

Alabama feeds Mother Russia

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Alabama families gather together today to give thanks for abundant blessings. A Russian family crowded around a family table 5,500 miles away may also have reason for thanksgiving.

In recent years, Russians have not faced such formidable conditions: an early winter with harsh temperatures, the worst harvest in 45 years and, topping it off, a financial crisis that has caused the ruble to evaporate.

Things look so bleak the West is preparing to ship in food aid. Alabamians' efforts loom large.

Though Russians don't have a harvest festival similar to Thanksgiving, many families are grateful for every night they are able to sit down to a warm dinner. They give thanks that they made it through the day. Hopes for tomorrow are dim.

Many Russian families fret about surviving the winter, feeding their children, persisting on fixed retirement incomes of less than \$50 a month.

Unmentioned in most Russians' prayers but nonetheless part of the process of feeding Russia's millions this winter lives in the foothills of Appalachia. It is Alabama chicken farmers. It is Larry Buckner's Ragland family, among others.

The biggest worry on Buckner's plate today is paying his 13-year-old's tuition at Auburn University in a few years. The worries of Russian families rise and fall with the sun. What will be for dinner tonight? Can more corners be cut? Quick, turn out that light; the electricity bill is going up.

Buckner raises 135,000 chickens every six weeks and some of his birds make their way to Russian dinner tables. They don't fly here, they take a long march to Russia via Gadsden and Blountsville, and on to ports in Mississippi. Much of the poultry crosses the Atlantic by ship, lands in St. Petersburg, traverses the European continent by train and ends its journey in Moscow's outdoor markets.

Some 78,000 Alabamians work in poultry— 78,000 Alabamians helping feed Mother Russia and benefiting from the economic trade.

Spanning 11 time zones, Russia is the main export market for U.S. poultry, and Alabama ranks fourth in domestic poultry production.

The U.S. and Russia have a mutually beneficial relationship when it comes to chicken. Americans generally prefer boneless breast meat and Russians like the juicier dark meat of legs and thighs. (And Chinese like the feet). The chicks grown by Buckner, a supplier for Tyson Foods, are split down the middle. The top half stays in the U.S. and the leg quarters hit the chicken trail to Russia.

Here in Russia, the back ends are fondly called Nozhki Busha or “Bush Legs” for the former U.S. president who first promoted the trade.

Far across the Atlantic and on the far side of Europe is Nina Apollonova, a 73-year-old pensioner. The widow lives in eastern Moscow in a high-rise building. Her efficiency apartment is one room that measures roughly 25 feet by 15 feet, plus a small bath. Black and white photos of her two sons hang above her sagging bed which is a few feet from her dinner table, a few inches from her sofa.

Mrs. Apollonova is energetic and excitable. She talks with her hands. When she laughs, a twinkle shows in her eyes and the light catches the gold caps on her lower teeth.

Cooking is an art for Mrs. Apollonova, and she talks zealously about her recipes for Alabama chicken: broiled birds with prunes, chicken Kiev, and her favorite — a spicy blend from Georgia — the country south of her own.

Back in Ragland, Norma Buckner, Larry’s wife, also loves to cook. Once a month, she drives her Dodge Caravan 50 miles to buy bulk groceries from a warehouse grocery in Birmingham. Every day Mrs. Apollonova walks three miles from market to market looking for the lowest prices. Her cupboard and refrigerator space are limited so she bundles up, pulls on her snow boots and straightens her fur shapka, the hat so many Russians wear to keep out the biting cold.

The petite, muscular grandmother emerges from the summer-like conditions of her apartment into weather colder than Mrs. Buckner’s deep freeze. On this mid-November day, it was already 5 degrees Fahrenheit.

Another household on the receiving end of Alabama’s chicken trail is the Ostashevskaya family. Nikolai, an engineer, drives a white mini-van for Tysons. Nadya, his wife, used to teach English. Now she does odd jobs such as baby-sitting and housekeeping. Nikolai worked in aeronautics until his job was phased out after the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Mrs. Ostashevskaya likes to warm up in the evenings by drinking homemade chicken bouillon. When Ostashevskaya gets home from work around 7 p.m., the couple eats her cooking and settles in for the night.

In Ragland, a similar scene is lived out.

Buckner has taken his last shower of the day trying to rid himself of the smell of his source of income. He and his wife eat the supper she cooks and serves while talking about farm jobs they finished and what needs to be done tomorrow. The kids run in, grab a plate. Larry catches the 10 o'clock news.

In western Moscow, sitting in his cloth-covered armchair, wearing an argyle sweater, Ostashevskaya is also watching the tube. Maybe it's a rerun of "ER" or an old French flick. Though the Russian engineer has attended college, Buckner nets more than 100 times his salary of about \$1,000 a month. But at the end of the day, it really doesn't matter. They are both dog-tired.

The Cold War officially defrosted long ago. Some Americans may still think of Russians as our recent Communist enemy. A few may also recall Russia was our World War II ally before the Stalinist regime soured relations.

The new global economy that exports Alabama chickens to Russia is recipe for a whole new relationship. The poultry industry is not charity but international trade with considerable monetary benefit to producers.

Instead of "us" and "them," Alabamians and Russians are simply trade partners.

The two peoples have sound economic and social reasons to learn mutual understanding. The process begins by recognizing cultural differences and similarities.

Take shopping as an example. While Americans wait for their Sunday newspaper inserts to scope out the lowest prices on food, Mrs. Apollonova joins other pensioners in a weekday morning shopping crunch. Instead of a frozen food section, all goods come that way. Anything left outside in Russia's frigid winters for any time will begin to crystallize.

As two Americans bump into each other in the produce section of Winn-Dixie, Mrs. Ostashevskaya sees friends and interacts with neighbors at her local rynok, or outdoor market. Shopping is a social event — a time to see familiar faces and to find someone to commiserate with about the high prices.

Since Russia's financial system collapsed Aug. 17, some prices have doubled while salaries have generally stayed the same. Many workers are on an unpaid "holiday" as they wait until the economy improves. In some cases, families lost their whole life's savings when the ruble lost its value and banks closed their doors.

At a butcher shop or small grocery store, Mrs. Ostashevskaya shells out her rubles for Alabama Bush legs. No need to stand in line. That's a futile effort. The way to make it to the front is to push your body toward it. The

eager but silent mob doesn't seem to vex the lone clerk behind the counter.

Mrs. Ostashevskaya's food has made it past the cashier. She's on her own to pack it into her personal grocery cart, much like luggage wheels with metal tubing and a leather-look sack. She layers her milk, her cabbage and her Alabama chicken legs.

Had she forgotten to bring her own shopping bag, Mrs. Apollonova or Mrs. Ostashevskaya would have to pay a small sum for a plastic one. No freebies here. Many street vendors sell plastic shopping bags decorated with scenes from a fantasy life — fast cars, jet planes and island vacations.

At Wal-Mart SuperCenter in Oxford, cashiers make brief eye contact asking, "How are you today?" Programmed to the greeting, the typical reply is, "Fine. How are you?" As niceties are exchanged, your shampoo, your new radio and your Alabama chicken legs are double bagged.

Since market reforms took hold in Russia, superstores have begun to open.

Unlike American ones, where discounts are the attraction, hypermarkets in Russia have variety and availability as their selling points. Shoppers are usually the upper middle class, newly rich Russians or Americans and Europeans working in Russia.

A blast of hot air welcomes shoppers to Ramstor hypermarket in Western Moscow. Instead of an elderly people-greeter at the door, the shopper first encounters two men holding mops. The moppers are everywhere. Twenty or 30 of them. Following in shoppers' footsteps. Interested in the muddy slush tracked in. A foreigner looks guilty for causing such work. High unemployment eases the conscience.

Perusing the acres of shelves on Sunday morning at the squeaky clean and glimmering 24-hour store, the director of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Trade Office in Moscow notices the variety of American chicken available. Bob Walker comments that poultry is one of the lowest-priced sources of protein for Russians and before the financial crisis, the U.S. sent 100,000 tons each year. At many shops, beef is twice the price of chicken.

Mrs. Ostashevskaya has done her shopping for the week, and it's time for Sunday-style family activities and Alabama chicken, of course. As Larry and Norma head to Hardin Chapel Bible Church in Ragland, Nadya and Nikolai make for the woods outside Moscow. The couple owns their own cross-country skiing gear and they like getting exercise and fresh air. Speaking for her husband, Nadya says they are Orthodox Christian.

"Nikolai doesn't go to church, but he believes in God in his heart," she says. Married 24 years, with one son, Nadya is the talkative one, and she

is clearly in control.

Larry and Norma have been together since she was 14. They operate by consensus, discussing whether their youngest son, Pike, should switch off the television and practice his trumpet. In their 33 years of marriage, they have four children. Two boys, Pike the surprise, and then a girl.

The oldest two are Jeff, 31, and Bradley, 28. Pike, the youngest son, is 13, and Beth is 10. Kira, the dog, joined the family somewhere along the way.

“I wouldn’t change a thing. I wouldn’t have it any different,” says Mrs. Buckner.

Buckner opted for a good job with the phone company and he was sent away for training for a few months. He missed Norma so much he went home to Ragland and married his sweetheart.

Nadya and Nikolai fell in love when they were a bit older. She was 21, and he was 29. She had introduced another couple and the friends wanted to return her favor. Enter Nikolai and the rest is Russian history.

Together with Riki, a 9-year old Airedale terrier, they have lived in their two-bedroom apartment in Moscow for the past 24 years. Their son, Artem, who is 22, is married and lives with his wife in Moscow.

At the distant dinner tables, both Mrs. Buckner and Mrs. Ostashevskaya serve their husbands the dishes they cooked on their gas stoves. Buckner and Ostashevskaya are seated; the women are scurrying, making sure the chicken doesn’t get too brown.

Western pop music by Sting and the Pet Shop Boys plays in the background of the small Moscow apartment that’s about 350 square feet of living space. The phone rings as the screen-saver on the family computer kicks in. (Ostashevskaya studies English on the computer).

At the 140-acre Buckner farm, the big screen television and microwave hum in the background of the 2,700-square foot house. Beth has connected to a Beanie Baby web site to find out which one she wants to add to her collection of 123 just as Pike, the eager concert and marching band member, practices his scales.

Wine or vodka is poured as dinner is served in Moscow. Little chunks of chicken are layered into a salad. In a second dish, cooks combine finely chopped chicken into a smooth recipe somewhat like paté. This precedes a main course of broiled chicken with prunes and cauliflower, something of a Russian standard.

The Buckners are true Southerners, and they take their chicken fried with a glass of iced tea to wash it down. Norma slices breasts lengthwise, dips them in milk and egg, dredges in White Lily self-rising flour and fries in

a little bit of corn oil. The fixin's? Mashed potatoes and gravy, macaroni and cheese and a green salad dressed by Paul Newman. Pickled vegetables from the family's dacha, or suburban garden house, dress the bird in Moscow.

A toast is made to all present and even to those who aren't. Careful not to set your glass down without drinking or it will bring bad luck. Women, don't sit at the outermost seat or you may not get married for the next seven years. And never leave an empty alcohol bottle on the table. It's a bad sign.

The Ostashevskayas and guests linger at the rectangular lace-covered table in their living room. It is furnished with a long armoire and a framed mirror.

The armoire holds the family's treasures — a flowered china set, pictures and trinkets.

Tea is served Russian style. Leaves are seeped in a small pot and half a teacup of the strong brew is served. Then boiling water from a different kettle is poured on top. The samovar, an ornate container once used for boiling water, is mostly for decoration these days.

Nadya takes a teaspoon full of cranberries in gooey sauce and stirs them into her green tea, called chai. "It's better than sugar," she says, spooning out the warmed fruits when she's finished with her tea.

Next come the candies. Individually wrapped and served in a beveled glass dish, the Russian specialties are crisp and rich. A large box of Western European chocolates is opened at the table. The guests' eyes grow large with anticipation. At the Buckners, it's apple pie for those who have any room left.

For some Russian families not as fortunate as the Ostashevskayas, the meal never progresses to desert. It is chicken — boiled, baked, rolled, stuffed or broiled. It is every last piece, cleaned to the bone, then boiled again to make broth.

And thousands of miles away, Buckner excuses himself from the dinner table. It's time to check on his chicks. The chicks that will soon help nourish a hungry Mother Russia.