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The best dumplings I ever tasted, courtesy of the Great Soviet Book of Recipes

by Helen Faller

Academics conducting research in Eurasia experience ups and downs. From the seemingly endless process of translating interview transcripts to the constant fear of deportation, research in the region can be a frustrating and stressful experience. But it is also incredibly rewarding. It can leave the researcher with life-long friends and memories. In the following article anthropologist Helen Fuller evocatively describes her experience drinking vodka and making dumplings in Tatarstanin in 2000.

When I was much younger, I spent a year living in Kazan. Located in central Russia, the capital of the Tatarstan Republic, Kazan is most famous as the place where Vladimir Lenin, the USSR's first leader, became a revolutionary after moving there with his family in 1887. More recently, while the Soviet Union unraveled, Tatarstan was at the forefront of a movement to throw off Russian rule. The Tatarstani authorities invested oil and gas revenues in local infrastructure and education, rather than passing on all the money to Moscow. Tatarstan painted roadside fences, built mosques and brought natural gas to isolated villages. And that's why I was in Kazan. I was researching Tatarstan sovereignty.

Winters in Kazan are harsh and long. Starting in September, the sky turns grey and cold rain fills endless, grimy puddles. The temperature soon dips below freezing. Around the New Year, the city is white, crisp and sparkling. Children sled down every available hill and midnight promenades crunching through fresh snow are a regular sight. By mid-May, all this is forgotten as damp flakes drift down onto haggard mud and sunshine's bone-warming heat feels like a far off dream. In June, the trees bud and the grass grows again. By July, the long awaited, balmy summer is in full, glorious bloom.

Old photo of a Tatar family Credit: Helen Faller

That summer, my friend Amina Apakaeva, a schoolteacher and my research assistant, invited me to spend a few days visiting Bauly, the Tatarstani village where she had been born. An ethnic Tatar, Amina was six feet tall, with jet-black hair cut in a bob, olive skin, chiseled cheekbones and piercing grey eyes. She usually dressed in roomy blouses and black slacks that concealed her ample body. Unmarried in her mid-forties – Amina told me her fiancé had died in the USSR's Afghanistan War – her mother repeatedly urged her to have a baby out of wedlock so that someone would look after her in old age.

In July, Amina and I boarded a ship. We sailed down the Volga River on a four-day Tatar cultural cruise that featured claustrophobic concerts in our ship's small hold, lively midnight feasts filled with long-winded, but sincere toasts and on deck disco dance parties that lasted till dawn. The ship was a magical space where Tatar men strode around spontaneously striking up songs on their accordions and everyone was full of camaraderie and joy.

The cruise ended in Ufa, the capital of Tatarstan's neighbor to the east, Bashkortostan. Ufa was originally a fortress built in the 16th century on Ivan the Terrible's orders and more recently the hometown of globally celebrated dancer Rudolf Nureyev, who , like Amina, wasa Tatar. Ufa is a sleepy, pleasant city.

After a few days, Amina and I were ready to move on. We boarded a rickety bus that headed towards Kazan, but stopped along the way in Bauly. As we barreled down a two-lane highway through verdant rolling plains, the graying paint on the roadside fences suddenly became fresh and bright. We had crossed the border into Tatarstan.

Shortly before our trip, Russian President Vladimir Putin had crushed Tatarstani sovereignty. Putin held a closed door meeting with Tatarstani President Shaimiev and Bashkortostani President Rakhimov. He threatened to find Muslim extremists in the region and turn it into another Chechnya if the presidents didn't renounce their claims to self-rule. Neither leader wanted his land to become a warzone where towns resemble bulldozed parking lots, like Grozny has since Putin's intervention, so they complied. Amina and I were blissfully unaware of these events until much later.

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In the early afternoon, just as the air on the bus was getting uncomfortably sticky, we pulled up at a bus station with glass walls. Its design reminded me of vans lined with green shag carpet. Before I could ask, Amina proudly informed me that the bus station was brand new.

Set in a valley on the River Bauly and surrounded by gently rolling grassy hills, the village of Bauly was lush and green, tidy but teeming with gently pruned foliage and wild plant growth. The air was fresh and the sunshine bright and welcoming. Light, high, white clouds wisped across the deep opal sky.

Amina's Uncle Fendas met us outside the station. His bushy white eyebrows stuck out over his bright blue eyes like wild grass. He wore a round black velvet cap on his grey head. When he greeted us warmly in his native Tatar language, the wrinkles on his leathery face cracked into a welcoming, gold-toothed smile. He gave Amina a warm bear hug, but waited until I held out my hand before shaking it heartily with both his own. Not initiating handshaking is one way that Tatar men show respect for women's personal space.

"Tatars tend to like Lenin because he supported the right of minorities to self-determination"

Uncle Fendas led us down a path flanked by solid oak trees with whitewashed trunks. We walked across the town's empty October Square, an open paved space physically dominated by a giant statue of Vladimir Lenin. Lenin statues once stood in most Soviet public squares. The majority were pulled down or vandalized in the 1990s. Not so in Tatarstan. Tatars tend to like Lenin because he supported the right of minorities to self-determination.

Soon we came to the quiet, tree-lined street where Uncle Fendas' small wooden house stood behind a freshly painted white picket fence. The house itself was bright turquoise except for the elaborate window shutters ornamented in stylized, geometrical flower motifs, which were painted white. I could hear birds singing joyfully in the trees.

Green house in Tatarstan Credit: Helen Faller

Amina's Aunt Rushaniya and Cousin Sariya rushed to the door, their faces all smiles. Amina introduced me, again speaking Tatar. Both women had scarves tied around their heads, a sign that they had been busy cooking. Shorter than Amina and sweetly plump, Aunt Rushaniya wore a bright floral printed cotton housedress, while Sariya, a couple inches taller than her mother, wore a plain white t-shirt and knee-length flowered skirt. Aunt Rushaniya's hair hung down her back underneath her scarf in a long white braid. Her daughter's brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail. Both mother and daughter had very prominent cheekbones and slanted, grey-blue eyes. Their gazes were open and calm.

We entered the house's compact foyer and removed our shoes, putting on slippers that the hostesses hurriedly dug out of a disorderly pile of footwear. We carried our bags into our room, which had twin single beds covered in white bedspreads, a large open French window through which an apple tree's branches poked and soothing white walls. The room emanated peace. Stepping along a faded brown runner, we visited a tiny toilet on the other side of the house, afterwards washing our faces and hands in the kitchen sink. Aunt Rushaniya handed each of us a clean white towel embroidered around the edges with red flower designs similar to those on the shutters.

We could hardly turn around in the tiny kitchen, which barely had room for a stove, refrigerator and Soviet pressboard table with three four-legged stools tucked underneath it. Rushaniya invited us into the much larger living room, wallpapered in broad vertical green and silver stripes. We sat on overstuffed cream-colored couches and savored tall glasses of cool well water. At ease among her family, Amina told her relatives about our trip, as we relaxed back into the large couch cushions. I sat up straight with my hands folded in my lap, smiling, in a sign of respect to my hosts. We glanced occasionally at a Mexican telenovela dubbed into Russian playing on the color TV standing in a corner of the room. The actors looked familiar, like Tatars. But the big crucifix on the wall behind the actors looked out of place. Most Tatars are Muslims and would never hang a cross in their home.

"the big crucifix on the wall behind the actors looked out of place"

After giving us a few minutes to rest and drink water, Aunt Rushaniya stood up, turned off the TV and went into the kitchen. From where I was sitting I could see her take two large metal bowls out of the refrigerator. She came back into the living room and placed the bowls on a long wooden table that stood against a wall overlooking the grassy yard. One bowl contained a large ball of dough and the other the filling for small boiled beef dumplings. These are called *pelmeni* in Russian, or in Tatar, *pilman*.

Aunt Rushaniya sprinkled flour on one end of the table and pulled off a chunk of the dough. She skillfully rolled it out with a rolling pin and, using an upturned drinking glass, divided the sheet of dough into circles about two inches in diameter. She rolled up the remains into a new piece of dough, which she rolled out and again cut into circles using the glass. She transferred the dough circles to a floured baking sheet. Her daughter Sariya handed Amina and me each a dough circle.

Wooden gates of a Tatar house Credit: Helen Faller

"Put the filling in like this," Sariya instructed, as she picked up a circle and plopped a healthy tablespoon of filling in its center. Sariya folded the dough over the meat and pinched it closed around the edges, forming a simple half-moon shape. Then she placed it gently on another floured baking sheet. We quickly followed her example and before we knew it, we had filled the sheet with half-moons of stuffed dough.

Aunt Rushaniya went into the kitchen to put a large pot of salted water on the stove to boil. As we worked, Amina talked about how much things had changed in Bauly since she was a kid. She pointed out that the toilet we had used when we arrived was a new addition to the house, having been installed only a decade earlier.

"When I was little," she explained, "Bauly was really a village. The population was small. Now it's officially a town. Since 1997, because they found oil here, the town has developed. You can tell because the main roads are paved."

"Since 1997, because they found oil here, the town has developed. I was curious about the dumplings"

I was curious about the dumplings.

"What goes into the filling?" I asked. Amina's cousin explained.

"Together with my mother's brother, we bought a cow in the spring and fattened it up. Then we took it to the local butcher to have it slaughtered. We divided the meat with my uncle's family. The beef in the filling came from that cow."

"What are the other ingredients?" I asked.

"It's very simple," Aunt Rushaniya chimed in, coming back into the living room. "Besides ground beef, the filling contains onion, salt, pepper, and maybe garlic."

"How do you make the dough?"

"It's a simple egg dough recipe. You can add milk or not."

"Where did you learn how to make these dumplings?"

"From the Great Soviet Book of Recipes," she responded, holding up a tattered volume. When the dough was all used up, a small clump of filling remained.

"That's for Allah," said Aunt Rushaniya. But her daughter picked up the clump and fed it to the German shepherd.

"His name is Michael Jackson," Sariya informed me. "We used to call him Jack." Jack is not a name ever heard in Tatarstan. "One day, Uncle Fendas went to the butcher's shop to ask for bones for the dog. To convince the woman working behind the counter that Jack deserved choice bones, he said to her, 'I have Michael Jackson outside and he needs the best bones you have.' And the butcher gave him wonderful meaty bones. Since then we've called him Michael Jackson."

"I have Michael Jackson outside and he needs the best bones you have"

In the kitchen, Aunt Rushaniya's knife made a staccato sound against the chopping board and the green scent of freshly chopped dill wafted through the air. Rushaniya carefully placed the dumplings into the pot of water and patiently waited with a spoon slotted in hand, pulling them out as they rose to the surface. Steam poured out of the kitchen in dense clouds, carrying strong doughy, meaty aromas. Sariya set the table with small plates, forks, and shot glasses. She put a bottle of the local vodka in the center of the table. Her mother came into the living room carrying an oblong serving plate full of steaming *pelmeni*.

The four of us sat down around the table. The aunt poured everyone a stiff shot of vodka. Her daughter placed a small mound of fragrant dumplings, liberally smeared with sour cream and sprinkled with chopped dill, on each of our plates. Aunt Rushaniya lifted her glass and nodded at me, at the same time wiping the sweat from her brow with the back of her hand.

"The first toast is to our American guest," she said. I smiled. She continued.

"May you be happy and have a lot of success. May you have many children. And may you write a good book about Tatars so that Americans know that we are decent, civilized people, and not the barbarians Russians say we are."

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"Rehmet!" I responded, thanking her. We all inhaled deeply, and holding our breaths, emptied our glasses in a single gulp. As we swallowed, we exhaled and scooped dumplings in our mouths to absorb the vodka. Those were the best dumplings I ever tasted.

Helen Faller, PhD, is a cultural anthropologist who specializes in the Turkic peoples of the former Soviet Union. Her first book Nation, Language, Islam: Tatarstan's Sovereignty Movement describes how the worldviews of Kazan Tatars transformed after the USSR's collapse. The above piece comes from her current project, Silk Road Warrior Women and Homemade Dumplings, which tells stories of Eurasian women and the food they make to sustain their loved ones. More information is available at www.mosaiqa.com or by emailing Helen at helen@mosaiqa.com.