

Kosher on My Terms

By Alex Yanishevsky

Ukraine is not a foodie destination and it does not have the culinary prestige of Italy or France. It makes sense that most people will not be tripping over themselves to make dinner reservations to restaurants that serve borscht, cabbage dumplings and potatoes. However, people of all nationalities and religions in Ukraine swear by *salo* (in fact, it is so popular that in 2008 Ukrainians created a political party for Lovers of Salo, which unfortunately was never officially registered), cured pork fatback without skin which is similar to the Italian *lardo* (also cured fatback but with rosemary) and lardo as a *salume* which includes other cured meats like salami, prosciutto, pancetta, so you might say that by association, kind of, sort of, Ukrainians are as famous as Italians when it comes to cured pork.

But if you're Jewish, pork, whether cured or not, is not kosher and forbidden.

The problem is – it is very tasty.

How do you solve this contradiction?

My great-grandmother had a special place in the fridge for my great-grandfather. As long as he ate *salo* on a napkin with a dedicated knife reserved only for that purpose and promptly wrapped the remaining slab and tucked it away in that special place, one could argue, perhaps, to God, that such small transgressions should not be considered.

Jews could not openly practice in the Soviet Union, but when they emigrated to America, they had choices and frankly, too many of them: some reclaimed their Jewish religious identity and became orthodox, some became primarily Jewish culturally, and a third category who claim to be more religious than they are and make up exceptions as necessary.

This is how my friend, Yasha, became Jacob, his name no longer shameful as it was in the Soviet Union. Jacob is a great biblical name, one of the patriarchs, father of Joseph, (he of the famous technicolor coat who saved the Egyptian pharaoh from famine and eleven less well-known brothers). Jacob was proud of his name and even more proud of keeping kosher, though in his own unique way.

When Jacob had eye surgery, he called me in a panic, “You need to come today!”

Worried there was a setback, I replied, “Sure, what’s the matter? How I can help? Do we need to go to the hospital? Can I go to the store to get you something?”

Now the problem was revealed, “I got a fancy gift basket from a coworker. The cheese crackers and spread are all fine. But the truffle salami is the culprit.”

“Huh?”

He elaborated, “You need to come and get the salami and remove it from my house immediately. You need to get it today since it’s expensive salami.”

“I need to get what?” - I said incredulously.

He was becoming more frantic, “You need to get the salami out of my house tonight!”

Why specifically tonight, I thought. What am I a salami exterminator; even the regular exterminator books an appointment at least one week out and he's battling legitimate damage-causing vermin like rodents, carpenter ants, and millipedes.

What will happen if I don't get it tonight, I wonder. Will he be able to sleep? Or even worse: what if he goes to sleep and in the dark of night the salami will make its romantic move and go over to the cheese and lie with it in a biblical way?

I offer a compromise, "I can't come over tonight. I am busy. How about tomorrow? Do you think you and the salami can coexist for one evening, maybe on separate floors, if necessary, so bloodshed will not ensue?"

I keep my word and call the next day, ready to be of service both for his religious good and for the sake of my stomach.

No answer.

I call the next day to offer my salami exterminator services.

Again, no answer.

I have my own suspicions about what happened to the salami, but that's between me and God.

Bell Peppers

If Freud were alive today, I would be one of his frequent patients. The financial arrangement, though, is not clearly apparent: would I fund his penthouse downtown or a second home by the ocean via my high insurance co-pays with my insurance footing the rest of his exorbitant bill or would he talk to me for a small, symbolic payment since I would be a nice case study for a medical conference? One thing is clear: Freud would find my aversion, bordering on maniacal revulsion to bell peppers, as a result of childhood food poisoning, absolutely fascinating.

Some American kindergartens can be quite liberal in their approach to childrearing. For example, if you subscribe to the Montessori philosophy, the child should be given free rein to express their natural inclinations. In other words, in this individualistic approach, one child may want to go to the bathroom, another may want to eat, a third to pick his or her nose, and a fourth to read Greek myths. All of this is perfectly fine because in a few years all the children will have become equally adept at doing all four of these tasks on a high level, in fact to the point of performing them simultaneously. In more conservative and egalitarian approaches, children will have planned activities, but they are still granted some modicum of autonomy by choosing when they go to the bathroom.

Not so in the Soviet Union. Everything, literally everything, is done collectively, together. Everyone is in class together under the watchful eyes of Grandpa Lenin (believe me, it could be worse; the grandparents were under the watchful eyes of Papa Stalin, so take your small

victories). Everyone also eats together in the cafeteria, also under the watchful eyes of Grandpa Lenin. And lastly, everyone sits on their own (thank God, not a collective one) potty, of course under the watchful eyes of Grandpa Lenin. Given this regiment, unlike the US, you do not bring lunch to school. There is no trading of snacks and no “Lunchables” with cute box designs and processed ham, processed cheese and an ultra-sweet, corn-syrupy chocolate chip cookie. The Soviets claimed they fed their kindergarteners fresh, collective farm to table food. If only that were true...The good food was promptly “privatized” through the back door and the kids received food that could be a bit beyond the expiration date, to put it mildly. That is how I got food poisoning from bell peppers stuffed with rice that traumatized my relationship to peppers for the rest of my life.

Ah, if you could only bring food from home to kindergarten. At home, I lived like a Jewish prince, the only boy among two doting grandmothers and two equally doting great-grandmothers. It seems they were in a serious, Olympics-level competition for who can feed me more. The goal was to make sure that my height and width were in equal proportion. The prize – bragging rights and pride.

“I fed him an apricot, a plum, a chicken cutlet and three cookies.” My Grandma Alla would ante up into the pot like an experienced poker player.

“Allochka.” My Grandma Tanya exclaimed, not to be outdone, “Yesterday, I had him devour one and a half apples, a bowl of chicken soup, a large cutlet meant for a grown man, *abyssleleh* (a

little) potato salad, and a large helping of honey cake. Oy, I was so proud. He waddled like a duck afterwards.”

My great-grandmother, Tsilya, would put up the royal flush of poker hands, “Girls,” she would say, (when you’re in your mid-sixties, you get to refer to women in their forties as girls), “Let me give you some advice. I can get him to eat one and a half to two times what you described. How? A rabbi does not know, but I will tell you. Cut everything into slices. You cut two apples, put them in a bowl and he does not even realize that he’s consumed two apples. Same thing for everything. Slices, girls, slices. That’s the key.”

Interestingly enough, despite being fed like a turkey who’s being prepped for a Thanksgiving Day feast, I was never, ever given bell peppers stuffed with rice.

They knew that everyone has their limits.

Perhaps my revulsion also has to do with the inherent nature of bell peppers. Some foods can be grilled, steamed or baked and their flavor is enhanced. Not bell peppers. They are slimy and mushy and will remain that way, even when grilled. Even if you were to stuff a bell pepper with a mouth-watering filet mignon, the bell pepper would still impart its slimy mushiness and its mushy sliminess to the filet mignon and ruin the latter.

And that is why as a generally reasonable and cogent adult, I fastidiously pick out every single

bell pepper bit from my plate; even at restaurants and fancy social gatherings, I move the offending pieces to a separate plate and cover them with a large napkin as not to offend my sight or smell.

Borscht, Anyone?

I work in an international company. From time to time, we have international food day, kind of like an elementary school science fair but for adults, when each person represents his or her homeland via their cuisine. French colleagues bring various cheeses and breads or make chocolate mousse from scratch. Italians, not to be outdone, bring various pasta dishes or lighter fare like prosciutto. And they take their food seriously, very seriously. My Italian friend commented, "This prosciutto, this was Vincenzo, from his cheek. I knew him personally, and his mother, grandmother and even great-grandmother. I saw him every day as he was raised. He wasn't fed corn to fatten him up like in the US, he was fed organic pasta with Alfredo sauce three times a week."

I can't compete with that.

On the wine front, I lose too. Italian and French wines are famous throughout the world. The only people who drink Georgian wine and Armenian cognac, thought to be the best in the world during Soviet times, are Soviet emigres themselves, and only out of nostalgia.

Asian colleagues stand on equal footing with their European counterparts. Colleagues from India conjure up magical chutneys with exotic spices. Japanese employees make hand-rolled sushi with fresh off-the-boat tuna and salmon. Chinese personnel fashion mooncakes in various flavors: red bean, salted egg yolk, minced pork.

Where does that leave me?

As usual, in the middle, between Europe and Asia, not really being a part of either one. We, Russians, have our own destiny, it seems.

In my head, I start going through the options of what best reflects Russianness. Of course, the first thing that comes to mind is vodka, but that's not a food, at least for most people, and likely would not be allowed at a company gathering.

Candies are a fine option at first blush. Clumsy bear is a famous Russian chocolate and wafer candy bar, kind of the like the American Kit Kat. However, Russians are not particularly original in creating when it comes to candy bars. There is Squirrel, which is the same base as Clumsy Bear, but with nuts. Bear in the North features a polar bear rather than the brown Clumsy Bear and the only difference is an additional emulsifier in the latter. Do you know what a king size candy bar is called? You'd expect something like Papa Bear or Tsar Bear, but no. It is called Gulliver like the giant in Gulliver's Travels. Go figure...The choices are somewhat limited as you can surmise.

Oh, I forgot the most important reason I can't bring the chocolate candy bar. Often, it tastes like stale chocolate. We Russians, are used to it, but many people are not. In fact, there's a factory in Brooklyn that manufactures Russian-American clumsy bears and desperately tries to match the original flavor, er, staleness.

“What you think, Misha? Like o-ree-geenal?”

“No, not at all. It tastes like four months trip from Moscow to Ufa (central Russia). Remember – Russia big. Eleven time zones. It must taste like full travel to Far East, to Vladivostok, eight months trip.”

“OK, we keep try...”

Rest assured, Russian is not France, Belgium, or Switzerland when it comes to chocolate.

Another challenge is that lots of tasty food that we eat is, how do we put it tactfully, frankly, not Russian: such as rice pilaf with chicken, almonds, and raisins (Uzbek), grilled and marinated meats like shish kebab (Georgian), meat pies (Tatar), chopped herring (Jewish), or pork fat (Ukrainian). Certainly, I can make pelmeni or vareniki, but many countries have similar variations of dumplings.

No, I need something uniquely Russian. Caviar would be a good choice, but from previous experience people are turned off by the concept of fish eggs. I do not quite understand since Spaniards eat bull testicles and authentic Chinese food is not what we see in many Chinese-American restaurants. I mean to feed over one billion people you can't discriminate – you eat everything of anything that walks, swims, flies or slithers. Also, a particularly rational colleague of mine once pointed out that eating fish eggs is illogical; why not wait for the actual fish to grow up and thus, have more food. Was she perhaps considering an alternate career as a salmon fish farmer?

Ultimately, this left me with borscht, a dark red soup featuring beets as the main actor with carrots, potatoes, onions and occasionally even meat as supporting actors.

And that's how I found myself like a kid who failed his elementary school science fair experiment, in the corner, pleading with colleagues, "Beets are very healthy. Borscht, anyone?"

Russian-Jewish Restaurants

Russian-Jewish restaurants are not really restaurants like a Chinese or Italian restaurant meant to cater the public. That's a misnomer when applied to them. They are really social clubs. To be more precise, they are places where you go for a medieval-style banquet, a feast with music, food and drinking for eight hours (nine to ten hours if you're the host since you need to arrive a couple of hours early to supervise the restaurant staff lest anything go wrong, and you bring shame to your family name for generations to come). If you have the good fortune or lapse in judgment to have a Russian-Jewish partner, you need to be psychologically prepared for the long evening ahead.

It is best to wear elastic or expandable pants as you will likely gain five pounds alone from the extended meal. There are usually four to five courses that come in one to one and a half hour increments. Frankly, quantity is prized over quality, though quality is of course expected to be at a certain threshold. For each course, at minimum, the entire table must be covered with food, whereby you have little room to maneuver your utensils or glasses. If you really want to impress your guests, the layering technique is even better. In this technique, the table is so full that you begin to stack bowls on top of bowls, so your guests have to restack and reshuffle as they partake of the food.

The first course is usually cold appetizers, an assortment of various sausages, spreads, marinated mushroom, pickles, tomatoes, as well as various types of hot and cold smoked fish.

The second course is soup, which moves us into the warm direction, typically borscht. The third course is hot appetizers, various dumplings (pelmeni and vareniki) with mushroom, cabbage, meat, and potato. The uninitiated make a mistake at this juncture and eat too much thinking that this is the main course. They are ridiculed as weaklings when the fourth course, the main course arrives. Russian Jews are not vegetarians, so the fourth course is meat, lots of meat, lots, and lots of meat; shish kebabs of all varieties (chicken, lamb, beef), pan-fried chicken, duck breast, rack of lamb. If Russian Jews were Hawaiian at this point, they'd bring out the entire pig, but the meat equivalent in shish kebabs probably wipes out most Georgian lamb stock for about a month. The fifth and last course, if you've made it, is various desserts – blintzes, pastries, cookies and various cakes with lots of merengue that have fancy French names, but are not really French.

While the courses above are served, there is live music. Usually, this is a band of four people: three guys from a conservatory, a keyboardist, guitarist, and drummer, with one of the first two having the ability to play violin, if necessary, and a lead singer with a large bosom. It's less relevant whether she is from a conservatory and can sing, as long as she has a large bosom. A set typically begins with Russian standards. These are big tip makers since guests will pay the band to play a song related to their city. Obviously, everyone wants to one up each other so it's not uncommon to pay \$100 for a "musical present to my compatriots from Odessa" which of course implies that compatriots from Moscow or St. Petersburg are less worthy. The band also displays their international flair by singing Gypsy Kings in Spanish with a Russian accent and for some reason, the obligatory Steve Miller song, "Abracadabra, I want to reach out and grab you"

also with a heavy Russian accent. As a little child, I was a bit anxious about being kidnapped by a woman with a large bosom. (Now if I were a poorly behaving Dutch kid, I'd get carried off to Spain...but no, I'd be grabbed and carted off to the Siberian taiga.) At a certain point, the band is so loud and passionate, that you can't hear yourself talk or think. At this crucial juncture, a brave soul gives the band money to take a break and stop playing. In some cases, the band is replaced by guests who are ardent amateurs and want to show off their own musical talents. Lastly when the music quiets, those souls who are more inclined to poetry begin declaiming their latest verses. Some of these souls strongly believe that they've inherited the poetic genius of Pushkin himself, Russia's national poet and who's to tell them otherwise.

In Russia, we were persecuted
In stores no items could be bought,
But here we soar, emboldened eagles
We value freedom, express our thoughts.

And so on...

Drinking is as important as food, if not more so. You need to plan for enough drink or shame will befall your household for generations to come. The going ratio is: one 750 ml bottle of vodka per man and one 750 ml bottle of wine per woman. Vodka may be replaced with cognac, but both must be of very good quality. Champagne is par for the course for desert and is considered separately from the calculations above.

There is also a definitive order to toasts, which generally happen every fifteen minutes and require that the entire glass be filled and emptied. My great-grandfather even in his seventies would call out younger men who did not fill his glass to the brim, “Eh, youngster, it seems you do not respect me.”

First you need to toast the host for inviting you to the event. Then, you need to toast the host’s family and all your friends. You also can’t forget to toast your ancestors who are not here to share the joyous occasion with you and to toast “the fact that we’re here, *gotenyu* (thank God), and not there.”

It is imperative that you toast “all the pretty women.” (As a linguistic pedant, I used to wonder are all the women pretty? presumably so; otherwise, we’re toasting pretty women and then require a toast for women who are not pretty and how do we toast them?)

An important rule about toasts: it is not sufficient to just make a one or two sentence toast such as “I love you, man” or “Congratulations! All the best!” No, such toasts are an embarrassment to the speaker and the recipient. Even grade school kids can do better. The toast is a monologue at a time when speaking was a form of entertainment itself and there was no TV or Internet. A brief example, “Senya and I met in kindergarten at five. We sat on adjoining pots under the watchful eyes of Papa Stalin as we went to the bathroom. Our wives knew each other when they were twelve. Our children were born three months apart and played on the same blanket. Both of our grandparents suffer from gout. We join him as one organism, as if we are in him, to

celebrate his birthday. And so on..."

And finally, when you start toasting the chandeliers in the restaurant for their beauty and for the fact that they stayed on for eight hours, that's when it's time go home.