WE CALL THIS ‘MUSHROOM RAIN’,” says Dima Nikitenko, referring to the fine mist that is falling over the Russian coastal city of Vladivostok. “Mushrooms grow quickly in this weather.” My husband, Tom, and I have just been met at the airport by Nikitenko, a local businessman in his 30s who hires himself out as a driver in his free time. With the temperature near 80 degrees on this sultry summer day, I feel as if I’d arrived in the tropics, not the southeastern corner of the vast land known for centuries as Siberia. Now called the Russian Far East, this region stretches from the North Korean border to the Bering Strait, covering an area of roughly 2.5 million square miles, two-thirds the size of the United States. Vladivostok’s climate veers from warm, muggy summers to frigid, windy winters. The last time I was here was a gild day in late December 1994. In the darkness of that winter morning, with the temperature at five degrees below zero, the 25-mile drive from city to airport took almost two hours, as fierce winds blew snow across the two-lane, potholed road, the same one we’re traveling on now.

“What do you want to do while you’re here?” asks Nikitenko, as he dodges maniciral drivers on the rain-slicked thoroughfare.

“We want to eat and visit the food markets,” says Tom.

Nikitenko regards us curiously in his rearview mirror, no doubt trying to gauge the sanity of two Americans who have traveled halfway around the world to check out grocery stores.

In 1993, when Tom and I landed jobs teaching economics and communications at Far Eastern National University in Vladivostok, the only thing we knew about the city was its location, a lonely pinpoint on the extreme edge of the Russian map. Because of its strategic importance as a Soviet naval base, Vladivostok had been a closed city from 1948 to 1992, off-limits to most foreigners and even most Soviet citizens.

Seven time zones and nearly 6,000 railroad miles east of Moscow, at the nexus of the Russian, Chinese, and North Korean borders, Vladivostok has always seemed remote and foreign to many Russians, far removed from the country’s political and cultural power centers. It wasn’t long ago that conductors on trans-Siberian trains arriving in Vladivostok after their weeklong trip from Moscow used to announce, “Take your time, ladies and gentlemen; you have reached the end of the world.”

Established in 1860 by Tsar Alexander II as a military outpost, Vlad-
vostok soon developed into a commercial port on Russia’s Pacific coast. As it grew, its inhabitants came to include European Russians, native Siberians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Germans, Scandinavians, and Balts, many of whom toiled as soldiers, sailors, and workers in the fishing industry, as well as Chinese, Korean, and Japanese immigrants who came as merchants and seamen. Others arrived as exiles, prisoners, or ex-convicts, often victims of tsarist Russia’s—and, later, the Soviet Union’s—infernal penal system. Today the hilly city that Nikita Khrushchev once compared to San Francisco has a population of approximately 600,000.

When I lived here from 1993 to 1994, Vladivostok was a city in transition. It had only recently reopened to outsiders following the collapse of the Soviet Union, and Chinese traders, American Peace Corps volunteers, foreign profit seekers, and members of the emerging Russian mafia were descending on what was rapidly becoming known as the capital of Russia’s “Wild East.” Many of the people I knew lived in cramped apartments and faced rising crime rates, poor health care, periodic power outages, and a polluted water supply.

More than a decade later, Vladivostok still grapples with those problems, but as I wander through the familiar streets, I am astounded by the changes: I see modern apartment buildings, new roads, sparkling gold-domed churches built after more than 70 years of religious repression, and even a pedestrian zone downtown bustling with teenage girls in designer dresses and spike heels.

Moreover, I marvel at the food. Eateries and grocery stores of all shapes and sizes have sprung up: European-style coffeehouses and pastry shops, sushi bars, upscale restaurants, beer halls, fast-food franchises, and supermarkets featuring an abundance of international specialties, from American peanut butter and German potato cakes to Australian cheddar and tropical fruits.

“Someone bring me the smelling salts!” exclaims Tom as we step inside the bustling First River food market. When we last stopped here, usually for products that were scarce or unavailable in standard state-owned stores, it was an ugly indoor bazaar with concrete walls, rows of gray counters, and surly vendors, predominantly men from the Caucasus who refused to haggle over their high prices for fresh produce. On this visit, automatic sliding glass doors admit us to a brightly lit foyer centered around an oversize marble fountain. The dilapidated tables that used to be strewn around the market’s periphery, by the time Tom and I arrive, I enlist the help of two new acquaintances from the local academic community, who introduce me to Galina Korotkina, a longtime Vladivostok resident with a reputation as a terrific home cook.

At noon on a Sunday, Tom and I reach Korotkina’s sixth-floor apartment in a Soviet-era high-rise. A stylish, sturdily 62-year-old with twinkling eyes and a ready smile, Korotkina leads us into her skimpily refurbished kitchen—complete with food processor, bread machine, two immersion blenders, and a countertop television—and proudly shows me her new, stainless-steel, European-made pots and pans.

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**Recipe**

**Okroshka**

(Chilled Russian Vegetable Soup)

SERVES 6–8

This chilled soup—a mixture of chopped vegetables and beef (okroshka means minced in Russian)—offers a refreshing antidote to the heat of summer. For more information on kvas, the faintly fizzy beverage that forms its base, see page 102.

**Salt**

- 3 medium carrots, peeled and cut into 1/4" cubes
- 2 medium red potatoes (about 1 lb.), peeled and cut into 1/4" cubes
- 16 scallions, white and light green parts only, finely chopped
- 3 large radishes, trimmed and finely chopped
- 1 large cucumber, peeled, seeded, and cut into 1/4" cubes
- 1 3/4-lb. piece boneless beef chuck, trimmed and cut into 1/4" cubes
- 8 cups kvas (fermented rye drink; see page 102) or sparkling cider, chilled
- 1/4 cup chopped fresh dill
- 2 hard-boiled eggs, finely chopped

1. Bring a pot of salted water to a boil, add carrots and cook until just tender, about 4 minutes. Drain and let cool. Put potatoes into a second small pot and cover with salted water; bring to a boil. Reduce heat to medium-low; simmer until tender, about 5 minutes. Drain and let cool. Combine carrots, potatoes, scallions, radishes, and cucumbers in a large bowl. Cover and refrigerate for 2 hours.

2. Meanwhile, put beef into a small pot and cover with salted water; bring to a boil. Reduce heat to medium-low; cover and simmer until tender, 40–45 minutes. Drain and chill. Mix beef, kvas, dill, eggs, and salt to taste with vegetable mixture; stir well. Serve at once with rye bread, if you like.

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Facing page, clockwise from top left: Vladivostok signage; clerks at a fish market; an arrangement of plastic flowers at a dacha outside the city; chilled Russian vegetable soup; a merchant at the First River food market. Preceding page, fresh raspberries, currants, and gooseberries for sale.
HOSPITALITY IS MEASURED IN RUSSIAN HOMES BY HOW LITTLE TABLECLOTH IS SHOWING

Korotkina and her friend Galina Belogubova lay out the ingredients for a multicourse meal for some friends who’ll be coming later in the day—though “multicourse” rather severely understates the matter.

The women begin deftly preparing the dishes for a mammoth spread that will feature 23 kinds of zakuski—the hot and cold appetizers that are the glory of every Russian feast (see “Tasting Tradition,” facing page)—followed by chicken-and-vegetable borscht, a roasted-chicken entée, and a napoleon-like cream-filled torte, garnished with fresh berries.

As Korotkina’s friends show up, Tom and I carry platters of food to the dinner table in the middle of the living room. Soon the table is crowded with a dizzying array of colorful dishes: cold, mayonnaise-dressed salads composed of various combinations of potatoes, beets, cabbage, white beans, and fresh greens; paparotniki (Korean-style fiddlehead ferns sautéed with pork, onions, and garlic); stuffed eggplant rolls; bay scallops sautéed in butter and garnished with boiled jumbo shrimp; baked fresh herring; and blini wrapped around red-orange beads of salmon caviar. The dishes are emblematic of Vladivostok’s culinary char-

cacter. In them, evidence of the city’s Russian heritage (the blini, the cold salads) intermingles with Asian flourishes like the use of Korean chile powder in the baked herring.

After we’ve stuffed ourselves with zakuski, everyone takes a breather before tackling the soup, main dish, and dessert. More of Korotkina’s friends drop by, and we adjust our chairs so that the newcomers can squeeze in. Finally, our hostess emerges from the kitchen, pulls up a chair, and unwinds with a shot of vodka, offering a toast to Tom and me as her honored guests.

Following her lead, we knock back the ice-
cold alcohol in one gulp, but when she imme-
diately proffers a second toast, followed by a third, I try an old trick that I learned at drinking bouts during my last stay in Russia, pretending to finish each shot while really taking only a sip. But Korotkina quickly catches on, looks me in the eye, downs her shot in one go, and then turns her small goblet upside down to show that it’s empty.

Knowing I mustn’t lose face, I follow suit, as the other guests sit on the sidelines, prudently sipping their drinks. Woman to woman, this contest continues for more than an hour,

From left, cups of tea; Galina Tarasova’s grandson Lakov enjoying fried bread topped with salmon roe; the zakuski spread at Galina Korotkina’s home, including caviar-stuffed blini, fiddlehead ferns sautéed with pork, cold and hot sausages, and homemade pickled cucumbers.
TASTING TRADITION

The myriad hot and cold hors d’oeuvres that traditionally kick off a Russian feast are meant to set the stage for the courses that follow, but these tempting appetizers—called zakuski (literally, “little bites”)—often end up stealing the show. Encompassing everything from caviar to cold vegetable salads, zakuski are usually consumed with shots of vodka or sparkling wine.

Some food historians trace the origin of zakuski to the ninth century, when Riurik, a Viking conqueror who ruled over the Slavic people of what is now northwestern Russia, is said to have introduced the custom of smorgasbord-style eating. Others credit the tradition to Tsar Peter the Great, whose travels across northern Europe may have initiated an era of gastronomic invention. Still others contend that the impulse to honor guests with a surfeit of goodies has always been characteristic of Russian hospitality, regardless of social class or historical period.

In the 19th century, when the Russian gentry entertained, they served zakuski on a separate table in one corner of the dining room or in a small anteroom. Diners gathered around and drank shots of vodka interspersed with bites of the artfully arranged offerings. During the Soviet era, such lavish dining was usually confined to well-connected Communist elites, but even when many foods were scarce or prohibitively expensive, humble households presented extensive zakuski spreads for weddings and other special occasions.

In post-Soviet Russia, zakuski remain an integral part of many meals. Some home cooks cover the entire surface of their dining tables with a nearly endless variety of savory and sweet treats. People crowd around, following each bite with a sip or a shot of alcohol, before beginning the cycle again...and again. —S.H.
EATERS OF ALL SHAPES AND SIZES HAVE SPRUNG
UP, FROM PASTRY SHOPS TO SUSHI BARS

interrupted only by flutes of Russian sham-
panskoe (sparkling wine) and ending when
the last bottle has been drained.

The next morning I am certain that the
blood in my veins has been replaced by vodka,
but there's no time to nurse my hangover because
Tom and I are joining yet another Galina—a first
name apparently quite common in the Russian
Far East—on a grocery shopping expedition.

An impish-looking, 60-year-old woman who
works as an English professor and translator,
Galina Tarasova was introduced to me by a
mutual friend. Learning of my interest in
Russian foods, she has arranged to have two of her
nieces, Svetlana Kataeva and Elena Ivaschenko,
cook a Vladivostok family feast for us, showcasing
some of the region's typical dishes.

We head to one of the city's largest food stores,
the Gipermarket V Lazer, a modern emporium
in the heart of Vladivostok. Stocked with thou-
sands of domestic and imported products, it's a
one-stop shopping destination for anyone who
can pay Western prices in a country where the
average monthly income is $395 per person. Ex-
cept for the Cyrillic labels, it looks like an Ameri-
can supermarket. I browse the long deli counter
featuring rotisserie chicken, prepared cold salads,
and heat-and-eat meals, stop at the bakery for
a sample of chocolate ganache-filled cake, and
wander among the wine and liquor aisles select-
ing drinks for the party.

Next, we accompany Tarasova to the city's
beach promenade at Sportivnaya Harbor, where
smaller specialty stores sell fresh and frozen fish.
No festive repast in this maritime regional cap-
tal would be complete without a range of sea-
food dishes, so we load our shopping bags with
whole squid, plump sea scallops, jars of salmon
caviar, and big, rosy kamchatka crab legs—the
local version of alaskan king crab.

Finally, we repair to Kataeva's large, airy
apartment, in a 1980s-era high-rise near down-
town. In the modern kitchen, Tarasova's nieces
work together quietly and efficiently, like a pair
of professional chefs, anticipating each other's
need for this ingredient or that utensil.

At one end of the kitchen counter, Tom
makes his "Vladivostok potato salad", flavored
with crabmeat, salmon caviar, and garlic may-
onnaise (a dish he created when we lived here in
the 1990s), while I shred carrots for a Korean-
style carrot salad, a pungent appetizer seasoned
with fresh garlic and cayeene chile powder.
I've eaten lightly all day because I know
what to expect at a typical Russian meal,
where hospitality is measured by how little
of the tablecloth is still visible after the food
has been set out. As Tarasova's relatives ar-
rive, at least two dozen hot and cold dishes are
placed on a long dining table, including crab
and calamari salads dressed with mayonnaise;
vinegret, a salad of beets tossed with potatoes,
carrots, and peas in vinegar-and-oil dressing;
shredded beets with walnuts and prunes;
keta zapechenaya pod mayonezom, a baked
salmon dish; and small bowls of chopped scallion
greens and hard-boiled eggs to be used as
garnishes.

We dine at a leisurely pace—a taste of this,
abundant meal of the aunts, uncles, and cousins
in this close-knit clan mill around the room
offering toasts, swapping personal sto-
ries about previous family get-togethers, and
laughing at the antics of Tarasova's young
grandson, Iakov, as he devours piece after
piece of thick-sliced baguette, lightly fried in
butter and slathered with salmon roe.

On our last day, Dima Nikitenko, our
driver, invites us to a picnic at his uncle's dacha,
or country house, north of the city. It is not
unusual for city-dwelling Russians of even modest
means to own a dacha outside of town. Many
of these second homes are little more than oversize
garden sheds, with no running water and only
the barest amenities; others are ornate two-story
houses. For an increasingly urbanized Russian
population, dachas are frequently seen as bastions
of a more pastoral, more traditional Russian life.
For Tom and me, visiting one is a chance to enjoy
a few low-key meals and to reacquaint ourselves
with the bounty of the Russian countryside.

By the time we arrive, our appetites have
been dampened by the oppressive heat and
humidity—that is, until we smell the shashlik
(skewered cubes of marinated pork) cooking
over charcoal on a portable grill. Nikitenko's

Facing page, clockwise from top left: open-face herring sandwiches; Korean-style carrot salad; poached shrimp and sautéed scallops; beet and potato salad.
mother-in-law has sent along some of her homemade pirozhki (savory pastries stuffed with potatoes and meat), and Nikitenko unloads the ingredients for okroshka, a cold summer soup of beef, finely chopped new potatoes, carrots, cucumbers, spring onions, and hard-boiled eggs combined with kvass (a lightly fermented beverage often brewed from rye bread).

After a long, lazy lunch, Tom and I go for a walk down a narrow path into the forest behind the little wooden dacha. Like their ancestors, many locals still forage these fertile woodlands for the wild gems that are hidden amid the foliage—ginger, mushrooms, sorrel, horseradish, fiddlehead ferns, berries, and nuts. As we wander and take in the scenery, enveloped by birdsong, I begin to understand why so many of my Russian friends spend their weekdays dreaming of the countryside and the meals that they enjoy there, served on old wooden tables graced with jam jars full of Siberian wildflowers.

In many cases, the striking changes that have taken place in Vladivostok represent advances over the past, but no matter how many shiny new food stores and upscale eateries become part of the city’s landscape, nothing can improve on homegrown tomatoes, cucumbers, and potatoes, fresh from the dacha garden, accompanied by the aroma of shashlyk grilling over a fire. Sometimes progress needs the weekend off, too.


WHERE TO EAT

DEL MAR 42 ulitsa Veroloda Sibireeva (40-56-35; www.delmar.vl.ru). Expensive. Overlooking Golden Horn Bay, this ultramodern eatery offers seafood specialties, including prawn salad, and a platter of scallops and tiger prawns served with spinach sauce.

NOSTALGIA 625 ulitsa First Marskaya (41-05-13; www.nostalgia.ru). Moderate. This intimate restaurant features classic Russian cuisine, including okroshka (vegetable soup with kvas) and pelmeni (a ravioli-like pasta stuffed with salmon).

RESTAURANT VERSAILLES 10 ulitsa Svetlanskaya (26-93-52; www.versailles.vl.ru). Moderate to expensive. One of the city’s finest restaurants, Versailles is notable for its seafood appetizers, including calamari, shrimp, and trepang (sea cucumbers), as well as its fish entrees.

WHAT TO DO

FIRST RIVER MARKET 13 ulitsa Otryakova. Traditional marker stalls are located in the central, street-level hall of this lively enclosed bazaar, with several smaller food stores around the periphery.

GIPERMARKET VLAZER 52-A Okeansky Prospekt. This is one of the city’s largest and most modern grocery stores, with an extensive deli counter.

SPORTVNYAYA HARBOR Vladivostok’s downtown beach and marina are crowded with swimmers in the summer and ice fishermen in the winter and are home to a host of food stands and outdoor cafés, as well as an amusement park and aquarium.