IGOR KLEKH

ADVENTURES IN THE SLAVIC KITCHEN

– A BOOK OF ESSAYS WITH RECIPES –

TRANSLATED BY SLAVA I. YASTREMSKI AND MICHAEL M. NAYDAN

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This book is dedicated to the memory
of Slava Yastremski (1952-2015),
a wonderful colleague, great friend,
and beautiful human being.

Acknowledgements

First of all the translators want to thank the author, Igor Klekh, who not only has written so eloquently about Slavic foods but also frequently has treated us with sumptuous samples of Russian and Ukrainian dishes to support the points he wants to make in his book from a practical perspective.

The translators also want to thank their wives for their constant support during the long process of preparing this book for publication.

Introduction

AN ADVENTURE IN THE SLAVIC KITCHEN WITH IGOR KLEKH

Igor Klekh is an accomplished Russian writer, the author of seven books of prose, essays, and criticism. Since 1994 Klekh has resided in Moscow, but as a writer he was formed in the western Ukrainian city of Lviv, which, as a result of its proximity to Poland and the rest of Europe, has always had freer contacts with the West, even during the Soviet period. Historically many cultural traditions have been intersecting and interrelating in Galicia and Transcarpathia, mutually enriching each other in striking ways. As a writer Klekh was influenced by both the great Russian literary tradition and the languages and dialects of East-Central Europe. Being a phenomenon of the multicultural environment of Galician Ukraine, Klekh to a certain degree represents at least in part that phenomenon of marginalized colonial writing when the literary culture of the colonized parts of the empire, with its unique perspectives, seemingly overtakes and influences the center. From the cultural perspective the region can be seen as a proverbial melting pot, in which Igor Klekh cooks his multicultural dishes and offers his meditations on the significance of various dishes in Slavic national cultures, particularly Russian and Ukrainian.

The book comprises a cultural study of the role food plays in the formation and expression of a nation's character. It focuses primarily on Russian and Ukrainian kitchens but discusses them in the context of international food practices. Some of the essays

have appeared previously in various Russian periodicals as well as in other of Klekh's publications and were later included in the bestselling *The Book of Food* (published in 2007) to round out his cultural discourse on Slavic foods. In our translation the book is divided into four parts: "The Philosophy of the Kitchen," which discusses the significance of food in national cultures; "Cultural Dictionary of East Slavic Food," which discusses foods that are quintessential for the Ukrainian and Russian food cultures (such as *salo* [pig lard] and *bliny* [thin crepe-like pancakes]) as well as the consumption of alcohol and hangover recipes; "Seasonal Culinary Art," which is dedicated to seasonal dishes, such as winter soups—borsht and *shchi* and Siberian *pelmeni*, summer salads, autumn pickled and marinated vegetables, etc.; and "Cities and Dishes," essays based on Klekh's travels to different European and Near Eastern countries as a writer for *Geo Magazine*.

Klekh's book is not a traditional recipe cookbook, although it offers recipes for all the major dishes in the kitchens of the Eastern Slavs. It is rather a collection of essays on the cultural implications of particular dishes and foods, such as borsht, pig lard, mushrooms, etc. Most of the essays that comprise the book are written in the genre of the informal aphoristic literary essay, which started with Bacon, who described the genre as "grains of salt which will rather give an appetite than offend with satiety." In his essays Klekh continues the rich essayistic tradition of twentieth-century Western and Russian writers and thinkers, such as Kafka, Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Nabokov, and perhaps most of all Borges, who has had the greatest influence on Klekh as well as on his entire generation. Similarly to Borges, Klekh's essays blur the boundaries between genres and styles. Most of Klekh's essays in the section "Cultural Dictionary of East Slavic Food" are about one particular food taken in its totality: in all the complexity of the word's semantic meanings, its phonetic sound, and the visual image the name of the food denotes. Klekh explains this seeming postmodernist paradox by the significance that food and its preparation play in the cultural formation of all nations: "The kitchen is one of the most ancient

performance theaters, especially in the case of fundamental dishes prepared with a minimum of means: flour, water, fire" ("The Origins of the Kitchen"), which is best illustrated by the essay called "Blin." If we accept flour as a kind of dust and a product of the earth, the preparation of these crepe-like pancakes will include three of the four primary elements, which comprise the basis of life. The very process of making *bliny* becomes for Klekh a cosmological myth of creation. The typical Russian dish is transformed into a mythic primary element of Russian culture. Klekh begins his essay with a visual image of the pancake: "If you project the cross-section of the world tree onto the Russian kitchen… you'll get a *blin*" ("The *Blin*"). Thus, a *blin* becomes the axis mundi of the Russian cultural landscape. Klekh presents his philosophical musings on the more profound nature of Slavic foods in a wonderful style and thereby offers fascinating insights into Russian and Ukrainian cultures.

Even when he provides a recipe, Klekh creates a cultural-historical narrative about the origin and significance of that particular dish for the people of a certain country. For example, in discussing borsht, he writes: "There is something pan-Slavic in this dish. Borsht is a metaphor for summer, for which every Slav waits and longs. That is why borsht has to be served not just hot, but scorching hot, scorching with the afternoon summer heat" ("Formula for Borsht"). Admitting that borsht was appropriated by other cultures (Soviet Russian, before all the rest), Klekh returns to the genuine Ukrainian formula that requires the achievement of an appropriate degree of spiciness, red and black peppers, cloves, and crushed garlic ground with sea salt and Ukrainian *salo*. Klekh takes the reader on a fascinating culinary adventure full of exotic names such as *khmeli-suneli*, *pechenya, vereshchaka, zavyvanets, verguny*, *imam-bayaldy*, *okroshka*, etc., and accomplishes daring culinary border-crossings such as the Russian appropriation of the French salad Oliver or the relationship between Ukrainian *vareniki* (cottage cheese or cherry dumplings) and their Turkish prototype.

In his book Klekh focuses on foods and dishes of primarily two Slavic peoples: the Russians and Ukrainians, but he also shows

the influences, borrowings, and modifications that each nation has made to the kitchens of its neighbors as well as interactions with other kitchens of the world: the French, Chinese, Italian, American (mostly in its fast-food manifestation), and others. While standing at the stove stirring the ingredients in his large cultural pot of Russian-Ukrainian borsht or sprinkling various vegetable dishes with multi-cultural spices, Klekh shares with his readers his thoughts on the significance this or that dish has in one of the Slavic cultures.

Klekh writes his book not only from within the culinary traditions of the Eastern Slavic peoples. His book is also steeped in the cooking and food consumption practices that were developed during seventy-four years of the Soviet regime and have continued to dominate Russian and Ukrainian food cultures even today. One can say that nowadays we, to my personal surprise, can witness a strong nostalgia for the simple foods of the Soviet times, such as we find in Klekh's book – "marine-style macaroni" or "sardines in tomato sauce." This nostalgia is a yearning for lost and idealized childhood, and in his book Klekh pays tribute to it, wistfully discussing mothers' cooking, the taste of homemade jams and pies, pickled mushrooms and hot winter soups. Some aspects of these cooking cultures may be confusing for the English-speaking audience. For example, both Russian and Ukrainian cultures until recently have been focused determinately on home-cooking with their own versions of Betty Crocker and Julia Child kinds of cooking gurus – William Pokhlebkin and Elena Molokhovets, for example. During Soviet times people mostly stayed away from going out to eat. Restaurants were expensive, and people would go to them only on special occasions. We should also remember that the average family's budget did not allow for frequent meals outside the home, and "child-friendly" restaurants were almost non-existent. The food offered by the public cafeterias and low-end restaurants, to which Klekh refers as *obshchepit* (Public Food Production and Supply System), was, as a rule, of very low quality, and even those were quite sparse. As the popular joke went: "Someone asks how was the

food at lunch at a public cafeteria, and another answers: 'First of all it tasted like shit, and secondly there was too little of it.'" Lunches were taken out at the workers' cafeterias or buffets, in which the food was no better, but at least it was cheap. In addition to that, with almost non-existent nutrition and food safety control, people had serious reservations about eating out. The majority firmly believed that they could prepare tastier and healthier food at home, although home cooking was complicated by the limited assortment of products in grocery stores and the high prices for better quality food at the farmers' markets. With the exception of bread and milk, which were purchased fresh every day, the ingredients were bought once a week and the dishes were prepared for several days in advance, using all parts of the purchased products. This historical fact is also reflected in the book. On several occasions Klekh discusses the fact that bones can be used for soups while the meat is used for pie filling; or while you fry the body of the fish, its head can be used for making soup. Surprisingly this practice that grew out of necessity in Soviet Russia now attracts the attention of environmentally conscious food theorists and practitioners who see it as a way of finding sustainability in the food preparation process in today's world, which can help to eliminate the danger of depleting the world food resources.

No cultural study of food consumption in Russia (and other Eastern Slavic countries, as a matter of fact) can avoid a discussion of the use (or abuse) of alcohol, and Klekh is no exception. In the aphoristic essay "Vodka as Pure Alcohol" he states that "In Russia to drink is a matter of honor, conscience, and reason… Vodka – also called *horilka* (burner), *gor'kaia* (bitter), *palenka* (fire-water), by its appearance is indistinguishable from water (and, after all, you must drink water, pure as a tear, but 40° proof!)." The excessive drinking results in a hangover, and Klekh examines this phenomenon in "The Metaphysics of a Hangover" and offers necessary remedies in "Hangover Cookery."

Another important factor in food preparation that Klekh discusses in his book is "seasonal culinary," that is, the use of

vegetables and fruits according to their peak seasons to get most out of them in terms of vitamins and nutrients. His reflections on "seasonal culinary art" can be seen as one of Klekh's original contributions to the discussion of the art of cooking. During Soviet times "seasonal culinary art" was an inevitable necessity – people had to rely on the meager supply of fresh produce available in grocery stores. In winter and spring months it was almost impossible to find any fresh fruit or tomatoes or cucumbers. People could try the farmers markets, to where these products were brought from Georgia or Azerbaijan or, more rarely, from Central Asia, but the prices were extraordinarily high. As a result, in the winter months consumers' choice for the most part was limited to cabbage, potatoes, and onions. All over the Soviet Union, as much as possible, people grew fruit and vegetables on their own. I encountered this practice in 1999 when I was teaching as a Fulbright scholar at the University of Tver, a historic city halfway between Moscow and St. Petersburg. My hosts, full professors at that university, received a "hefty" salary equivalent to $40 and $30 a month respectively (they were a married couple and she received $10 less for being a woman. So much for gender equality in the former workers' paradise!) The couple lived in a village two commuter train stops from the city and grew all their vegetables, spices, and some fruit (strawberries, raspberries, etc.) on their tiny private plot. They made jams, pickled cabbage and mushrooms, and dried spices for winter. If people did not have summer or private land lots, which they could cultivate, they bought fruit and vegetables in extra quantities at the local markets in the summer and early fall when the prices were much lower, so they could prepare and store them for the winter. That is why Klekh's book offers recipes for all kinds of jams and preserves, pickled and marinated cucumbers, mushrooms, cabbage, "eggplant caviar," home-made liqueurs, etc.

For Klekh the main distinction of the Slavic kitchens is their "sour" or "pickled" character, that is, the prevalence of "sour" dishes, such as Russian *shchi* (pickled cabbage soup), Ukrainian borsht with the use of tomato paste, Polish *bigos* (a stewed cabbage

dish with all kinds of meats and spices). The "sourness" of the Slavic kitchens presented certain cultural problems in translation. In Russian we have "sour" or "salted" cabbage, which is not the same as the sauerkraut that you can find in American supermarkets. The same goes for cucumbers, which in Russian can be "salted" or "semi-salted," and Klekh draws a clear difference between "salted" and marinated mushrooms, which are nowadays sold in the stores. We decided to go with "pickled" as the closest equivalent for cabbage, cucumbers, and mushrooms.

Another important thing that should be pointed out about Russian and Ukrainian cooking cultures is that they are meat-oriented, with Russians using beef and Ukrainians – pork as their main meats. At the same time vegetables such as cabbage for the Russians and beets for the Ukrainians play an important, if not crucial, role in their national cuisines, because they are used as the main ingredients for what you might call a national soup – cabbage for the Russian *shchi* and beets for the Ukrainian borsht.

It is also worth mentioning that Slavic people have a very different concept of "healthy food" if we compare it to American cooking culture. I must say that the Slavs are right in saying that nowadays their food is, generally speaking, better tasting and healthier than what is imported from the West because they do not use artificial ingredients often found in Western food products. On the other hand, the claims that *salo* (pig lard) or vodka can actually fight bad cholesterol may seem far-fetched for an American reader. But why not be adventurous and try?

Let's consider one of the most popular and widely used ingredient in Slavic cooking cultures, which usually puts fear in the hearts of American food consumers – wild mushrooms. Russians, Ukrainians, Poles, and Lithuanians fry mushrooms, add them to soups and salads, pickle and marinate them (and in these last two forms mushrooms are considered to be the best chaser after a drink, especially a shot of vodka, for example). Russians or Ukrainians either pick the mushrooms in the woods or buy them at farmers' markets. In the late summer and early fall thousands of people hike

through forests to gather mushrooms. Most know which ones are safe to eat or to pickle, where the woods can be environmentally unsafe, and what time of the year and day are the best for mushroom picking. The Slavic people have a definite mushroom hierarchy with so-called "white mushrooms" (Boletus mushrooms also known as penny bun, porcino, or cep) occupying the top spot. In fact when a Slavic person says "mushroom," he or she most likely means a Boletus; the "white mushrooms" sold in American supermarkets are not even considered to be real mushrooms at all because they have no taste. Poles and Lithuanians call Boletus the king of mushrooms. The Boletus mushrooms are best for frying and soup making. The honey fungus and "little fox" (a type of chanterelle) mushrooms are considered the best for pickling. Mushroom dishes could be of a great interest for vegetarians, but where would you find Boletus mushrooms in America?

Not only the consumption of certain products in Slavic food culture appear exotic and unusual to the Western reader (something on the level with the popular TV show Bizzare Foods with Andrew Zimmern on the Travel Channel) but also certain names of Slavic foods need to be explained, for example such word as "kielbasa" (pronounced "kolbasa" in Russian and "kovbasa" in Ukrainian). While in English kielbasa means a particular type of East European sausage (such as Polish kielbasa), in Russian it stands for a generic word for all types of sausages. All Russian kielbasas are divided into two basic types: so-called "boiled sausages" that include Bologna-type sausages, with "Doctor's" and "Choice" sausages being the most popular, and hard hot- and cold-smoked sausages (as the type of Italian hard salami or chorizo). Or the word "kasha," which in addition to the universally accepted term for buckwheat groats, also is a generic term for all types of cereals, porridges, and groats. We should also remember that cold cereals were almost non-existent in the Soviet Union. In addition to buckwheat kasha, Klekh also discusses "kashitsy," the hot thin porridges, the most popular (and most hated by) among children being oat porridge. Russian and Ukrainian kitchens are quite limited in their use of

spices – they mostly use just salt and pepper. Most spices used in the preparation of Russian and Ukrainian dishes come from the nations in the Caucasus Mountains, the most popular of which is *adjika* (a Georgian [referring to the former Soviet republic and now the independent country of Georgia] hot red pepper sauce)

With Russian and Ukrainian kitchens playing the central role in his book, Klekh reflects on many kitchens of other Slavic peoples who either were the part of the Soviet Union or had close political and/or cultural interactions with it. All these nations had a long and rich history of their national cooking traditions. For example, Klekh devotes a lot of attention to Polish *bigos*, Moldavian *mamalyga*, and to the use of eggplant in the kitchen of the peoples living in the Caucasus Mountains. During Soviet times Russians appropriated a lot of these dishes, making them part of the Russian holiday table. In his book Klekh restores the origin of a particular dish and discusses its significance in the national culture.

Klekh is an experienced traveler, and his encounters with national foods extend beyond the borders of the former Soviet Union and its closest neighbors. After moving from Lviv to Moscow, he worked for the travel magazine *GEO* (a kind of Russian version of *Travel and Leisure*), and for his assignments wrote about life in different countries of the world – from the former Soviet republics such as Latvia and Lithuania to Norway and Jordan. He also spent time in Germany, Switzerland, and the United States as a writer-in-residence and wrote about his experiences there. The excerpts from these essays, at least those in which he discusses dishes and foods, were included in the section "Cities and Dishes." This section serves as a fitting conclusion to this journey through Slavic kitchens and places them in the broader context of European and other world cuisines.

To maintain the linguistic flavor of the national kitchens we decided to leave the names of specific Russian and Ukrainian dishes and foods in transliteration in our translation, with a short explanation of what they are attached to them when they are used for the first time: for example, *shchi* (cabbage soup) or *halushki*

(unstuffed dumplings). We also decided to use the Russian plural endings "–y" or "–i" for dishes such as *bliny* or *pelmeni*, because it seemed more natural to us than the standard English plural form with an "s," which would have turned these into awkward sounding *blins* or *pelmens*.

In light of the recent Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the translation of the book in English appears to be very timely. Klekh's work can be welcomed as a synthesis of the two traditions and as an invaluable insight into historically determined cultural interactions between the two nations. It also offers an alternative way for conflict resolution – making food, and not war. It offers an unusual look at the peaceful interaction between Russian and Ukrainian cultures and at the same time explains Russian "culinary imperialism," especially during the Soviet period. The book is expected to appeal to a diverse audience, ranging from those who are interested in cultural studies of food to those who want to try something different in their kitchen, as well as to the Russian, Ukrainian, and Polish Americans and émigré communities.

Slava I. Yastremski

PART I
The Philosophy of the Kitchen

The Origin of the Kitchen

The kitchen appeared when people first began to use fire to protect themselves against the cold and predators, and that was just as great an invention for humankind as spoken language and hand tools. In the beginning there were the hearth and stove with the tamed deity of fire; next to it a butchering table (as a kind of altar for sacrifices), and utensils. Next came the creation of a set of basic, essential food products and dishes. Finally, came the ritual of eating at the table, a repast, and feasting as a particular religious rite (that is why it was customary to thank spirits or the Creator before a meal) and the symbolism of the absence of enmity (from this fact come the "round tables" of contemporary scholars and politicians, those mass produced "clones" of the Round Table of the Knights of King Arthur). We can speak of *Homo sapiens* and the birth of civilization since the time when people began to bury other people and started to cook food (that is, they performed the revolutionary transition from the "raw" to the "cooked" in Claude Levi-Strauss' formulation[1]).

It is not surprising that the food chain formed differently in different geographic and climatic zones; even more so the differentiation of tribes living in the same zone happened because one tribe of its own volition chose to feed itself in one way, and another tribe in another: tell me what you eat, and I will tell you

1 The French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss was one of the founders of Structuralism and famous for his studies of North American myths. His approach was based on binary oppositions that were reflected in the title of his book *The Raw and the Cooked*, 1969.

who you are. Today we witness the inverse process, but it has not changed the essence of the question: in order to cook a "global" soup you need fundamental individual "ingredients" and some firm rules. If the salt stops being salty, and a bay leaf fails to taste like a bay leaf, if you combine herring with ice cream and sprinkle it with curry, you will get nothing but swill for creatures who barely resemble people by their unique pantophagy (eating-no-matter-what-it-is), but not people as such.

Why did the astronauts in the film *Solaris*[2] tie strips of paper to a fan? Why did the Russian prince, who had grown accustomed to his life in Polovtsian captivity, suddenly come to his senses and return to rule over his people when envoys from his homeland placed a bunch of steppe sagebrush to his nose?[3] Why do not only their kitchens smell different, but the Chinese, Vietnamese, and Mongolian people themselves smell differently than the Russians with the latter's specific "cabbage-soup" Russian odor? There is no racism in this, only biochemistry and the conservatism of human nature, which biologists call imprinting, science-fiction writers – the matrix, and all the rest of people – a code. If something is intrinsic for individual people, then it must be intrinsic for entire nations. Purposeful creative activity is covertly interwoven with biochemistry and cultural memory. Food does not determine abilities, but seemingly diverts and directs them along the resultant forces of the parallelogram. That is why icon-painters observe a strict fast before painting an icon, athletes – before matches, and dancers – before performances, and why Pavarotti brings his own chef when he goes on tour. Thus, one person has a bell canto voice like no one else in the world, and another – a throaty singing voice, a third – diligence, and a fourth – inspiration, etc. In short, everything is interconnected in

2 A reference to the Russian film director Andrei Tarkovsky's science fiction film *Solaris*, 1972.

3 A reference to the purportedly twelfth-century folk epic *The Lay of Prince Igor's Campaign*, which became the basis for Alexander Borodin's opera *Prince Igor,* 1887/1890.

Contents

To Get Ukraine

by Oleksandr Shyshko

Since Maidan in Kyiv and Russian presence in the Crimea, Ukraine has never been the same. In 2014, the country is deeply divided by the conflict imposed on the Ukrainians. But since nobody actually asked the nation, author Oleksandr Shyshko decided to take matters into his own hands and look for the answer to the ultimate question – who are the Ukrainians and what do they want.

Shyshko spent his time researching the national identity of native Ukrainians, and as he went he stumbled on a discovery that led to yet another question – where is Ukraine going, the so-called Quo vadis? of the Ukrainian people. His findings and critical comments gave birth to this new book that is now for the first time being published in English. To Get Ukraine.

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More coming soon…

The polyglot Igor Klekh is an extraordinarily erudite and accomplished Russian writer, journalist, and translator, whose formative years were spent in Western Ukraine, mostly in Ivano-Frankivsk and in the multi-cultural city of Lviv where he had access to the literature of East-Central Europe. He currently resides in Moscow.

His complex prose style has been compared to that of Jorge Luis Borges and Bruno Schulz, whose novellas he was among the first to translate from Polish into Russian. He has authored seven books of prose, essays, translations, and literary criticism and has been a frequent contributor to the best Russian literary journals including *Novyi mir, Znamya*, and *Druzhba narodov*. His works have earned numerous prizes including the Alfred C. Toepfer Pushkin Prize (1993), the Yury Kazakov Prize (2000) for Best Short Story, and the *October* Magazine Prize (2000) for his book on the artist Sergei Sherstiuk. His works have been nominated for the Russian version of the Booker Prize twice (1995 and 2012).

Adventures in the Slavic Kitchen: A Book of Essays with Recipes is a cultural study of the role food plays in the formation and expression of a nation's character. It focuses primarily on the Russian and Ukrainian kitchens but discusses them in the context of international food practices. His prose works have been published in English translation under the title *A Land the Size of Binoculars* (2004) by Northwestern University Press.

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