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## Mushrooms, Russia, My History

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*Cliff in boxwood forest near Sochi, Russia, 2015*

**I STARTED SUMMERING** in Russia unexpectedly five years ago when my maternal grandmother Olga died. My mother and I got multi-year visas on our return from the first visit, quickly understanding the pace of paperwork after dipping our toes into the bureaucratic hell swamp that is post-communist Russia. Our goal was to try and sell my grandmother's property in Sochi: a tucked-away house with an outdoor kitchen and a yard with persimmon, apple, and pear trees in the middle of the city. Before she died, I learned her favorite mushroom was the Caesar's Amanita, for which she'd hike into the snow-peaked Caucasus Mountains.

My whole family is from the former Soviet Union: on my father's side, my grandmother is from a small town called Lodeynoye Pole in the

St. Petersburg region, and my grandfather from Belarus. I grew up close with them, and my surviving grandmother Marina shares albums of photographs and stories of my predecessors. She particularly likes to tell me about her father, Alexei, as I remind her of him. My favorite story about him is how every autumn he would save cherry pits and apple seeds to throw in the woods while going mushroom hunting. As a family they'd go on berry-and-mushroom excursions and have big gatherings at home.



*My great-grandpa Alexei near Lodeynoye Pole with his cache*



*My grandmother (far left) and great-grandmother (far right) on their way to cross the Svir River to go mushroom hunting*

Russians' love for mushrooms is no secret. I remember reading *Mushrooms Demystified* for the first time and seeing Arora call Russians "bananas for mushrooms." It's accurate. My step-grandpa would take the first train out of Moscow to the last stop, hunt honeys (*Armillaria* spp.) all day, take the last train back, fill the bathtub at home with his haul, and salt+oil preserve them.

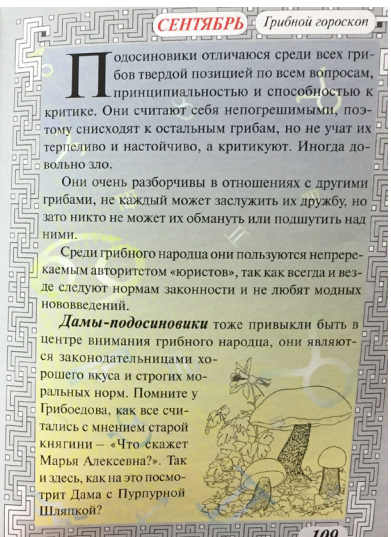
There's an entire detailed pdf available called [Mushrooms Russia and History](#) which pretty thoroughly tries to explain why it is that Russians are particularly fond of fungus. My short answer is that Russia is a harsh environment both climatically and politically: it operated under the feudal system for a long time, and the majority of the population would survive on what it could harvest and preserve seasonally. Mushrooming is so infused into the culture to this day, that there are mushroom horoscope books, that assign a mushroom and consequent character description dependent on your date of birth. Shelves in the equivalent of a 7-11 are stocked with pickled and salted *Suillus*,



Left to right: preserved *Armillaria*, *Suillus*, *Lactarius* at a store. 89 rubles is about \$1.45



L-R: Potato and Porcini Mushroom Vareniki (dumplings) with fried onions and sour cream, Potato salad with cranberry, red onion, parsley, *Armillaria mellea*



"Mushroom Horoscope" from a mushroom store south of Moscow

*Armillaria*, and *Lactarius* species, ones that are commercially unavailable in the States and of interest to a fraction of an audience.

For anyone who hasn't been to Russia, people are generally quite cold to strangers. I had to practice what my stepdad calls my "Moscow face" before each trip, because Americans smile too much, especially happy sun-kissed Californians. So to save some money and dignity (there's basically a 50% price-hike if you smile: dead giveaway you're a foreigner) I would pretend every person who walked by me had done some unforgiveable evil. This got easier after every passing day of dehumanizing interactions in which people in various government roles would exercise their power in not helping us with my grandmother's property, even if the rules they were enforcing made zero sense. People look at you like you're psychotic if you ask for directions, and will often ignore you.

We found ourselves at a birthday celebration of a former KGB (current FSB) officer who was in charge of "making people disappear." I wasn't quite comfortable being there... despite being on a beautiful river with a proper sauna built on the edge, and I slipped away into the woods to find some solace and hoped for mushrooms.

Imagine my surprise when I popped out of

the woods by the river that day, clutching an armful of chanterelles and mysterious boletes that I wanted to ID, when multiple people voluntarily approached me, voluntarily SMILED, and shared STORIES. "I used to go hunt chanterelles with my grandmother! "Oh we still make mushroom soup together; porcini and barley is my favorite" "What will you do with the chanterelles? I love them with dill and sour cream" "I just took my son mushroom hunting for the first time and he found chanterelles!" I even had a couple grandmas eye and berate me for picking "paganki," the ubiquitous term for poisonous mushrooms (though most often used for *Amanita phalloides* which grows there too.)

I stood there shocked, speechless, giddy and glowing, feeling like I had uncovered the great secret to accessing the humanity of the Russian populace.

In a stupor I returned to meet my mother and her childhood friends who we were staying with, made a chanterelle-celeriac savory tart for dinner, and made small watercolor paintings of the velvety red and yellow boletes.

Since then I've tested my theory during successive summer trips by bringing baskets full of mushrooms I'd found onto busrides. Sure enough, people engaged in conversation with me and



Left to right: Red-capped, red-pored bolete, basket of chanterelle, black trumpet, porcini, chicken of the woods, *Amanita rubescens*, *Amanita vaginata*, chanterelle-celeriac tart.

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More Photos from Sochi, Russia

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*Boletus edulis*



Volodya looking up *Amanita vaginata*



*Craterellus cornucopioides*



River ravine lined with fig trees



Illustration from a folk tale with mushroom borders



*Lactarius volemus*

*Lactarius quietus*

offered comments on my basket. Questions were asked, surprise was expressed at the timing of species, sighs were exhaled about looking forward to autumn and their own hunting adventures.

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I was lucky in that my mother's childhood friend Volodya was one of the few people that I met in the Sochi area who held onto a love and interest for being in the woods and cultivating a relationship with it. The Winter Olympics of 2014 and the ever-present secret desire to be more European spurred a lot of the locals into money-oriented city dwellers, commercializing the Black Sea on which the city sits.

Volodya's fingers were stained from harvesting and processing walnuts when we went hunting. He gifted me a jar of sugar-rubbed rose petal jam. He shared pickled "molochai" *Lactarius volemus* with me, and we went and found more.

Many of the species we found were already familiar to me, but I didn't expect to find them all at the same time and place. His son Denis had eyes that were well-attuned to the forest floor, and he found the majority of the mushrooms that day. We found porcini, chanterelles, black trumpet, chicken of the woods, reishi all on one mountain-side. The habitats were different from what I was

used to as well. The porcini were hiding in grass (still associated with oaks), the dominant tree was boxwood, and much of the area was scattered with hazelnut, fig, beech, sycamore, and a variety of conifers. Unexpectedly, when reaching a clearing we would find naturalized tea, *Camellia sinensis*, as there used to be large plantations of it in the Krasnodar region, its northernmost range.

During our outings together, I got more familiar with the Russian common names for mushrooms I already knew. An oyster mushroom is a "veshenka," from the verb "veshat" which means "to hang." "Rogatik" means "little antler" appropriately for coral mushrooms. One that always flustered me was calling *Boletus edulis* "beliy grib" or "white mushroom"—due to its white flesh inside—since to me, a white mushroom is *Agaricus bisporus*. I had many disappointing miscommunications with my grandma about that one. Luckily chanterelles have one that make sense to me; "lesichki" means "little foxes" because of their color. In Russia chanterelles were also colloquially called "Jew's mushroom" because they don't have bugs, which aren't kosher to eat. Species in the genus *Lactarius* are called "mlechniki" from "mlechniy" or "milky, lacteal." A member of the genus *Russula* is a "siroyeshka," or, "raw-eater."

Many mushrooms have names that describe what tree they're found under, such as "podosinovik" —"under aspen" (Aspen bolete/ *Leccinum aurantiacum* or "podberzovik"—"under birch" (Birch bolete/*Leccinum scabrum*)

On one of our visits, my mother and I engaged in subverting many, many laws. We were traveling to a remote village in the Kursk region near the Ukrainian border, where we were strictly forbidden as Americans, given that it was considered a war zone back in 2015. This was the village where my great-grandparents lived, where my grandmother grew up, where many of our relatives were buried. We were going to bring my grandmother's ashes to bury there with them.

When we tried to do the "correct" motions of receiving permission and stamps on our visas from the regional police, and the FSB, both parties kept diverting to the other, not wanting to be responsible for allowing Americans/spies/"vragi" (enemies) into a war-zone. So we slipped through anyway. There's a common saying in Russia that's a real testament to getting through bureaucracy: "Ne imey sto rublei, a imei sto druzey." Don't have a hundred rubles, have a hundred friends. My mom said we'd act "po-sovetski" "like Soviets" and we got a ride to the village Tyetkino from Kursk by a nephew of another childhood friend of my mother's.

We stayed with the husband of my grandmother's sister and his son who still lived there. This village felt like a time-machine. Common transportation was a horse and carriage. Neighbors would greet each other by asking how their strawberry harvest was that season. Every household had a garden with potatoes and 3 kinds of currants and cabbage and would trade various animal products with each other. People would walk their cows near the river. When my mom was little, she'd take her grandparents' goats across the river in a

canoe to graze in the meadows. People bathed and shaved in the river, did their laundry in the river, in the winters when it was frozen over, they'd fish in the river.



Top: Shaving on the river Bottom: Boarding the canoe

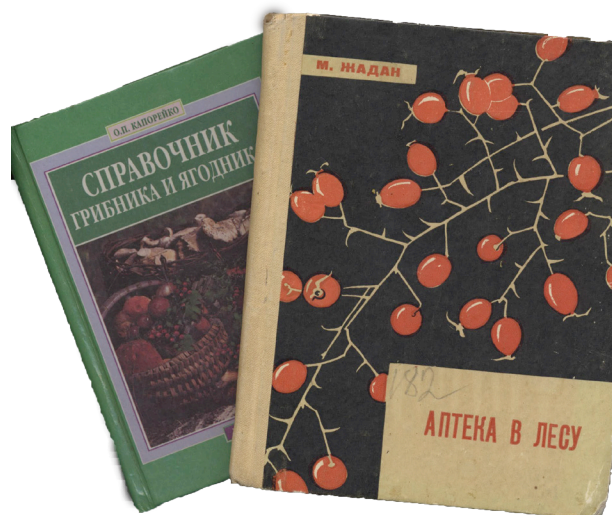
Back in Soviet times, Tyetkino, like many towns in the middle belt of Russia, was a sugar refinery town. Beets were one the most commonly grown crops and were the source of both sugar and rubbing alcohol. Many villagers bemoaned the collapse of the Soviet Union, as this ended their primary work once importing started replacing local industry.

Our relative Nikolay Stepanovich shared various salted and pickled mushrooms from his cellar. He told me about "the most unbelievable honey mushroom harvest" which he was still consuming years later. He lamented that I was there in the summer, not autumn, but gifted me his

field guide to mushrooms and berries regardless. He told me they had wonderful porcini and birch bolete harvests in the area, and shared his salted ryzhiks (*Lactarius deliciosus*) while chatting with me about changing weather patterns. His son spent the twilight hours harvesting stinging nettles bare-handed to feed their chickens and ducks, and teased the feral kittens that hid and played in some of their potato crop.

I was determined to pick wild strawberries (“zemlyanika”) from the forest while there, and had just started to collect a bunch when all the mosquitoes in the area descended upon me and made everything unbearable. I saw several *Suillus* species and stinkhorns from the corners of my eyes as I fled back to the car in defeat.

To compensate, we all took a canoe across the river and spent a whole day picking wild strawberries from the meadows where my mom used to bring goats. The grass was tall and it was easy to hide there for hours plucking ripe berries off their stems, enjoying the sun and the breeze. The meadow variety are different from the forest ones. Both are far more fragrant and flavorful than the cultivated ones; the forest ones are tiny and have a deeper musky note to them while the meadow ones are brighter and sweeter. We made vareniki, thin-doughed dumplings, with the berries and had healthy smotherings of sour cream all over them. We compared red currant, black currant, wild strawberries, but honestly it was hard to say much about them with our mouths so full.



Wild strawberry reprieve

Nikolay Stepanovich's field guides to berries and mushrooms

I wanted to can some jars of jam from the remaining berry harvest to take back to the States and had a fierce argument with Nikolay Stepanovich over the best methods to get a good set on the jam. The knowledge that winter was coming and the jams needed to be shelf-stable for months made him vouch for more sugar, while I wanted less sugar under the pretense of knowing it would all be consumed again in just a few weeks. I left contented with this pastoral experience.

Upon our return to Sochi and attempted exit from the country, I faced heavy interrogation at the airport. The person examining my American passport didn't know what to make of me, and I heard her describe me to an officer as a potential European or a gypsy. I had a large backpacking pack which was uncommon. My clothing and coloring were uncommon. I was asked what I had in my bag "uh... knitting materials, books?" I made the mistake of replying in Russian, which put me under further suspicion. During the terrifying questioning process, I understood with the prompt "do you have family members in the military?" that they thought I was a spy. I did fail to mention that I had checked in an entire suitcase full of homemade fruit and mushroom preserves, dried

mushrooms, fruit seeds, all sorts of contraband. I also failed to mention that I'd just spent a week illegally in a warzone. Ultimately once my entire family history was relayed and the purpose of my visit was clear enough, the officer relaxed and let me through.

Once back home, I had the pleasure of sharing all of my smuggled goods with friends, and got to relive my experiences by way of storytelling and eating.

I'm very grateful for the ways in which my mushrooming experiences in Russia have helped connect me to the land, the people, my family, a common language, heritage, and passion. I'm grateful for all the stories and the "in" I got socially because I was interested in mushrooms, the acceptance and sense of "one of us" expressed because of this shared activity.

I feel my ancestry running through me back in California every time I crouch under a pine or oak to investigate a hump, my hands becoming extensions of my great-grandpa Alexei and my grandmother Olga, and all my other relations that have both depended on this food source and have enjoyed this integrated part of their lives that pulled them to the forest every autumn. •



*Denis and I with chanterelle-eyes in a chamomile field in Khosta*