

Food & Drink

Russia has a glorious culinary heritage enriched by influences from the Baltic to the Far East. The country's rich black soil provides an abundance of grains and vegetables used in the wonderful range of breads, salads and appetisers, and as the base of the distinctive soups that are the highlight of any Russian meal. The rivers, lakes and seas yield up a unique range of fish and, as with any cold climate country, there's a great love of fat-loaded dishes - Russia is no place to go on a diet!

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES Breakfast

Typical *zavtrak* (breakfast) dishes include bliny (pancakes) with savoury or sweet fillings, various types of *kasha* (porridge) made from buckwheat or other grains, and *syrniki* (cottage-cheese fritters), delicious with jam, sugar and the universal Russian condiment, *smetana* (sour cream). *Khleb* (bread) is freshly baked and comes in a multitude of delicious varieties.

Appetisers & Salads

Whether as the preamble to a meal or something to nibble on between shots of vodka, *zakuski* (appetisers) are a big feature of Russian cuisine. They range from olives to bliny with mushrooms, *tvorog* (cheese curd) or caviar, to delicious salads, which are universally popular and nearly always smothered in creamy mayonnaise. There are many salad recipes but popular versions found in most restaurants include *salat olivye* (chopped meat - sometimes chicken, sometimes sausage - cheese and vegetables mixed with mayonnaise) and *selyodka pod shuboi* (literally 'herrings in fur coats'), a classic fish salad from the Soviet era of cooking with all but the kitchen sink thrown in. Discovering what's actually under the salad's creamy sauce is often part of the fun, unless you happen to be vegetarian: salads often include shredded meat, fish or seafood.

Soups

No Russian meal is complete without soup. *Shchi* (made from cabbage) and *solyanka* (a sometimes flavoursome concoction of pickled vegetables, meat and potato that used to be the staple winter food for the peasantry) are both popular soups that you'll find on menus across the country.

Borsch, made from a base of beetroot, originates from Ukraine but is now synonymous with Russia throughout the world. It can be served hot or cold and usually with *smetana* poured on top of it. Some borsch is vegetarian (ask for *postny* borsch), although most is made with beef stock. Other commonly served soups are listed in the food glossary .

Main Courses

It's worth noting the difference between traditional Russian cuisine and what passed for it during Soviet times, now referred to in some restaurants as Soviet-Russian cuisine. Traditional Russian cuisine is very meaty and quite heavy. Staples include *zharkoye* (hot pot) - a meat stew served piping hot in a little jug, *kotleta po kievsky* (better known in the West as chicken Kiev), and shashlyk (meat kebab). In Siberia the common Russian dish *myaso po monastirsky* (beef topped with cheese) is often relabelled *myaso po Sibirski* (Siberian meat).

Soviet-Russian cuisine includes Central Asian-style dishes, notably *plov* (fried rice with lamb and carrot) and *lagman* (noodles and meat in a soupy broth which gets spicier the further south you go). Ubiquitous are *pelmenr*. Russian-style ravioli (generally stuffed with pork or beef) and served either heaped on a plate with sour cream, vinegar and butter, or in a stock soup. Variations such as salmon or mushroom *pelmeni* are found on the menus of more chic restaurants.

Fish is extremely popular. The range is enormous, but common staples include *osyetrina* (sturgeon), *shchuka* (pike), *losos* or *syomga* (salmon) and *treska* (chub). Beware that even relatively upmarket restaurants seem averse to filleting and the unwary can find their fish dishes viciously barbed with throat-ripping bones. Stuffed *kalmar* (squid) is usually tasty and bone-safe, though as it's generally stored frozen, avoid it if you doubt the regularity of the restaurant's electrical supply.

Most restaurant menus give the weight of portions as well as the price (easily confused when your Russian is poor). In most cases you'll be expected to choose an accompanying 'garnish' (priced separately) of *ris* (rice), various potato dishes or *grechka* (split buckwheat). The latter has long been considered low class, but a recent revival means it is no longer relegated to just the most basic *stolovye* (canteen). In Chinese restaurants check carefully whether there's a compulsory minimum rice order: this can occasionally double the cost of a meal when eating alone. Russian cuisine borrows enormously from neighbouring countries, most obviously from those around the Caucasus, where shashlyk originated. Across Russia, Georgian restaurants (below) are almost as common as Indian ones in the UK, though not all offer a fully Georgian menu.

Desserts

The Russian sweet tooth is seriously sweet. *Morozhenoe* (ice cream) is very good here, and Russians love it with a passion: it's not unusual to see people gobbling dishfuls at outdoor tables, even in freezing weather. Also popular are gooey *torty* (cream cakes), often decorated in lurid colours. *Vecheniye* (pastries) are eaten at tea-time in the traditional English style and are available at any *bulochnaya* (bakery).

DRINKS

Drinking is the joy of the Rus. We cannot live without it' - with these words Vladimir of Kyiv, the father of the Russian state, is said to have rejected abstinent Islam on his people's behalf in the 10th century. And who wouldn't want to bend their minds now and then during those long, cold, dark winters? Russians sometimes drink vodka in moderation, but more often it's tipped down in swift shots, with the aim of getting legless.

The nearest thing to a pub is a *traktir* (tavern), becoming more common as the Russian taste for beer exceeds the love of vodka.

Alcohol

Both good local and foreign brands are common. That doesn't stop some locals gleefully dishing out *samogon* (home-made moonshine), which can be very bad for you.

VODKA

The classic Russian drink is distilled from wheat, rye or occasionally potatoes. The word comes from *voda* (pronounced *va-da*, water). Its flavour comes from what's added after distillation, so as well as 'plain' vodka you'll find *klyukovka* (cranberry vodka, one of the most popular kinds), *pertsovka* (pepper vodka), *starka* (apple and pear leaves), *limon-naya* (lemon), and *okhotnichya* (meaning 'hunter's', with about a dozen ingredients, including peppers, juniper berries, ginger and cloves).

Two common 'plain' vodkas are Stolichnaya (perhaps the most famous Russia vodka), which is in fact slightly sweetened with sugar, and Moskov-skaya, with a touch of sodium bicarbonate. Don't get excited when you see how cheap Stoli is here - the stuff made for export is way better than the domestic version. Better Russian brands include Flagman, Gzhelka and Russky Standart (Russian Standard).

BEER

These days beer is as popular, if not more so, as vodka among Russians, not least because it's cheap and very palatable. There are now scores, of breweries across the country pumping out dozens of tasty local brands, as well as famous Western brands. The local market leader is Baltika, a joint venture between Scottish & Newcastle and Carlsberg under international management based in St Petersburg. You're bound to find something to like among its 12 different kinds of beer: No 3, a light beer, is the most popular; No 8 is an unfiltered beer; No 10 has natural almond and basil aromas; Medovoye is supposedly made with a taste of honey; No 0 is alcohol-free; and No 9 is a lethal 16.5% proof-Other brands to look out for include Stepan Razin, Nevskoye and Bochkaryov (all produced in St Petersburg), Stary Melnik (a product of the Turkish-owned Efes brewery), Klinskoye and Sibirskaya Korona. Most cities have their own brews - Krasnoyarsk's Legenda is particularly good.

WINES & BRANDY

Many locals prefer their wine *polusladkoe* (semisweet) or *sladkoe* (sweet). The latter is little short of diluted alcoholic sugar. *Bryut* (very dry and only for sparkling wine), *sukhoe* (dry) and *polusukhoe* (semidry) reds can be found, though getting a good dry white can be pretty tough. In some restaurants wine is served by the glass but look carefully at the small print as prices are often per 100g or even 50g (about one third of a full glass).

Some Georgian dry red wines are superb, though Georgian whites are very much an acquired taste (see p109). Imported wines from Bulgaria and Moldova tend to be cheaper, as are certain French table wines which are generally of the lowest quality and worth avoiding.

Locally produced sparkling wine Shampanskoye is remarkably cheap (around R300 a bottle) and popular, and rarely anything like champagne.

Russian brandy is called *konyak* - the finest come from the Caucasus. Winston Churchill reputedly preferred Armenian *konyak* over French Cognac, and although standards vary enormously, local five-star brandies are generally a very pleasant surprise.

Nonalcoholic Drinks

WATER & MINERAL WATER

Tap water is suspect in some cities and should definitely be avoided in St Petersburg. Many stick to cheap bottled water. Local brands cost around RIO for 1.5 litres. If you buy mineral (rather than

purified) water, be aware that it can be a full-on gastric work-out, as you'll discover most notably with Georgia's celebrated Borzhomi - a great hangover cure.

TEA & COFFEE

The traditional Russian tea-making method is to brew an extremely strong pot, pour small shots of it into glasses, and fill the glasses with hot water. Traditionally this was done from the samovar, a metal-water urn with an inner tube filled with hot charcoal; modern samovars have electric elements, like a kettle, which is actually what most Russians use to boil water for tea these days. Putting jam instead of sugar in tea is quite common.

Tuvans and Buryats often drink tea weak and milky, while tea in the Altai traditionally has butter and *talkan* (a sort of ground muesli) added to taste.

Coffee comes in small cups; unless you buy it at kiosks or stand-up eateries, it's usually good.

There's been an explosion of Starbucks-style cafes all across Russia's bigger cities - cappuccino, espresso, latte and mocha are now as much part of the average Russian lexicon as elsewhere. (In smaller towns you might want to check that the cappuccino you order isn't the instant powdered kind.)

OTHER DRINKS

Tasting not unlike ginger beer, *kvas*, fermented rye bread water, is a common Russian drink. It's often dispensed on the street, for a few roubles a dose, from big, wheeled tanks and is cool and refreshing in summer.

Sok can mean anything from fruit juice (usually in cartons rather than fresh) to heavily diluted fruit squash. *Mors*, made from all types of red berries, is a popular and refreshing *sok*. *Napitok* means 'drink' - it's often a cheaper and weaker version of *sok*, maybe with some real fruit thrown in.

Jugs of *kefir* (yogurtlike sour milk) are served as a breakfast drink, and are also recommended as a hangover cure. Milk, common and cheap in *moloko* (dairy shops), is often unpasteurised.

The Bashkirs, the Kazakhs of southernmost Altai and the Sakhans of the Sakha Republic drink kumiss (fermented mare's milk).

DRINKING ETIQUETTE IN RUSSIA

If you find yourself sharing a table at a bar or restaurant with locals, it's odds-on they'll press you to drink with them. Even people from distant tables, spotting foreigners, may be seized with hospitable urges. If it's vodka being drunk, they'll want a man to down the shot in one, neat of course; women are usually excused. This can be fun as you toast international friendship and so on, but vodka has a knack of creeping up on you from behind and the consequences can be appalling. It's traditional (and good sense) to eat a little something after each shot.

Refusing a drink can be very difficult, and Russians may continue to insist until they win you over.

If you can't quite stand firm, take it in small gulps with copious thanks, while saying how you'd love to indulge but you have to be up early in the morning (or something similar). If you're really not in the mood, one sure-fire method of warding off all offers (as well as making people feel quite awful) is to say *Ya alkogolik* (*Ya alkogolichka* for women): 'I'm an alcoholic'.

TABLE SCRAPS FROM HEAVEN *Mara Vorhees*

Described by writer Darra Goldstein as 'Heaven's table scraps', you must try the rich, spicy cuisine of the former Soviet republic of Georgia while in Russia. Fertile Georgia - wedged between East and West - has long been the beneficiary (and victim) of merchants and raiders passing through. These influences are evident in Georgian cooking, which shows glimpses of Mediterranean and Middle Eastern flavours. The truly Georgian elements - the differences - are what make this cuisine so delectable. Most notably, many meat and vegetable dishes use ground walnuts or walnut oil as an integral ingredient, yielding a distinctive rich, nutty flavour. Also characteristic is the spice mixture *khmeli-suneli*, which combines coriander, garlic, chillies, pepper and savory with a saffron substitute made from dried marigold petals.

Georgian chefs love to cook over an open flame, and certainly grilled meats are among the most beloved items on any Georgian menu. Herbs such as coriander, dill and parsley and things like scallions are often served fresh, with no preparation or sauce, as a palette-cleansing counterpoint to the other rich dishes. Grapes and pomegranates show up not only as desserts, but also as tart complements to roasted meats. For vegetarians, Georgian eggplant dishes (notably garlic-laced *badrizhani nivrit*), *lobiyo* (spicy beans) and *khachapuri* (cheese bread) are a great blessing.

Here are a few more tried and true Georgian favourites to get you started when faced with an incomprehensible menu: **basturma** - marinated, grilled meat, usually beef or lamb

bkhali or **pkhali** - a vegetable puree with herbs and walnuts, most often made with beetroot or spinach

buglama - beef or veal stew with tomatoes, dill and garlic

chakhokhbili - chicken slow cooked with herbs and vegetables

chikhirtmi - lemony chicken soup

dolmas - vegetables - often tomatoes, eggplant Of grape leaves - stuffed with beef **khachapuri** - the archetypal Georgian cheese bread comes in three main forms: snack versions sold at markets are flaky pastry squares. In restaurants *khachapuripo-imeretinsk* are circles of fresh dough cooked with sour, salty *suluguni* cheese, while *khachapuripo-adzharski* is topped with a raw egg in the crater (mix it rapidly into the melted cheese).

kharcho - thick, spicy rice and beef or lamb soup **khinkali** - dumplings stuffed with lamb or a mixture of beef and pork **lavash** - flat bread used to wrap cheese, tomatoes, herbs or meat

pakhlava - a walnut pastry similar to baklava, but made with sourcream dough **satsivi** - walnut, garlic and pomegranate paste, usually used as a chicken stuffing in cold starters **shilaplavi** - rice *pilaf*, often with potatoes

Wine is a crucial part of any Georgian meal. At all but the most informal occasions, Georgians call on a *tamada* (toastmaster) to ensure that glasses are raised and drinks topped up throughout the meal.

Georgian vintners utilize a process that is different from their European and New World counterparts. The grapes are fermented together with skins and stems, then stored in clay jugs, resulting in a flavour specific to the Caucasus. Noteworthy Georgian wines include: **Kindzmarauli** - a sickeningly sweet, blood red wine which - appropriately enough - was the favourite of Stalin **Mukuzani** - a rather tannic red, which is the best known and oldest Georgian wine **Saperavi** - a dark, full-bodied red produced from grapes of the same name **Tsinandali** - pale and fruity, the most popular Georgian white

TRAVEL YOUR TASTEBUDS

Russia has an abundant supply of regional food specialities. Our favourites include **kalmary** (calamari), **kraby** (crab) and **grebeshki** (scallops) - all standard items on Vladivostok menus. **Manti** are steamed, palm-sized dumplings, known as *pozi* or *buuzy* in Buryatiya and *pyan-se* (a peppery version) in the Russian Far East. Two or three make a good, greasy meal. Eaten most often as a snack food with beer, **oblyoma** is a dried, salty fish found in the Volga. **Omul** is a cousin of salmon and trout, endemic to Lake Baikal and considered a great delicacy.

We dare you to...

- Tuck into horse meat fillets in the Sakha Republic.
- Chew on reindeer cartilage - a snack indulged in by the Even of Kamchatka.
- Drink *khoitpak* (fermented sour milk) in Tuva or its distilled version *araka*. . . Pig out on *salo* (pig fat).

CAVIAR - IF BUYING, BUY CAREFULLY

While nothing is as evocative of Russian imperial luxury as black caviar, be aware that the sturgeon of the Caspian Sea could face extinction due to the unsustainable and illegal plunder of their roe. If you do buy some, buy carefully. Purchase caviar only from shops (not on the street or at markets), in sealed jars (not loose) and, most importantly, make sure the jar or tin- is sealed with a CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species) label, an international trade-control measure set up to reduce sturgeon poaching. Additionally, under international law, tourists are only permitted to bring home 250g of caviar per person. For more information go to www.cites.org, or read *The Philosopher Fish* by ecojournalist Richard Adams Carey. It's a lively investigation into the endangered life of the sturgeon and the prized caviar it provides.