and paths food products take through the global economy (Appadurai 1986).

I have explored these issues ethnographically from the particular social perspective of St. Petersburg public schoolteachers, drawing upon twelve months of participant-observation in schools, homes, and more public settings as well as intensive, semi-directed interviews. As public employees, Russian teachers (most of whom are women) have been hit particularly hard by drops in state funding and by the market fluctuations of the post-Soviet era. Typically, their incomes have shrunk substantially since the collapse of the USSR: both in terms of their absolute buying power and in comparison with the more elite professionals, entrepreneurs and racketeers who have prospered and become infamously conspicuous consumers during the

same decade.[3] A frustrating mix of expanded consumer opportunities, rising prices and decreasing social supports has undermined teachers' senses of themselves as respectable, "cultured" (*kul'turnye*) representatives of a (once relatively secure, if not wealthy or terribly prestigious) "mass intelligentsia" (Schlapentokh 1999; Patico 2001a, n.d.). Yet, even in the first months of the 1998 financial crisis with its concomitant hardships, few expressed much nostalgia for the enforced stability provided by socialism *per se*. On the contrary, even the most financially strapped among them tended to view the changes as improvements over Soviet shops' drab uniformity and the constant shortages and endless queues once endured by citizens.

Remembering the earliest floods of imported goods to St. Petersburg in the early 1990s, the teachers recalled an initial rush to try as many novelties as possible, especially all kinds of unfamiliar foods. These included brand-name items that quickly became famous, such as Snickers candy bars and Folgers coffee; there were also exotic fruits and vegetables never before seen in the Soviet Union, such as kiwi. Many of the "new" items were not, strictly speaking, new to the local diet. What was new was the wide availability of familiar foods such as apples, cheeses and sausages from places as geographically and (once) politically distant as the U.S., Britain, the Netherlands, and China. These foods may, of course, differ in taste and appearance both from previously accustomed Soviet products and contemporary Russian ones. More importantly, those material differences are sometimes taken up and given special kinds of significance, following particular logics that I describe in the remainder of this paper. It is worth noting that while my ethnographic research included accompanying teachers on grocery shopping trips, I draw here less on my direct observations of their purchases than on our conversations, in interviews and in less formal contexts, about domestic and imported foods and their respective merits. For in any given instance, the choice of one food product over another was likely to be explained away as a straightforward matter of finding the cheapest item of decent quality available; but our more abstract, hypothetical conversations drew out some of the ways in which "quality" itself is understood and predicted.

Some teachers described the sudden influx of imports in the early-mid 1990s as a kind of revelatory experience. Seeing all those bright and attractive new foods, garments, appliances, and packagings had provoked a shift in their perceptions of the progress and positioning of Russia itself: the Soviet Union had been further "behind" the rest of the world than they had previously imagined. Such new visions had finally showed them what "normal life" – life in the "West," as opposed to Soviet life – was really supposed to be like. Shortly, however, the novelty wore off, and as people gained experience they began to compare imports unfavorably with more familiar, less expensive, locally produced goods. This was particularly the case with domestic foodstuffs, which many people quickly concluded to be healthier, fresher and tastier on the whole than imported ones (Caldwell 2002, Humphrey 1995, Patico 2001a). But as the following story illustrates, practical logics for interpreting goods' quality have not relied solely or even primarily on assumptions about the inherent superiority of Russian products, but also on ideas about how and why particular goods end up in St. Petersburg markets.

Elizaveta, a middle school English teacher, was trying to describe how she generally decided what to purchase, given the diversity of products now available locally. She mentioned various warnings she had heard, either through the media or from acquaintances, about allergenic food additives and preservatives said to be found mainly in imported products. This threat had become particularly real to her when a student became quite ill and missed school for some time. Elizaveta was told that the source of the girl's illness was due to an allergy to imported foods. When I asked for more details, such as whether the allergy had been to particular brands or ingredients, Elizaveta said she had been too shy to ask – she had heard only that the hospital's diagnosis was "imported foods." She did not appear to doubt the diagnosis, however, seemingly willing to suspect imported products on principle.

Yet as she went on, her explanation revealed a more complicated reasoning, as she clarified that the goods Russia received from the U.S. were not, as far as she knew, necessarily the best of what that country had to offer to its own citizens. It was specifically the *exports to Russia* that were problematic. High quality imported foods were fine, but they were very expensive; and there were others, cheaper ones, of very low quality: people said these were "for Negroes." When I inquired as to her choice of that particular phrase, Elizaveta recalled Soviet-era propaganda about the capitalist West, which included the claim that giving low quality, even harmful foods to Blacks was a form of systematic racism

perpetrated in the U.S.[4] Finally, she complained that Russia had become a "Third World" country – an evaluation whose significance I shall return to consider below.

Foods from the U.S. and Western Europe were not the only culprits, however. American companies' goods could be deemed the safer bets when compared to suspiciously inexpensive domestic items or with foods from, for example, China. Teacher Nastia declared that cheap chewing gums from China were bad for one's health – better to buy "Orbit" brand.[5] She observed with frustration and some disdain that "all 'normal' countries have already refused [i.e., kept out]" such putatively low-quality, unhealthy Asian imports.[6] Another woman, a teacher's friend who had recently traveled to Italy, commented on how tasty the Orbit chewing gum on sale *there* had been compared to the Orbit available in St. Petersburg. She concluded with a laugh that "*our* Orbit must be made in Poland or somewhere!" Production in a fellow former socialist, less "Western" country provided a plausible (if humorous) explanation here, in and of itself, for the observed difference in quality.[7]

Still, foods produced in Russia quite often were described as simply tastier than any imports. One man asserted that in that sense, he was "on the side of domestic" foods, though he claimed not to espouse the view that "*nash produkt*" ("our food product") should be bought for its own sake. "If our analogue [to an imported product] is good, I'll buy it; but if not, why bother with patriotism?" This attitude was rather typical in that people did not portray buying domestic as the right thing to do for the national economy or as a matter of national integrity. Notably, they referred to commodities (including foods) produced in Russia as *rossiiskoe* (Russian[8]) and occasionally, rather anachronistically, as *sovetskoe* (Soviet). More common in informal conversation were the somewhat vaguer yet more proprietary *nashe* ("ours") and *otechestvennoe*. I translate the latter here as "domestic," though it could be rendered as "native" and derives literally from "fatherland." As I heard the term used in the consumer context, however, it seemed so mundane as to be rather value-neutral; that is, people applied it without appearing to care particularly about domestic production as an issue of politics and patriotism *per se*.

Instead, they described the superior healthfulness and tastiness of milk from the nearby Petmol plant and chocolate from the trusted Krupskaia factory of St. Petersburg.[9] Apples and other produce from nearby cooperative farms might not look as attractive as the shiny, flawless fruits that came from abroad, but they were said to have more flavor and were assumed to be fresher. And while one did not know exactly when and how an imported, packaged roll-up cake (*rulet*) had been made, local bakery stands carried breads and sweets that one could assume to have been baked in St. Petersburg the day before. According to this kind of logic, domestic goods, especially cheap items transported to St. Petersburg from other towns and cities, could fall under suspicion or derision almost as easily as imports.

There were particular things to watch out for. Some shoppers tried consciously to avoid consuming harmful preservatives and additives. Imports, again, were especially but not exclusively implicated, due to the technological complexity of vacuum-packed and other packaged foods as well as the fact of their having been transported long distances. Prime suspects included imported *polufabrikaty* (literally: "half-made" or half-assembled) food products as well as their more recently introduced, domestic counterparts, including frozen cutlets, *pelmeni* (meat dumplings), and soup mixes. A crucial question was that of expiration dates. For instance, when several teachers discussed groceries to be purchased for a teachers' party, one woman who had been delegated to buy packaged torts asked for direction: "Should I get those ones, those imported ones?" To which her superior immediately cried, "Only don't get those! They're expired!" Another man theorized that the reason why goods were so inexpensive at the market at Sennaia Ploshchad', reputed as one of the cheapest shopping areas in the city, was that foods were being sold there past their expiration dates. While a shopper could, of course, examine the expiration date to avoid problems, false expiration labels notoriously were pasted over earlier, authentic ones.[10]

Explanations circulated that were based on a conception of Russia's falling status within a global hierarchy of producers and consumers. Teacher Dima noted that when the imports had begun pouring into Russia, "the West" had sent over the expired goods that had gone uneaten at home. Kseniia similarly complained that "Europe 'throws goods out' here, as to the Third World," a problem she had seen discussed in Russian newspapers. Importantly, in the common parlance of the Soviet era, it was the state apparatus that "threw out" (*vybrosili*, *vykydivali*) goods to the shops for people to buy. As Caroline Humphrey puts it, the phrase reflected people's awareness that these goods were

> *not really bought by choice, but allocated*...at some level [people] realised that they were at the receiving end of a state-planned system of distribution...[and] that shops and markets were *lower-priority parts of the same system* as the specially distributed packages of luxuries to officials and the nameless, closely curtained buildings that contained foreign-currency stores. (1995:47) (emphasis added)

If in the Soviet era an inscrutable and resented "they" controlled the distribution of goods, wealthy countries exporting their least wanted commodities to Russia clearly represent one of the new, post-Soviet "thems."[11] That a person should describe contemporary market relations using the old notion of "throwing out" attests to the feeling that a new locus of authority or judgment – not some invisible hand – is releasing these goods to Russia's poorer consumers, having assessed their place within a broader set of priorities. "Third World," as Elizaveta and her colleagues used the term, referred to a lack of economic development and perhaps even of cultural sophistication (the notion of how "civilized" a country was); "food for Negroes," meanwhile, called up troubling tales of purposeful racial discrimination in the West. Such comparisons expressed the injustice that even well-educated, ostensibly "cultured" Russians such as schoolteachers were being reduced to a shameful kind of poverty. Sub-standard food products evoked the humiliation of what the teachers perceived to be their subordinate and increasingly exploited position vis-à-vis the world's more privileged populations. Stale cakes and tasteless gum appeared, then, as reflections of the speakers' own inferiority, as they imagined it might be seen through the eyes of powerful others.

In this sense, each of those questionable items spoke loudly to consumers about the state of things in Russia in general, and about the well-bring of one's own family in particular. It was precisely in falling prey to low-quality imports from places like the U.S. that were also known to produce *better* things that a shopper was most likely to wonder ruefully whether she really was becoming part of the "Third World." By making smart consumer choices, people strove to insulate themselves as well as possible from the ignominy of Russia's weak position in the global economy. Whatever sentimental value people attached to Russian cooking and cuisine in other contexts, the more salient concern as they interpreted and negotiated their options in the post-Soviet marketplace was for a more satisfactory, "civilized" and "Eurostandard" lifestyle – which, ironically enough, could sometimes be achieved most effectively by "siding with the domestic."

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[1] For example, in 1998-99 a frequently run television commercial for Twix candy bars (a Mars product) included a prominent reference to Russian cultural icon Alexander Pushkin, and Cadbury named a line of candy bars after historic Russian towns.

[2] On related issues of globalized consumption as a site of cultural innovation and of new articulations of "local" identity, see, for example, Appadurai 1990; Miller 1994, 1997; Hannerz 1996; Howes 1996; Watson 1997. For discussions of how recent anthropological work on globalization and consumption pertain to the post-Soviet scene, see Stryker and Patico 2002 and Patico and Caldwell 2002.

[3] The official salaries (including base pay, or stavka, plus salary for additional hours or responsibilities) of most teachers I knew were in the range of 1000 rubles per month in 1998-99;

they received only very small raises for the spring 1999 semester. Meanwhile, due to the ruble depreciation that began in mid-August 1998, the value of the same salary dropped from approximately U.S. $167 (August 1998) to about $42 in (early 1999). The correspondence of prices to exchange rates varied: prices for some food products, especially those that were state regulated such as bread, rose significantly but more slowly than the ruble depreciated; others, especially imported products, rose at equivalent or even higher rates. In January 1999, 1000 rubles was roughly equivalent to both the average monthly per capita income in St. Petersburg and the official per person subsistence minimum as calculated by the city government (Nevskoe Vremia 7/1/99). However, some teachers, especially English language teachers, earned higher monthly incomes by maintaining a busy schedule of private lessons.

[4] On representations of race, ethnicity and culture in Russia, see Lemon's analysis of Roma identity and performance (2000); and regarding the significance of the "Negro" in Russian and Soviet history, see Blakely 1986. For a full discussion of the interconnected discourses of "civilization," national identity, and "culturedness" (kul'turnost') in consumption, see Patico 2001a, n.d.

[5] Orbit is a product of the Chicago-based Wrigley Company.

[6] Notably, my informants' critiques generally did not dwell specifically on the apparent ineffectiveness of state regulations and monitoring standards in ensuring reasonable food quality and safety. As a rule, they put little stock in consumer protection agencies, at least when it came to lodging official complaints about unsatisfactory purchases; they assumed nothing would come of it and that it would be a waste of time.

[7] According to the Wrigley company's website, it operates fourteen factories around the world, including four in Europe. In addition, it opened a new plant in Novgorod in June 1999, hoping that local production would make it less vulnerable to the effects of fluctuations in the ruble's value (The St. Petersburg Times 6/29/99). The conversation recounted above took place during the same year, in September 1999.

[8] Note that "Russian" here refers not to ethnic Russians (as the adjective *russkii* refers to the nation in the sense of a group with common history, culture, language, etc.) but to the Russian nation-state (the adjective *rossiiskii* might modify, for example, citizenship, the army, or any kind of national institution).

[9] Some teachers and their relatives, like many other people in St. Petersburg, have dachas outside of the city where they (or more likely, their retired parents) grow produce (cucumbers, potatoes, etc.) and collect wild berries and mushrooms. For the most part, teachers found that their time (which could be spent, instead, in tutoring for pay) and travel expenses were dear enough that they chose not to invest much in cultivation of their dacha gardens; it made more sense to buy produce in the city. Still, they did value home-grown produce, particularly because they knew exactly how and where it had been produced (dacha spots were described as "ecologically clean (*chisto*)." While urbanites' nostalgic romanticizations of life in the countryside are undoubtedly relevant in these evaluations (see Caldwell forthcoming), I did not find foodstuffs as commodities to be very strongly identified with Russian culture and heritage per se. Rather, as described above, international frames of "civilization," progress, and privilege seemed at least as important.

[10] Nancy Ries (2002) provides apocryphal evidence of this actually happening in urban Russia: "a friend explained one of his friends' frozen food business: he imports expired product from Europe and has his employees restamp the boxes with new expiration dates; this man pays off the state inspection agents at the border so as to import his inventory without problems."

[11] The local nouveaux riches could also be described this way; see Patico 2001a.