Food and Sex: The Soviet Literary Imagination Fueled by Desire and Taboos

Savannah Eklund
Columbia University

There is no shortage of cross-contamination between food and sex. This intertwining is often employed to either make the casual consumption of sex more palatable through food metaphors or, on the other hand, to make the ingestion of food more exciting through its sexualization. But what if, rather than just a tongue-in-cheek innuendo to "spice up" the literary imagination by bridging two worlds, the connections between them lie in an even closer coupling in the writings of Soviet-émigré writers? Using Anya von Bremzen's 2014 memoir "Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking: A Memoir of Food and Longing" and selections of Lara Vapnyar's 2009 collection of short stories "Broccoli and Other Tales of Food and Love," I argue that the frequent food shortages emblematic of Soviet life and the sexual mores imposed under Stalin cemented the two together in the Soviet literary imagination as mutual symbols of longing and desire.

Food and sex have been subjected to taboos, routinely raising questions of ethical consumption and the limitations therein. In her article "Beyond Food/Sex: Eating and an Ethics of Existence," Elspeth Probyn says, "Pleasure and ethics, sex and food are all about breaking up the strict moralities which constrain us." On the flip side of Probyn's ethical inquiry which suggests that the connections between food and sex can reimagine the limits of pleasure and identity are the harsh realities of life in Stalin's USSR that forced limitations on both food and sex placed something of a prohibition on pleasure.

Similarly, both food and sex find themselves sandwiched between necessity and indulgence. While food is necessary, the simultaneous existence of kartochki

- the Soviet era ration cards - as well as food shortages place ethical and practical limitations on consumption - that is, except for the Soviet intelligentsia and "red bourgeoise," as their own hypocritical indulgences are now widely-known. At the same time, sex is necessary for reproduction and thus the continuation of society, and yet, its indulgence finds itself mired in taboo. In "Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking," von Bremzen says:

Or perhaps, as the contemporary author Tatyana Tolstaya suggests, the "orgiastic gorging" of Russian authors was a compensation for literary taboos on eroticism. One must note, too, alas, Russian writers' peculiarly Russian propensity for moralizing Rosy hams, amber fish broths, blini as plump as "the shoulder of a merchant's daughter" (Chekhov again), such literary deliciousness often serves an ulterior agenda of exposing gluttons as spiritually bankrupt philistines - or lethargic losers such as the alpha glutton Oblomov. Is this a moral trap? I keep asking myself. Are we enticed to salivate at these lines so we'll end up feeling guilty?

Contrary to "Manfield's motto that 'Life's too short for bad food, bad sex or no sex at all'..." the moralization of indulgence in these pleasures suggests instead that Soviet society - although far from the only society to do so - suggested to their populace that there really can be "too much of a good thing". "Exposing gluttons as spiritually bankrupt philistines," implies that indulging in more food than is necessary for survival implicates the consumer as inherently morally corrupt, that food for pleasure beyond the realm of utilitarianism demonstrates an internal moral failing.

These moralizing attempts to contain food and its consumption into strictly utilitarian realms reflect the official, post-Lenin Soviet attitudes towards sex that strictly delineated between the morally good conception of sex for procreation and the morally bad conception of sex for recreation. Vera Sandomirsky's 1951 article in The Russian Review highlighted these almost hypocritical and contrasting views on sex. Sandomirsky noted the shift from the Leninist conception of "free love" to Stalin's imposition of an unforgiving moral code:

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Abortions became illegal in 1936. Divorce laws were revised, so that by 1944 simple mortals found it extremely difficult to obtain divorces. Motherhood medals, carrying with them lucrative state subsidies for large families, were instituted.

The reign of free love - or Red love - was succeeded by the regime of Stalinist Virtue. (The latter emerged as anything but red or flamboyant, but on the contrary enormously rigid and oppressive.)

Sex had, essentially, become a couple's duty to the nation and the Party, nothing more than the utilitarian function of the means of (re)production. There almost seemed to be a level of cognitive dissonance demonstrated in the simultaneous valor in plentiful reproductive sex, as evidenced by the subsidies available for large families while recreational sex shared the same moralization as food indulgences - the characterization

as immoral and inappropriate gluttony.

This dissonance highlights a critical similarity between food and sex in the Soviet moral code, wherein both are required and expected to exist for means of survival and continuity, but neither is to be a vector for pleasure or to be consumed in excess. Von Bremzen wrote of the moralization of food:

The very notion of pleasure from flavorsome food was reviled as capitalist degeneracy. Mayakovsky, brazen poet of the revolution, sicced his jeering muses on gourmet fancies:

Eat your pineapples, gobble your grouse

Your last day is coming, you bourgeois louse!

Food was fuel for survival and socialist labor. Food was a weapon of class struggle. Anything that smacked of Testov's brand of lipsmacking - kulebiaka would be a buttery bull's-eye - constituted a reactionary attack on the world being born.

Of course, plenty can be said about capitalism's tendencies towards indulgence in excess, but the Soviet repression of any incarnation of pleasure as a capitalist indulgence excellently demonstrates "a reactionary attack on the world being born." Von Bremzen's remarks on the matter mirror what Sandomirsky noted at the time, that "In Soviet eyes the Kinsey report is a revelation of the dirt and depravity into which American civilization has fallen. We Americans have sunk so low that we are interested only in sexual pathology." The portrait of American indulgence in life's pleasure perfectly illustrates the theory that capitalist excess has been used to lull us into complacency and dull our revolutionary tendencies, which despite its possible truths, is being used here to conversely dull individualistic desires.

Much like today's continuing moralization of weight as a measure of self-control and thus individual moral quality, we can observe the Soviet tendency toward moralizing both food and sex in similar manners. In "Borscht" from Lara Vapnyar's short story collection, Alla, the prostitute with whom Sergey has a rendezvous, is described multiple times in terms of her weight and the shape of her body, "The trilling voice on the phone gave him a different image, however, that of a short, plump young woman with full lips and small white hands." And later, "She was stocky, with a red, wrinkled neck, blotchy face, and smudges of mascara in deep creases around her eyes." As both a prostitute, in particular one who seems to do so less out of necessity - she already has employment as a nanny - and a woman who is being described in terms of her full-figured body, she serves here as an emblematic literary depiction of two "immoral" shades of over-indulgence. She is, in short, an illustration of everything seen to be wrong with succumbing to excess, and even further, of the corruption of a Russian in America, transformed by capitalist indulgence.

We can see a similar brand of moralizing over-indulgence towards sex in von Bremzen's memoir when she notes the difference between Russian and American hospitals, similarly implying a laxity of moral codes of indulgence in America. She writes of her first time in an American hospital, "No nurses screaming 'Trakhatsa nado menshe!' (You should screw less!) at gonorrhea sufferers." At the same time, it also depicts gonorrhea as

a disease of indulgence, as a divine bacterial retribution - much like AIDS was popularly depicted in America during my childhood - for what has been classified as morally unacceptable behaviors.

Furthermore, Stalin's imposed virtue system felt almost reminiscent of a self-colonialism, borrowing the colonialist mindset of "civilizing" a people thought to be inferior, except, that he seemed to view his own people this way. Von Bremzen highlights this attitude in her memoir, saying:

Alongside abundance and prosperity, the third pillar of Stalin's new cultural edifice was kulturnost' (culturedness). Hence, Soviet citizens - many of them formerly illiterate - were exhorted to civilize themselves. From table manners to tangos, from perfume to Pushkin, from tasseled lampshades to Swan Lake, the activities and mores reviled by the earlier Bolsheviks as bourgeois contamination were embraced as part of the new Homo sovieticus. If a member of the nomenklatura (Communist political elite) showed up at a meeting in his trophy silk pajamas and carrying a chocolate bar, it just went to show that socialism was doing swell.

And yet, despite the priority placed on these cultural pleasures previously considered taboos by the Bolsheviks, this liberation did not exist for all indulgences, as there was an implication that sexual pleasure was not refined enough to be freed from the shackles of taboo. Because, as we see quite clearly in Sandomirsky's writing, this same wave of kulturnost' that von Bremzen discusses was also the end of the Bolshevik "free love" period, and the newfound valor and priority placed on motherhood and domestication. Also on this period of kulturnost', Sandomirsky writes:

We may summarize all this by saying that Stalinist Virtue which replaced the original Communist free love, means first the de-erotization of love and, secondly, the subordination of the sexual drive to the political and economic exigencies of the Soviet state. But there still remains a third aspect of Stalinist Virtue, and this aspect is the most sinister of all: its use as a device for invading the one sphere of personal privacy yet remaining to the Soviet citizen.

Interestingly, rather than the typical colonial mindsets that categorize the sexual and cultural attitudes of the "other" as being merely primitive and therefore detestable, the Stalinist outlook seemed to classify the Bolshevik sexual attitudes as primitive specifically because of its detraction from work and one's responsibility towards communism.

And yet, it shares with the standard colonial mindset the tendency to view the "other's" morality as being primitive and untenable because of its diametric opposition to the colonizer's dominant cultural attitude. Galit Atlas writes about the simultaneous fetishization and scorn of Middle Eastern women's sexuality in particular, as a reaction to Western sexual mores:

The different energy of the Other gives rise to fantasies of sexual promise, desire, and pleasure. It touches our inhibitions as well as our longings. The exotic despot or the harem, for example, seemed simultaneously alluring and threatening in Western eyes, and was often perceived as decadent, irrational, barbaric, and immoral.

Except, that all the while the scorn of capitalist decadence and degeneracy was being thrust upon citizens by

the mission of Stalin moralization, the confusing and simultaneous "myth of plenty," dispersed alongside propaganda of widespread under-eating and under-nourishment in the States, was making the rounds. Seemingly an attempt to satiate these cravings for more and better food by categorizing indulgence as a character flaw and supposing that the availability of nourishment was still better than that available elsewhere, these perplexingly contrasting myths were still seeded. Von Bremzen recalls the pornographic nature of this "myth of plenty," this attempt at quelling desire by proximity to the object of desire, hidden away behind glossy photographs:

Kremlin winds shifted, commissars vanished, but the official Soviet myth of plenty persisted, and people clung to the magic tablecloth fairy tale. Who could resist the utopia of the socialist good life promoted so graphically in Kniga? Just look at the opening photo spread! Here are craggy oysters - oysters! - piled on a silver platter between bottles of Crimean and Georgian wines. Long-stemmed cut-crystal goblets tower over a glistening platter of fish in aspic. Sovetskoye brand bubbly chills in a bucket, its neck angling toward a majestic suckling pig. Meanwhile, the intro informs us, 'Capitalist states condemn working citizens to constant under-eating...and often to hungry death.'

Like so much pornographic material that centers around something the viewer can't have or finds too taboo or extreme for real life, the "myth of plenty" disseminates taunting fantasies of the indulgence deemed inappropriate for the moral Soviet citizen and is, regardless, also unattainable for the vast majority, attempting to satiate desires through fantasy. In the same manner that capitalism lulls the populace into complacency through consumerist indulgence, the Stalinist regime employs the titillation of plentiful nourishment to quell the cravings and desire for actually fulfilling nourishment.

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Lapnyar's "Borscht" illustrates the parallel sexual version of this unattainable fantasy when the prostitute the main character ends up meeting, described in terms of her "plumpness" and disappointing appearance, fails to live up to the glossy sexual photos that initially allured him:

The naked women on the page came in various shapes and colors, yet they all had two things in common: they were visibly moaning, and stars and solid black rectangles covered their breasts and genitals. Sergey took a long swallow of coffee and tried to mentally unscrape the stars and rectangles. He imagined that he was the one who made the women moan. The words accompanying the snapshots boasted of heavenly pleasures and hot, hot, hot women.

In the sexual fantasies of "Borscht" and the edible fantasies of the Soviet cookbook detailed by von Bremzen, there remains a bond of unattainability to both; a reminder that some things are just out of reach but a way to animate the lonely or the hungry. Of course, the obvious bond tying together both food and sex in these cases is their mutual inaccessibility, the catalyst for

their morphing or at least proximity in the Soviet-émigré's literary imagination.

Their taboo and allure but mutual deprivation for many under the Stalinist regime can be seen as fusing their morphologies through the manifestation of cravings. Thus, the reason the proximal relationships sometimes seen in the work of Soviet-émigré writers is even more evocative. In the scientific literature, diverging views of the precise definition of "craving" proliferate, and there exist a few major frameworks for theorizing the precipitation of cravings, but one theoretical assumption tends to underlie the vast majority of them: that some element of cravings are borne out of the absence for a necessity or desire. Dr. Weingarten and Dawn Elston wrote in "The Phenomenology of Food Cravings," "A common view is that cravings are elicited by need and, therefore, cravings serve to correct bodily needs. This interpretation is equivalent to many abstinence models which view craving as a state identifying the substance which will redress a deficiency." Suppose a common trait presumed to be underlying cravings is the absence of that object of desire. In that case, it stands to reason that the sexual mores imposed by Stalin precipitated increased sexual desire, much like the food deficits would have precipitated food cravings. If we are to accept both food and sex as imbued with the affect of desire and longing, and thus the object of craving, then it is entirely understandable how they would become united in the literary imagination.

Early in her memoir, von Bremzen highlights the tantalizing nature of food - and specifically the restaurant experience - from her Soviet childhood when she says, "As a kid, I cut straight to the porn - the dining-out parts." The allure of pornographic material - of pseudo-experiencing fantasies from a safe distance or as a substitute for one's actual desire - seems to underscore the seduction of these alimentary fantasies of not only having adequate sustenance but being able to thoroughly enjoy a dining experience. The taboo of dining and of edible indulgence beyond that which is necessary for sustenance under Stalinist virtues only heightens the provocativeness and applicability of this metaphor; of likening the taboo of culinary extravagance to a pseudo-pornographic existence.

Beyond that, the wordplay of "dining-out," seemingly suggestive of the euphemism "eating out," also implies a further boundary transgression between food and sex and an outright rejection of Stalinist virtues. Not only has this been a point of conjecture about the proximal relationship between oral sex and eating - in relation to Bill Clinton's scandal, Probyn remarked, "It also led me to wonder if oral sex wasn't sex, was it eating?" - but there are further political connotations of this conflation. Atlas mentions the sin of Adam - the original juxtaposition of food and sex - and the ramifications therein: "The first sin involved food and sexuality, when Eve seduced Adam into eating the apple. Preoccupation with food, then, is not only about body image, but also about what we are allowed to take into our bodies and what we are not—penetrability, desires, and prohibitions." In Atlas' focal point - of what we allow into our bodies versus what we do not - there is also something obvious to be said about Stalin's ever-present power over that decision. In this case, the conflation of

dining out in a restaurant, a taboo of capitalist indulgence, and oral sex, an inherently non-reproductive act thus shunned by Stalinist virtues, there is, in this passage, a subtle rejection of both.

But, of course, despite the rejection of capitalist alimentary indulgence, we find that the Soviet nomenklatura and the "red bourgeoisie" were, in fact, living the titillating "myth of plenty," enjoying the decadence of hypocritical and lavish buffets, intended to make the international community swoon at the "successes" of Stalinist communism. Von Bremzen wrote of learning for the first time, the hypocritical indulgences of the nomenklatura:

I was dazed by what I'd learned at his fantasy table. It was akin to discovering that Santa Claus was somehow, after all, real. The Soviet myth of plenty that my latter-Soviet generation had scoffed at? That fabled abundance so cynically, even existentially scorned?

How spectacularly it had flourished on Kremlin banquet tables.

Like the allegories of the Catholic priests having affairs while peddling sexual repression or the "pro-life" politicians secretly arranging abortions for their mistresses, Stalin and his ilk were much the same as every hypocrite with any semblance of power, set on virtue-signaling while living by an entirely different set of values for themselves. How shocking it must be to realize that the same Kremlin causing you to salivate with fantasies of plentiful food was indulging in bounties without shame.

While much may have changed after Stalin's death, and for these writers and their families, after emigration as well, there remains a bodily memory of that alimentary absence, of the craving for fulfilling nourishment. Von Bremzen spoke of her mother, of whom she says, "My mother has impeccable manners, is ladylike in every respect. But to this day she eats like a starved wolf, a war survivor gobbling down her plate of food before other people at table have even touched their forks." Similarly, you can see a reminiscent trace of the same affect in Nina from Vapnyar's story "A Bunch of Broccoli on the Third Shelf," who continues to buy - or as her ex-husband says, "seduced" - more vegetables than she actually consumes, akin to a comforting compulsion. If the remnants of this bodily memory of the deprivation of satisfactory nourishment continue to plague these emigres, it also explains why the tantalizing juxtaposition of food and sex remains an element of their work.

Probyn suggests that a unique element tying food and sex together in contemporary culture is that they both hold significant power over our identity formation. In the case of Soviet-émigré writers, I would argue that they have mutually molded identity in such a profound way as to remain firmly rooted in the literary imagination of these writers. Even more than likes and dislikes, they have been shaped by the impressions of strict taboos and deficits, remnants of a past that uniquely molds their writing and unites these two desires. And, even more, that both Nina from Vapnyar's story and von Bremzen's mother turned to vegetables and cooking, respectively, to dull the loss of love suggests that the culinary fantasy has taken such a remarkable hold over them as to be the closest replacement for love; the closest approximation to the intertwining of two souls being an alimentary obsession.

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