

Salo (Pig Lard)

To M. Epshtein¹: Ukrainianness, Russianness, Sovietness

1. Does a cuisine have anything to do with a certain nation's fate, with a mindset, a philosophy?

Only a hopelessly narrow mind would answer this question in the negative. Nevertheless, we usually imply that there is such a connection, but do not comprehend it. Why is that so? Is it the result of the nearsightedness of our sense of touch, of smell, and of taste overcome by longer-range sight and hearing? There is no doubt about it either. The human larva drags everything into its mouth, and this stage settles deep down somewhere at the foundation of an adult whose senses are determined by the primacy of sight and hearing and by the suppression of cannibalism.

How many words do we have in our culture to designate taste? Sour, sweet, salty, bitter, tart, “tasty” – that’s about it. It is truly the vocabulary of a primate. However, one of the wildest mysteries of a refined intuitive culture is called transubstantiation and communion. There is apparently something fundamental in the sensation of taste repressed by a rationalistic culture, something that pierces through all levels of humanity in a human being and protrudes somewhere... into nowhere. One can eat one’s fill and burp, one can “*napertysia horniatkom kashi*” (eat till you burst), one can feast or indulge in the culinary art of food and drink, but – eliminating avarice – we will be interested only in satisfying hunger, in fortifying one’s strength. Why does the presently anecdotal (and deserving of special interest), mythic *SALO* (incredibly edible PIG LARD) appear as so much the quintessence of Ukrainian ethnic culture? What kind of product is it and what does it contain?

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2. Pig lard for Ukrainians is the same as Manna for the Jews (and the apples of Hesperides² for the Greeks), that is, a transcendental and earth-shattering dish, and for differentiation (as they say “out of spite” or to have them in “spades”) from the neighbors to the South, the Judeo-Muslims, it is undoubtedly prohibited for *them*.³ It is a dish that is both public and sacral, polemically sharpened. Consuming it resembles gliding on skis.

In the world of perishable products in the South, it is non-perishable and in some way the equivalent of gold. It comprises the cult of abundance that originates in the fat pagan gods of happiness, Biblical pomace, and also the dry Cossack ration, emergency stores of the poor, sprinkled with the thick salt of the Chumak road.⁴ In its taste you can distinctly feel echoes of that Chumak road – whether it is because people take it with them for a trip, or because *salo* calls for a long journey along beaten down, opened up Ukrainian “*shlyakhy*” (dirt roads), drowning in soft white road dust like the Milky Way.

From those carts, the axles, the leather boxes filled with lard to grease the axels, the far-reaching wisdom of the first social mechanisms is drawn – “if you don’t grease up, you won’t go.” And from the same source comes the specifically Ukrainian word “sum,” the sadness of a traveler sitting by the side of the road (because “*sadlo*,” the original form of the word “*salo*,” is something that has settled down, packed down on meat, and from the same root come the words “session” [*sessiia*] and “conference” [*zasedanie*]...), yes, of the traveler who has lost his way and is sitting now under the boundless sky, under the clouds, that lard of the heavens. To accompany

² In Greek mythology, the Hesperides are nymphs who tend a magical apple garden in the far west corner of the world.

³ Klekh is playing with words here: “to spite” in the Russian original is “v piku,” which literally means “to play a spade.” The original for “prohibitive” is an adjective “trefnoe,” which refers to food proscribed in the Jewish faith, but it also is associated with the playing card suit of clubs.

⁴ The *chumak* was a Ukrainian oxcart driver, who transported grain to Crimea and brought back salt, fish, and other goods. Klekh is also playing here on the Ukrainian phrase for the Milky Way “Chumatskyi shliakh.”

it, a *tsybulyna* (an onion) is procured and cut into four parts, which eases the welling of tears of the sad high *priest* who has found himself far from home.

It is a universal product that gives light, when it is melted down for an oil lamp or in the shape of a tallow candle. It is dreadfully rich in calories, when it is cut off with a knife in a thin “*skibochka*” (slice). Its assimilability is traced even in the phonetic form of its name – the gliding “S” and the moist, deglutitive “L” – and the vowels AO. The salted lard, bittersweet onion, “*horilka*” (home-brewed Ukrainian vodka), unleavened bread slightly oxidized with saliva – in a wide-open field – that is, the fundamental meal of the steppe-living Slav. At the sight of such a scene, pride grows in the heart, the way lard grows on a pig.

3. (In sum) *Vazhko vtrymatys’, aby ne skazaty: “salo – nashe use”* (If we think about it, how can we not say that “for us *salo* is everything”?)

The *Blin*⁵

A blin won't harm your stomach.

*V. Dal*⁶

If you project the cross section of the world tree onto Russian cuisine, you will get a *blin* (a pan-fried flat cake something like a crepe).

You can find one of the most unique cosmogonic myths in a Russian fairytale about an old woman who was cooking *bliny* on the baldpate of her not-getting-any-younger husband. With the use of solar energy, of course.⁷ Generally speaking, the echoes of the solar origin of *bliny* are clear even for us who do not believe in anything. After all, the shape of a circle is not at all simpler than, let's say, that of a triangle, and the matter here is not limited by economy alone.

⁵ For an Internet recipe for *bliny* see: <http://splendidtable.publicradio.org/recipes/app_blini.shtml>.

⁶ V. Dal', *Poslovitsy i pogovorki russkogo naroda* (Proverbs and Sayings of the Russian People).

⁷ A reference to a Russian folktale about a woman married to the sun, who cooked *bliny* on his head.

Cooking is one of the most ancient of theatrical performances, especially in the case of basic dishes prepared with a minimum of means: flour, water, and fire. And a little bit of oil, of course.

The most Russian aspect of making *bliny* is that it comprises an exciting activity when it is going well and one can ignore the law of “the first blin.”⁸ This way there appear constellations of pancakes; the chthonic *deruny* (potato pancakes); barley, wheat, oat, and buckwheat *bliny*; *bliny* from leavened and yeast dough, with all kinds of stuffing and without; tiny oily pancakes, hotcakes, and flapjacks. Generally speaking, tea drinking with *bliny* from a samovar is nothing else but a model of the universe, a national Russian planetarium where the cups and saucers are Saturns and Plutos following their orbits, and the scalding hot tea is analogous to life-giving sunlight, which, by the way, the resourceful Russians learned to catch and deposit in the yellow of butter and honey.

But the *bliny* take their most intense form at wakes where *bliny* with caviar are served first. Hot *bliny* with chilled caviar are both an inversion and a shroud that conceal the hyperbole of cornucopia. Death pregnant with life. In light of what has been said above, the monopoly of the privileged classes and the state trade on the sale of caviar appears as nothing else but a symbolic usurpation of the right of the powerful, one for the continuation of the species.

Without penetrating the consciousness and self-realization of the people, in the waning days of the *stagnation* during the Brezhnev era this thought spilled into a collective madness over UFOs – when the tired, hungry, and ill-fed raised their heads and suddenly saw still hot *bliny* flying over them. The outrageous thing about them was that it was very difficult to

⁸ A reference to a Russian saying “The first *blin* always comes out crooked,” meaning “better luck next time” or “you must spoil before you spin.”

establish contact with them. But this also inspired a belief that sooner or later the people will get to them.

That was how the preconditions of *perestroika* came about. Interestingly enough almost simultaneous to the information about the UFOs, a new Russian swearword appeared – “Bli-n-n-n!”⁹ – like a resounding slap on the face, like an American pie in the face.

It was then that the Party understood that *perestroika* could no longer be postponed.

⁹ A reference to the Russian swear word “blin,” which is a euphemism for “blyad” (which literally means “slut,” but whose closest English equivalent is “f—k.”