

Ordeal by Dinner: US Diplomats and Food Culture in the Russian Empire

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Abstract

This article examines the encounters of US diplomats with food culture in the Russian Empire. Understanding local traditions associated with food was essential for diplomats who had to attend and host various receptions and formal dinners. Based on diaries, letters, and memoirs, the author argues that the Americans - representatives of a republic - found an immersion into food culture of an autocratic state, where the extremely elaborate rituals of food consumption were a part of a social-distinction signaling system, challenging. However, they learned to navigate all the nuances, representing their own country and traditions with dignity. Their observations about food in the capital of the Tsars reveal valuable details about the inner workings of the Russian Empire.

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Svetlana Paulson

Anthropologists argue that one of the main challenges that a person faces abroad is adjusting to local food and eating traditions. Patterns of food consumption and cuisine preferences in any locale are not merely based on the availability of certain foods. They are tied to many factors, including the existing political institutions and social structure. Basic awareness of food-related traditions in a foreign land may suffice for a tourist. However, those who stay and work abroad for extended periods of time have to navigate the nuances of life in a new place and figure out what factors are going to determine what they will eat, as well as when, where, and in whose company. For foreigners engaged in certain occupations – such as the diplomatic service - these considerations are especially important. While, like most people, diplomats plan their private meals at home, their jobs require that they regularly eat out at public events and official ceremonies. They accept invitations to formal breakfasts, lunches, and dinners, and in return, host similar receptions at the embassy. In order to perform these duties successfully, diplomats have to become keen observers of the local behaviors, rules, and taboos associated with food. They often record their observations in letters and diaries. Such records offer a great source of information for scholars studying cross-cultural interactions, as well as daily lives in the cities that host diplomatic missions.

For an historian of 19th-century St. Petersburg, diplomats' memoirs are indispensable. This city was founded as Russia's window to the West, and foreign "bakers and dress makers" poured into it. The lifestyle trends that they brought - including cuisine – intertwined with the local traditions and underwent changes that integrated them into the fabric of an autocratic empire. How did the members of the diplomatic corps adjust to St. Petersburg's unique cuisine and dining traditions? What observations did they make in the process, and how can these observations help historians develop a better understanding of life in the capital of an autocratic state? These questions are particularly interesting to examine in relation to American diplomats. They represented a republic. A monarchy was alien to them, and even for those who had worked in London, Berlin, or Madrid, an encounter with Romanovs' autocracy presented a challenge.

The first US Minister to St. Petersburg John Quincy Adams arrived in 1809. He had already traveled there as a teenager with Francis Dana's mission, and learned that the cost of living was high. Wishing to present himself well upon returning to Russia, Adams purchased European clothes. His black suit, however, did not impress the Russians, in whose eyes, a high-ranking official like a minister had to dazzle the world with a glorious uniform. Anything less undermined his status. Thus, Adams encountered the Russian obsession with social status and its outward manifestations. The origin of this phenomenon lay in the autocratic nature of the Russian state. The monarch's autocratic power rested upon strict hierarchy in society and its division into ranks. Subjects were supposed to fit like cogs into this mechanism, promoting discipline and obedience among them.¹ The Table of Ranks, introduced by Peter the Great in 1722, created fourteen grades in the military and civil service. The Table and subsequent legislation determined the social status and responsibilities of each grade, and even assigned uniform designs - specific down to the last button.

In his first weeks in St. Petersburg, Adams discovered that Russian obsession with rank made an impact on the diplomatic corps. Among its members, games for asserting one's status were played with an intensity that Adams had not seen before, and one of the main arenas for these battles was the dinner table. A minister newly arriving on Neva's shores was not expected to receive anyone in his residence until he was formally presented to the Tsar. Meanwhile, the heads of other missions invited him for a round of dinners at their homes, providing an opportunity to meet colleagues and form first impressions of the local traditions. It turned out that St. Petersburgers lived by the maxim "everybody eats, but only a true gentleman dines." High society, court members, and top bureaucrats asserted their belonging to the elite by cultivating a reputation as gourmards, and throwing dinner parties at astronomical cost. Some prominent aristocrats, in the quest for prestige, spent their entire fortunes on hosting dinners, and died in poverty. In order to maintain respect for their country and their own lofty status in Russian eyes, foreign diplomats also organized lavish lunch and dinner receptions. On Napoleon's orders, French ambassador Armand de Caulaincourt acquired a spectacular palace where he entertained hundreds of guests in the most opulent style. Through these displays, Napoleon was signaling that even though he was not royal by birthright, he knew how to present his monarchy internationally with proper grandeur. Adams reported that Caulaincourt's dinners were the talk of St. Petersburg. Guests were offered "a succession of seven or eight courses of rising novelty before the main one was reached. Different wines were served with every dish, the butlers whispering to each guest the year of the vintage and the name of the vineyard."² The French ambassador's annual budget was about a million roubles (\$ 300,000.00).³ Other embassies could not compete with his regularly, but they made efforts to give occasional dinners that would rival the French.

1. A.I. Herzen, *Sobranie sochinenii v 8 t.*, vol. 5 (Moscow: Pravda, 1975), p.479.

2. William Harlan Hale, "The Yankee and the Tsar," *The American Heritage* V.9, Issue 2 (Feb 1958). <https://www.americanheritage.com/yankee-and-czar#3>

3. Ibid.

Adams witnessed this when he attended dinner at the Austrian mission: “there was in the dinner, and everything connected with it, an effort of magnificence, seemingly to equal or outdo that of the French Ambassador.”⁴ Unfortunately, Minister Count St. Julien was not known for refined taste. His reception proved a tragicomical show of excess. The chasseurs waiting on him at the table wore “hussar dresses, bedizened with silver lace and tassels and sashes to such a degree that scarcely any part of the clothing under them was visible. Their mantles, bordered with furs, hung crosswise behind them from shoulder to shoulder.”⁵ The need to keep all that fur out of the food and sauces hardly made anyone happy. Adams remarked how unsuitable the chasseurs’ uniforms were. The gourmet highlight was pineapple jelly, but guests could not properly enjoy it due to the “thundering” music: instead of a chamber orchestra St. Julien ordered one “fit only for the field.”⁶

Examples like this illustrated the saying that more was not always better. Most of the US diplomats, at any rate, could not organize lavish dinners. As compared to the \$ 300,000.00 available to the French ambassador, Adams earned \$ 9,000.00.⁷ By the end of the 19th century, US ambassadors made \$ 17,000.00. For the Americans, the best strategy was hosting small lunches and dinners with a tasteful, warm atmosphere and quality food. However, planning even these was not trivial. Premier historian of St. Petersburg culture Yuri Lotman observed that high society dinners in the Tsars’ capital could be likened to theater plays where every detail was scripted to embody aristocratic traditions and esthetical values. Such details - ranging from stylish china to the “verbal décor” of elegant conversation in French - were supposed to elevate dinner to an event with the holiday atmosphere in which Russia’s privileged few dwelt.⁸ Which of these elements did Americans adopt for their mission’s needs? Which ones did they modify, and what remained completely alien to them?

Preparation for hosting lunches and dinners started with the acquisition of tableware. In the first decade of the 19th century, the Russian aristocracy mostly used silver. However, as the century progressed, porcelain became more popular. Owning Sèvres brand was considered particularly impressive, a fashion inspired by a magnificent Sèvres china service that graced the table of Catherine the Great.⁹ When Adams dined at Chancellor Nikolai Rumyantsev’s, the host invited him to inspect his Sèvres vases, underscoring that he was a true VIP. Table décor on a par with this was outside of Adams’ price range. Some of his successors – those who were very wealthy – managed to rival the Russian splendor. In the 1830s, George Mifflin Dallas rented a beautiful Bobrinskii palace on Galernaia Street

4. Charles Francis Adams, ed., *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams, Comprising Portions of His Diary from 1795 to 1848*. Vol. II. (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1874), p. 311.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 311-312.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 312.

7. Hale, <https://www.americanheritage.com/yankee-and-czar#3>

8. Yuri Lotman and Jelena Pogosjan, *High Society Dinners. Dining in Tsarist Russia* (Malta: Gutenberg Press, 2014), pp. 44-45.

9. Darra Goldstein, “Introduction to the English Edition,” in: Yuri Lotman and Jelena Pogosjan, *High Society Dinners*, p. 23.

where he entertained St. Petersburgers and members of the diplomatic corps in grand style.¹⁰ Henry Middleton, one of the richest men in South Carolina, was also known in St. Petersburg for his elegant dinners.¹¹ The Ministers who could not supplement their salaries with vast personal funds came up with creative ways to make their table service and décor look admirable. One of the methods was to collect antique tableware and centerpieces. The individual items did not have to match perfectly: when artistically arranged on the table, they created a chic atmosphere. The wife of Ambassador Clifton Breckinridge, Katherine was an expert at finding antiques at reasonable costs. Native of St. Petersburg Mme. Gasser introduced her to a Russian who “made it her business to travel through the interior of Russia, collecting curious and interesting things.”¹² She brought them for sale to the capital. Breckinridge was especially proud of “a handbeaten dish and cup, dating about a hundred and twenty years back, some little silver vodka cups” purchased from this dealer.¹³ The American also became a virtuoso incognito shopper, venturing to markets on Sadovaia Street – a home to hundreds of second-hand stores. “The Russians travel a great deal, especially to France, - explained Breckinridge. – They spend freely, often buying beyond their means, then they must sell... As antique hunters have not invaded this part of the world... these things are accessible to the purses of people of moderate means.”¹⁴ The American purchased fine Saxon plates, as well as prestigious Gardner china produced in Russia in the reign of Catherine the Great. She wrote to her aunt that her protestant frugality helped her face the challenge of St. Petersburg.

Other diplomats avoided the expense of buying Sèvres or Meissen Saxon china by shipping their American tableware to St. Petersburg. The Russians and European diplomats, as it turned out, knew little about porcelain and glass made in the US. The wife of George Van Ness Lothrop, Almira, wrote that members of the diplomatic corps thought they were low-quality. German Ambassador General Schweinitz asked Lothrop what kind of glassware she was getting for the US mission. “When I told him the glass was made in Boston, he looked as surprised as if I had told him the moon. He seemed to think handsome glass could not be made in America.”¹⁵ The German was so intrigued that he called on the Lothrop's to see the glass. The Americans “showed him some pieces which he admired very much. There were several people who also admired them and were... a little surprised to learn that they were made in America.”¹⁶ Using US

10. Anastasiia Dolgosheva, “Naznachenie v SShA,” *Sankt-Peterburgskie vedomosti*, March 6, 2007. https://spbvedomosti.ru/news/career/naznachenie_v_nbsp_ssha060307/

11. Paul Bushkovitch, “Henry Middleton and the Decembrist Revolt,” *Zapiski russkoi akademicheskoi gruppy v S.Sh.A.* 38 (2013): 131-156. <https://digitallibrary.vassar.edu/islandora/object/vassar%3A77729>

12. Katherine Breckinridge, “Letter to Susan Lees, January 22, 1895,” in: Katherine Breckinridge’s Papers, Private Collection, Magnolia, Arkansas, in the author’s possession. Heretofore cited as K.B. and the date when the letter was written.

13. Ibid.

14. K.B., December 19, 1894.

15. Almira Lothrop, *The Court of Alexander III* (Philadelphia: The John Winston Company, 1910), p. 38.

16. Ibid, p. 45.

tableware was unique, attracted interest, and allowed the diplomats to advertise domestic products.

Wise menu selection was also important for the image of the mission. When the USA and Russia established diplomatic relations in the 19th century, the European continent was being conquered by French cuisine. The Revolution affected culinary arts in France. Chefs who used to work for the aristocracy lost their jobs. In an effort to attract new customers, some of them opened restaurants - not only for the wealthy, but for a broader, middle-class clientele: fine cuisine was supposed to become more mainstream. Others sought employment abroad, including Russia. While they opened several French restaurants in St. Petersburg, high French cuisine primarily produced an impact on the eating habits of the elite. French chefs found jobs with numerous aristocrats. Their exquisite culinary creations impressed the guests at lavish dinner parties. Hiring a French chef became a matter of prestige and a demonstration of lofty social status. High society members wishing to emphasize their sophistication had their chefs follow Parisian trends and serve the newest dishes popular there. Taking these local traditions into consideration, at their receptions in St. Petersburg diplomats also offered French cuisine.

Throughout the 19th century, US ministers and ambassadors consistently hired French chefs. Sometimes it was hard for the Americans to adjust to the earnest homage that St. Petersburgers paid to the Parisian novelties. In the beginning of the century, a trendy dish in Paris was consommé. It was very versatile, and could be served alone or as a clear soup with asparagus and eggs, crepes, vermicelli, rice, and quenelles. The St. Petersburg elite quickly adopted consommé, and even started circulating jokes about those who showed no interest in consommé or consommé-based soups. Even famous people, like poet Ivan Dmitriev who had moved to Moscow, became characters in these fables: “Vasilii L’vovich Pushkin loved bragging about his innovations. At an evening party in his house guests were served this type of bouillon – according to the tradition that he evidently brought from St. Petersburg or Paris. Dmitriev rejected the bouillon. Vasilii Lvovich runs up to him and says: “But Ivan Ivanovich, this is consommé!” “I know, - Dmitriev replies with some vexation, - that this is no chamomile. Nonetheless, I do not want to drink it.”¹⁷ The fascination with consommé and soup among the St. Petersburg elite received a major boost after French chef Nicolas Appert, in 1804, invented the method of preserving food in hermetically sealed containers. Soups directly from Paris were shipped to the tables of the wealthy at enormous cost, and chefs working in the Russian capital came up with recipes imitating these soups.¹⁸

When the Adams came to St. Petersburg, they did not know such nuances. The first dinner reception that they gave in their residence turned into a soup drama. Among the attendees were members of the legation and such influential guests as Baroness Stroganova, the Bettancourts, and the Colombis. Louisa

17. Petr Andreevich Vyazemskii, *Zapisnye knizhki* (Moscow: Zakharov, 2017), p. 54.

18. Lavrent’eva E.V., *Kul’tura zastol’ia XIX veka. Pushkinskaia pora*. (Moscow: Terra-Knizhnyi klub, 1999), p. 103.

Adams hired a French chef. Dinner started well, but “alas... the cook forgot the soup.”¹⁹ Mrs. Adams had accompanied her husband on previous diplomatic missions, and in Berlin played the role of a hostess for both the US and British missions. The lack of soup would not have been a major catastrophe there, and she took it calmly in St. Petersburg. However, US Consul Levett Harris who had arrived in the Russian capital before the Adams, and was aware how serious the locals were about soup, was mortified. Being an impressionable person, he remained in a state of distress the entire evening: “we danced until one o’clock but his horreur at the oversight was not to be overcome.”²⁰ Mrs. Adams made sure that, at subsequent dinners, soup was served.

Sometimes French cuisine in St. Petersburg proved a disappointment for the American tastes. In 1819, celebrity chef Marie-Antoine Carême came to work in the capital of the Tsars. While he introduced the locals to his famous – and truly extraordinary – desserts, he also cooked main dishes.²¹ He noticed that the Russians did not seem fond of minced meats in his recipes, and substituted them for whole pieces of meat: entrecôtes or escalopes thinned out by a mallet. Carême’s entrecôtes and escalopes became very popular. In the 1894, the Breckinridges hired a French chef to prepare dinner for a Thanksgiving celebration at the legation. The main dish was supposed to be turkey. When the Americans saw it, they were in disbelief. “Apparently someone had taken an axe or a club and pounded the breastbone until it was cashed flat. Then, with a sharp instrument it had been cut... into even squares. We each helped ourselves to a square of turkey... It did not taste any more like home than it looked,”²² – complained Katherine Breckinridge. She learned that if she did not want French food, she had to give specific instructions.

Offering French cuisine to guests was prestigious, but eating it all the time could grow tiring. Diplomats admitted to craving more variety. Some embassies used this to their advantage. In the first half of the 19th century, a great delicacy in St. Petersburg was macaroni. They were imported from Italy, and usually served with Parmesan cheese. Neapolitan macaroni were considered the best, and to the delight of high society and the diplomatic corps, the Neapolitan minister gave dinners featuring this dish. George Mifflin Dallas recalled dining at Minister Prince Butera’s in 1837: “The dinner... was exquisite, especially... Neapolitan macaroni and the glass of imperial Tokay.”²³ Members of the US legation often received questions about American cuisine. Since food preferences in the US notably differed from region to region, they felt it was difficult to name a representative

19. Louisa Catherine Adams, *Diary and Autobiographical Writings of Louisa Catherine Adams. Vol. I, 1778-1815* (Cambridge: Massachusetts, 2013), p. 331.

20. *Ibid.*

21. Alain Drouard, “Chefs, Gourmets and Gourmands. French Cuisine in the 19th and 20th Centuries,” in: *Food: The History of Taste* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), pp. 263-264.

22. K.B., December 26, 1894.

23. George Mifflin Dallas, *Diary of George Mifflin Dallas While United States Minister to Russia 1837-1839, and to England 1856-1861* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1892), p. 40.

national dish. Almira Lothrop stated that it was oysters. She reasoned that this would be a clever reply: both Russians and Americans enjoyed them, and they were gourmet food. This, indeed, was perfect for impressing St. Petersburgers. People of means there had special love for this dish. On the Neva embankment near the Stock Exchange, stalls serving Ostend and Flensburg oysters never lacked customers. And every April gourmards awaited a printed announcement that the first shipment of fresh oysters had arrived at Libava Port, and would soon be at the capital's stores.²⁴ In the 1860s, Minister Cassius Marcellus Clay generously offered oysters at his receptions. Lothrop did not mention whether she did the same. However, she made an effort to follow the trend started by other embassies, and introduce the locals to some authentic American recipes. She decided on Boston codfish balls, albeit with some hesitation: cod could be perceived as low-brow.²⁵

The logistics of preparing American cuisine proved nightmarish. Lothrop's French chef could not read English. She translated the recipe into German, and her local servants who spoke both German and French, translated it into French. Then the American could not procure cornmeal. The Russians, relying on flour or potato starch, did not know what it was. Lothrop enlisted the help of her local friend, Mme. Struve: "I said to Mme. de Struve I wish I could get some corn meal; and she replied it could be found here, and that she would send me some. The next day came a paper of cornstarch."²⁶ The butler dispatched to buy codfish returned with salted sturgeon.²⁷ Lothrop's premonition turned out right – St. Petersburgers could not fathom why a high ranking official like a Minister would want to serve his guests cod.

Tasty food and elegant tableware were necessary for a good dinner, but a dinner reception was much more than that. The conversation and the highly prescribed etiquette were supposed to provide the right atmosphere. In an autocratic state, where status was everything, a dinner for top-ranking officials and high society was a theater play where each detail was scripted and meant to emphasize that the attendees were no mere mortals, but the select few living privileged lives. According to tradition, the guests first assembled in the ante-room, formed pairs, and marched to the dining room. This dance-like procession allowed them to admire each other's outfits and glittering jewelry and feel that the evening was special.²⁸ The conversation at the table was supposed to flow in French, fluency in which was an indicator of belonging to the elite. For the US diplomats, table talk often was a serious challenge. Among those who served in the 19th-century in Petersburg, there were some excellent French speakers, such as the Adams, Henry Middleton, or Henry T. Allen. However, the majority either had limited skills, or did not know French at all. In such cases, Americans had to

24. Albin Konechnyi, ed., *Chuvstvitel'nye puteshestviia i progulki po Nevskomu prospektu* (St. Petersburg: Petropolis, 2009), p. 165.

25. Lothrop, p. 173.

26. Ibid, p. 88.

27. Ibid.

28. Lavrent'eva, pp. 16-17.

come up with creative ways of communicating. Mrs. Lothrop recalled her dinner conversation with a Dutch diplomat. He addressed her in French, she responded in English, throwing in a few French words, and this proved enough to avoid awkward silence.²⁹ Clifton Breckinridge once sat next to a Russian who tried to speak to him in French and German.³⁰ She looked frustrated after receiving a shoulder shrug. The US Minister then smiled and mustered the courage to say one of the very few phrases he knew in French: “But madam, I find your company so pleasant.”³¹ His neighbor was charmed. Minister Neill Smith Brown did not have such great social skills, and therefore he attended dinners accompanied by a translator, his secretary Edward Wright.³²

St. Petersburg etiquette also required that all the guests’ needs should be attended to by servants. The host could offer some small assistance, but nothing beyond it – otherwise he risked debasing his social status, acting like hired help. Those who violated that social expectation were ridiculed. The consommé enthusiast V.L. Pushkin, for instance, gossiped that: “Yesterday our new comrade gave a dinner to which I was invited. There was only one woman, the hostess. A vulgar idiot, she did not sit at the table a single minute – she shut the windows herself to make sure that we did not get sunburned, she went to get us a bottle of warm champagne, and she poured it into our flutes herself.”³³ American attitudes regarding appropriate host behavior were less restrictive, and diplomats sometimes crossed the Russian lines of the acceptable. Minister Alfonso Taft was affluent. His dinners in the Russian capital in the 1880s showcased tasty food, elegant décor, and trained service personnel. Once, at his dinner given for the members of the diplomatic corps “a servant was directed to open a window but was unable to do so, when Judge Taft arose from the table, went over to the window and with his powerful arms easily raised it. When the visitors had gone, Mrs. Taft protested to her husband against his act of leaving the table to open the window, assuring him that in Russia such an act on the part of the host was by no means conventional. The Judge heard her out and replied, “Whenever I’m not permitted to open a window in my own house I want to go home.”³⁴

Americans rightfully expected to find the strictest dinner protocol in St. Petersburg at the royal palace. Breakfasts, lunches, and dinners at the Tsars’ residences – from small receptions to the grand balls where hot meals were served to four thousand guests – by virtue of the monarch’s engagement, were state events. They functioned as a venue propagating the lofty status and power of an absolute monarch. The Hoffmeister Department, responsible for catering at these events, meticulously planned every detail, including guest lists, seating arrangements, the menu, and the purchase of provisions. Dinner organization and rules of

29. Ibid, p. 31.

30. K.B., November 24, 1894.

31. Ibid.

32. Edward H. Wright, “Letters from St. Petersburg, 1850-1851,” in: *Proceedings of the New Jersey Historical Society*, v. LXXX, No. 2, April 1964, p. 158.

33. Lavrent’eva, p. 24.

34. Alexander Leonard Lewis, *Life of Alfonso Taft of Cincinnati* (New York: Hawke Publishing Company, 1920), p. 185.

conduct for the attendees have been described by numerous memoirists. US diplomats did not add anything new in regard to how these rules were composed. However, while recording their own experiences at the imperial receptions, they mentioned not only the instances where protocol was followed, but also where it was disrupted. Such details are particularly valuable because they allow scholars to reconstruct a fuller, more realistic picture of life in the Romanov palaces. In addition, diplomats' memoirs shed light on what representatives of a republic felt when sharing a meal with an autocrat.

Katherine Breckinridge, for instance, pointed out an important nuance: before one could taste food at the Tsar's receptions, one could smell it. Guests at January ball dinners had to line up in the small throne room aired out after the dances. Cold, tired, and hungry, they smelled the aroma of enticing food emanating from the adjacent dining area. However, they had to wait a long time until the imperial family should pass by, and they were allowed in. As a wife of former US congressman, Breckinridge had attended dinner ceremonies in Washington, D.C. By comparison, the Romanovs' arrangements struck her as drawn out. Imposing a long wait on the guests was certainly meant to instill humility in the royal subjects and emphasize the special status of the autocrat. Republican Americans, in Breckinridge's words, felt "aggravated" rather than impressed: "as we stood there the waiters filed by carrying great silver dishes of steaming, hot, good things to eat. It required great self-restraint not to make a raid on them and capture something to satisfy the cravings of the inner man and to fortify our bodies."³⁵

Once seated at their tables, the Romanovs' guests experienced a true culinary extravaganza. The Tsars' chefs were experts not only at French and Russian, but a variety of world cuisines. Throughout the nineteenth century, US diplomats consistently voiced amazement at the diversity and multitude of offerings on the palace menu. Pondering the autocrat's extraordinary display of opulence, Louisa Adams broke into verse:

The brain bewilder'd floats in gay delight
The sight enchanted swims in rays of light...
While tables groaning pall the varied taste
Luxurious splendors of profusion waste.³⁶

Next to their plates, the guests found menu cards - a new tradition that originated in nineteenth-century France and spread to other countries. Having become ubiquitous both at private dinners and government receptions, they quickly turned into collector items. Dinner guests saved them, lovingly inserted them into their diaries, or bound them into scrap books to be shared with friends, family, and acquaintances. Culture historians Yuri Lotman and Jelena Pogosjan explained the popularity of menu cards by the fact that, for the diners, they served as a great means of preserving their personal, as well as family history.³⁷ Often,

35. Breckinridge Family Papers, 1752-1965, The Library of Congress Manuscript Division. Box 863, 1896-97, *Katherine Breckinridge to Lily*, March 5, 1896.

36. Louisa Adams, p. 307.

37. Yuri Lotman and Jelena Pogosjan, p. 12.

at dinner individuals first met their future spouses, friends, and even business partners. Showing up at dinner in a brand new uniform, they celebrated their rise on the career ladder. An invitation to the Tsar's reception, and an opportunity to try rare dishes from the palace menu were viewed as a matter of particular prestige, and an indicator of the person's high social status and sophistication. Since menu cards served as keepsakes for special moments, they were beautifully designed. The ones printed for the imperial catering service at the Semennikov Printing House on Bolshaia Morskaia, became prized possessions of art enthusiasts.

American diplomats in St. Petersburg saved menu cards – for similar reasons as the locals. Writing home about dinners at the Tsar's residences, and discussing the food that was served, they celebrated their success in a career that opened up opportunities to see the world. Americans also appreciated the artistic value of menu cards. The wife of US Minister William H. Hunt, Sarah, reported to her sister: "The menus were large sheets of paper with colored pictures painted in oils, very handsome, and the dinner was quite up to them."³⁸ Katherine Breckinridge enthused about these "works of art," describing them to her aunt in great detail, and mentioning her intention to frame them.³⁹

Minister John Foster decided to send a menu from Gatchina Palace to his family in the US. His letter about this offers unique insights into the work of the Hoffmeister Department. As Foster reached to pick up his card from the table, he realized that it was already gone. He asked the US Legation's local groom who had friends among the palace staff to get him a replacement. It was procured, but the request had caused a commotion: "the head waiter was quite exercised."⁴⁰ It turned out that the cooks had not sent up two dishes listed on the menu: a failure for which many employees working at the Gatchina breakfast that day, or responsible for organizing it, could get fired. Meanwhile, employment at the Hoffmeister Department was highly prized: it was officially equal to military service, and came with the military ranks, perks, and medals. Foster's groom explained that the original menus had not disappeared by accident. The waiters quietly removed them as evidence that breakfast had not gone according to the plan. Foster's story revealed fascinating details on what was happening behind the scenes in the imperial catering, and how its employees covered up their mistakes to make it look like everything at the autocrat's receptions was perfect.

Among the foods that impressed them at the palace events Americans usually mentioned fish and fruit, especially in the winter. Before the advent of the railroad, fast shipment of fish and fruit to the Tsars' capital presented a major logistical problem, and was done by special courier service. For instance, the famous Romanovs' hot houses were located near Moscow, and couriers had to brave treacherous icy roads delivering perishable cargo to St. Petersburg. In

38. Sarah Hunt, "Mrs. Hunt's Letters," in: *Thomas Hunt, The Life of William H. Hunt* (Brattleboro, VT: E.L. Hildreth & Co., 1922), p. 349.

39. Breckinridge Family Papers, 1752-1965, The Library of Congress Manuscript Division. Box 863, 1896-97, *Katherine Breckinridge to Susan Preston Lees*, June 9, 1896.

40. J. W. Foster, *Diplomatic Memoirs* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1909), p. 204.

addition, they had to be on the lookout for thieves. In February of 1809, pears grown at the Tsar's hot houses were stolen. The police caught the thief, but by that time some of the pears – valued at an astronomical one hundred rubles each - had gone rotten.⁴¹ The next year, in her diary Louisa Adams described having seen large pears cultivated in hot houses for a dinner *fête* in honor of Empress Maria Fedorovna. The American noted that since these were few in number, they were not offered to the guests, but reserved for French Ambassador Caulincourt.⁴² Given the limited supply, at dinner Alexander I often gifted fruit to his favorite courtiers, as well as foreign ambassadors. With the construction of new hot houses near the capital and opening of rail communication later in the century, fruit became readily available to the Tsar's guests all year round, and at receptions both in St. Petersburg and Moscow. In 1883, Sarah Hunt reported that at Alexander III's coronation dinner which she attended, forty-five hundred guests were served strawberries "at that time selling in Petersburg at twenty-five dollars the pound."⁴³

Americans also shared rare information about the consumption of alcohol at the royal receptions and festivities. A wide selection of alcoholic beverages was served generously, and there were the proverbial "rivers" of champagne that gained popularity after the Russian campaign in France during the Napoleonic Wars. The guests, however, preferred to imbibe in moderation: being seen drunk by the Tsar was risky. Alexander I and Nicholas I, in particular, did not tolerate drunks. The courtiers circulated a story of how Alexander I punished those who loved spirits. On his summer walks, the Tsar "passed by a house nearly every day where there was a parrot in a cage at the open window. It shouted incessantly: "Gavrishkin is here. Serve up the vodka!"⁴⁴ The Tsar took a notice and, when Gavrishkin came up for promotion in government service, he refused to sign the papers, destroying his career. Despite such risks, occasionally palace etiquette was violated. While enjoying a glass of champagne at Nicholas I's masqued ball, Secretary of the US Legation Edward Wright witnessed a curious incident. An officer flirted with a beautiful domino, but when she lifted her mask, he visibly panicked. He exclaimed that he had tried to seduce his own wife, and grabbed a bottle from a waiter, hoping to drown his imminent troubles in drink.⁴⁵ Wright's recollections revealed fascinating non-standard situations that occurred at the imperial dinners, and explained what sometimes caused the guests to ignore behavior expectations. Overall, American memoirs demonstrated that attending breakfasts and dinners with the autocrat required learning to notice and navigate numerous nuances. US diplomats rose to the challenge.

If dinners in the aristocratic circle were a lot of work for the US diplomats, eating in the company of the Russian merchant class was more informal, and more of an adventure than a challenge. Foreigners who penned memoirs about

41. Lavrent'eva, p. 39.

42. Louisa Adams, p. 319.

43. Hunt, p. 348.

44. Vyazemskii, p. 72.

45. Wright, p. 157.

their life in the 19th-century St. Petersburg rarely mentioned much about merchant milieu. Memoirs of US diplomats such as Cassius M. Clay and Jeremiah Curtin contain invaluable details about their interactions with merchants. They served in Russia the 1860s, a time when the US was torn by the Civil War, the Russian Empire struggled through the Great Reforms. Both countries sought each other's support. To St. Petersburg US sent representatives capable of establishing close rapport with the Russians. Minister Clay charmed them with his enthusiasm for meeting people, and the legation secretary Curtin impressed them with fluency in their language. The two diplomats were invited to numerous banquets given by the Merchants' Association of St. Petersburg. Curtin noted that "the merchants just at this time were beginning to get power."⁴⁶ They did not wish to stay within the confines of the status into which the autocratic state pegged them. "They were proud of their wealth and influence and wanted to make it felt against the nobles,"⁴⁷ - noted the American. Inviting foreign diplomats to dinners was a statement that merchants had an opinion regarding foreign policy, and that they wanted it noticed. Décor at such dinners rivaled the splendor of aristocratic gatherings. At the merchant clubhouse on Nevskii "four hundred persons sat down at tables glittering with silver and glass and adorned with beautiful vases filled with flowers; an unusual decoration was ripe pineapples growing in ornamented boxes."⁴⁸ And at a fête at the villa of lumber merchant Vassili Petrovich Gromov the guests enjoyed magical ambiance created by thousands of lanterns arranged in various designs. In the center the lanterns formed "Russia-America 1863-1866." Food selection featured "the luxuries of many countries."⁴⁹

The atmosphere at these gatherings differed from the one that governed dinners in aristocratic circles. It was far from a scripted theater play. Among the guests there were those who possessed impressive linguistic expertise. At several banquets, for example, Curtin spoke to a merchant who had translated Dante's *Inferno*. However, the guests were not using foreign language skills as a status symbol. Minister Clay's speeches were translated into Russian for everyone. Table-talk was flowing freely in Russian as well, and since Curtin could easily participate in it, he became the merchants' favorite. Both Clay and Curtin felt very comfortable at these dinners. Moscow merchants, wishing to rival St. Petersburgers, invited the Americans for a visit as well. The guests at merchant banquets showed their respect for Curtin by addressing him in a polite Russian manner as *Yeremei Davidovich*. The translator of Dante expressed this admiration without artifice, stating: "Yeremi Davidovich, you must marry, for we in Russia want to see a son begotten by you."⁵⁰

US diplomats often ate out at special events or gave formal diplomatic dinners at the legation. However, they also ate their meals at home, in the private

46. Joseph Shafer, ed., *Memoirs of Jeremiah Curtin* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1940), p. 94.

47. *Ibid.*

48. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

49. *Ibid.* p. 112

50. *Ibid.*, p. 117.

family circle. For the needs of their household, Americans hired local help. Ordering provisions for the minister's meals and overseeing the meal service was the responsibility of the *maitre d'hôtel*. For this position US ministers usually hired men who had served for years in the families of St. Petersburg high society. On the one hand, having staff who understood local traditions was useful. On the other, dealing with St. Petersburg *maitres d'hôtel* and chefs was sometimes frustrating. These men prided themselves on knowing what the Russian nobility ate in private, and believed that if they did not offer the same menu staples – and on the same time schedule - to such dignitaries as US diplomats, that would be their professional failure. Persuading them to be more flexible and serve the foods that Americans preferred was no easy task. St. Petersburg's high society spent their evenings at balls, and various other gatherings, returning home around two or three A.M. When they woke up in the morning, they typically had French croissants and coffee for a light breakfast. A more solid second breakfast, served at one P.M., featured *kasha* porridge, *kalach* bread, and/or eggs. Families of US diplomats preferred to have just one, but hearty breakfast. Sarah Hunt reported having breakfast wars with her chef. Upon their arrival in St. Petersburg the Hunts rented an apartment from a Frenchman Monsieur Petit, who included food service in their contract. Mr. Petit turned out to be a well-known chef. However, this was a mixed blessing. He refused to recognize that Americans came from a different food culture, and insisted on providing them the same service as to his regular local customers. In her letters home Mrs. Hunt complained: "I have struggled to have an American breakfast served at nine, as we have at home, - no use! Mr. Petit could not understand it, and we have resumed the coffee and rolls served in our room just as we get up, with a hearty meal called breakfast at one o'clock."⁵¹ The Breckinridges had better luck. At first, their cook served them *kasha*. One of the more popular varieties in St. Petersburg was buckwheat porridge. Breckinridge admitted that her family did not care for it. She managed to persuade the cook to substitute porridge for "grits from the United States and oatmeal from Scotland."⁵²

When families craved a particular American food, diplomats' wives sometimes went grocery shopping in person instead of relying on *maitre d'hôtel*. In the beginning of the century, it was considered below a proper lady's station to do grocery shopping. However, as the century progressed, and it became more acceptable, Americans began to venture into the stores. While such items as cornmeal were hard to find in the Russian capital, a few familiar foods were available. Almira Lothrop, for example, bought brown sugar as a treat for her family. It was sold as a rare specialty product, and packaged as a gift item in a nice little round paper box and delicate tissue paper.⁵³ In order to provide their families a taste of home once in a while, the wives of US diplomats also personally cooked some of their favorite treats. Usually, they did it in the summertime during the

51. Hunt, pp. 305-306.

52. K.B., January 10, 1895.

53. Lothrop, p. 47.

break in the diplomatic season, or on holidays. They made cakes and sweets, and mixed various punches.⁵⁴ In December, eggnog was especially popular. It brightened the spirits of those who were spending Christmas away from their homeland and their loved ones. One of the more curious eggnog stories was recorded by the US Naval Attaché Henry T. Allen. In 1894, when Breckinridge arrived in St. Petersburg as a new ambassador, Allen noted the first impression that he produced: “The Breckinridge family arrived and presented a very sorry sight... very plain people. They are not all qualified for the new role that they are about to assume...”⁵⁵ The legation staff doubted that their new boss possessed enough sophistication to make headway in St. Petersburg. However, the Breckinridges invited their staffers for Christmas eggnog that turned out to be “excellent.”⁵⁶ At a card party that followed the ambassador engaged in eggnog mixing again, and it became the highlight of the evening. Allen even wrote down the recipe: “...12 eggs, 1 pint of cream, 12 table spoons of whiskey, 6 of rum.”⁵⁷ The Breckinridges’ culinary skills gradually warmed up the legation personnel to them, causing it to concede that perhaps the ambassador possessed the abilities to make good progress in St. Petersburg’s diplomatic circles. Home cooking proved an effective tool in improving collegiality at the US mission.

During the summers in the second half of the nineteenth century, the ambassadors’ wives often found themselves at the stove. The expansion of railway networks near St. Petersburg in the 1870s caused a boom in *dacha* vacationing. US diplomats followed the trend and regularly rented *dachas* in Finland – within a manageable train ride from the Tsar’s capital. Relocating to a *dacha* for the summer presented a number of challenges. For instance, the chefs and cooks who worked for the US mission typically excluded summer from their contracts: they did not wish to be separated from their families in St. Petersburg for months. The Americans had to hire local Finns. Unfortunately, there was a shortage of real cooks at the Finnish vacation spots, and *dachniks* often ended up using the services of individuals who had only a remote idea about professional cooking. The Allens complained that their local chef was awful. The Breckinridges thought it better to find a “cheap cook” in St. Petersburg who would relocate. However, this man’s culinary creations proved subpar. Once he served such a questionable game dish that the ambassador lost his cool and, with interpretative help from his son and *maître d’hôtel*, demanded an explanation: “Andre [the *maître d’hôtel* – S.P.] faced the cook and asked him in Russian how he dared to serve His Excellency crow for dinner. The chef volubly disclaimed in Russian to Andre and declared never was anything further from his mind than to be guilty of such conduct... The conversation proceeded, waxing hot and confused as the chef vowed that such a thing as serving crow to His Excellency was as impossible to contemplate as it

54. Henry T. Allen Papers Collection, The Library of Congress Manuscript Division. Box 1, 1893-95, *Dora Allen Diary*, 1894, September 22, 1894.

55. Henry T. Allen Papers Collection. The Library of Congress Manuscript Division. Box 1, 1893-95. *Henry T. Allen Diary*, 1894, October 15, 1894.

56. *Henry T. Allen Diary*, December 18, 1894.

57. *Ibid.*, December 26, 1894.

was to do.”⁵⁸

Since *dacha* meal service could be uninspiring, diplomats’ wives learned to supplement family menus by making tasty American treats. Mrs. Allen and Mrs. Pierce brought cookbooks from the US, and in the summer eagerly exchanged recipes. They personally cooked lunches, as well as snacks for outdoor picnics, and baked for the children. In her diary, Dora Allen recorded both her success stories and mishaps: “In the afternoon made a cake which came to a sad end as the children put their fingers in it and then knocked it out of the window.”⁵⁹ In the 1890s, when these diary entrees were written, cooking remained unconventional for the wives of high-ranking officials in St. Petersburg. However, *dachas* were at a safe distance from high society’s eyes. This allowed the Americans to maintain diplomatic decorum while doing what was necessary in order to make their experience in a foreign land more palatable.

Memoirs, letters, and diaries penned by families of US diplomats in St. Petersburg reveal how representatives of a republic dealt with an immersion into food culture of the Russian autocratic state; how they survived the ordeal by this culture, and what observations about its nature and inner workings they made in the process. One of the more fascinating aspects of these memoirs is the evidence that they provide as to how much food was a part of a social-distinction signaling system. The autocracy expected everyone to fit the image of their rank. Top ranks, starting with the monarch, asserted their belonging to the elite through the extremely elaborate rituals of food consumption. Exquisite menu selections were framed with exclusive table décor and exclusive table-talk (accessible to those who could afford to be bi-or-trilingual). Americans offered great observations on how in St. Petersburg foreign cuisine got incorporated into this setting, and how, in the process, it acquired new meanings. While, in the nineteenth century, fine French cuisine was becoming more mainstream in its homeland, in Russia it served the opposite purposes. For US diplomats, who, by nature of their occupation, had to revolve in the top circles of Russian hierarchy, this emphasis on everything French was challenging to deal with. In order to communicate with their chefs, they often had to get their messages translated first into German, and then from German into French. Those Americans who did not speak fluent French, had to find creative ways to communicate with other guests at the dinner parties. Hosting dinners, with expensive European-made décor, presented a financial burden. US diplomats’ memoirs demonstrate that they managed to adapt to the situation successfully. They resorted to clever methods of saving money, including shopping at the inexpensive antiques dealers’ or shipping table service from the USA. They even advertised American products and food by shipping tableware from the USA, and serving American food at their dinner events. In the summer, US diplomats found respite from the aristocratic etiquette and French food at *dachas*. Away from the eyes of the Russian elite, they diversified their diet by personally cooking American dishes. The experiences of American diplomats confirm historians’ findings that *dacha* vacationing gained enormous popularity in

58. K.B., June 16, 1895.

59. *Dora Allen Diary*, June 12, 1894.

the 19th century because it gave *dachniks* a temporary escape from many societal constrictions. While US memoir writers mostly described dealing with high society, they also provided unique glimpses into the lifestyles of the emerging Russian bourgeoisie that was beginning to change the political and economic landscape of the autocracy. Stories recorded by Americans demonstrate that the Russian “merchant class” was using banquets and dinner parties as a forum for voicing their political interests. The details that reminiscences of American diplomats add to the existing understanding of the 19th-century Russian culinary scene and its broader social meanings, as well as the story of Russian-American cultural interactions, are invaluable, and deserve to be examined by historians in more detail.

About the Author

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