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# Food and Negotiation of Identity among the Russian Immigrant Community of Brighton Beach

Elena Starkova  
*CUNY Hunter College*

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Food and Negotiation of Identity  
among the Russian Immigrant Community of Brighton Beach

by

Elena Starkova

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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Date

Marc Edelman

Signature of First Reader

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Date

Leo Coleman

Signature of Second Reader

Having been borne across the world, we are translated men. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling obstinately to the notion that something can also be gained.

Salman Rushdie.

This thesis explores the construction of ethnic identity among Russian immigrants in New York, by examining how it has been negotiated and articulated through foods, including traditional and non-native foods as a vehicle for their shifting identities and for reaffirming their position and participation in mainstream American society.

Keywords: immigration, community, ethnicity, identity, memory, food, Russian immigrants, New York City.

## **Introduction**

This is a study of the gastronomic traditions and customs of a Russian minority group that isn't coherent along dimensions such as language, ethnic and religious background, or even country of origin. The group's members come from the fifteen former Soviet republics and occupy a distinct place in the multi-national city. As a cultural artifact, food provides the tools for negotiating their representations. What food trends reveal the negotiation of ethnic identity in the immigrant environment? How are ideas about which foods are considered an "authentic" articulation of a national culture impacted by other factors in the immigrant context?

Food offers a right to difference, both for a community and for an individual. Food brings sociability and happiness. Food is a point of reference for a community's identity and one of the major factors in the formation of a sense of belonging. Food is a medium to express cultural and social values and a mechanism by which ethnic populations experience, communicate and reproduce (or not) their distinctiveness. But the immigrant environment

also provides opportunities to construct a new self in terms of food and opens the road to negotiate one's own individual identity. Finally, the interplay of other social forces can be seen in the incorporation of different foods into a community's consumption practices.

In this light, ethnic identity is a dynamic construct that evolves and changes in response to contextual factors. It is in constant flux impacted not only by the state's immigration policies, but also by the desires and attitudes of the immigrants. Exploring new food ways while claiming the authenticity of national cuisine becomes not only a means to satisfy curiosity, but a powerful device to manipulate a social position. As a symbol of status, food may be a tool to transform social relations and enact power.

### **Data and Methods**

This thesis is based on interviews and ethnographic observations in the Brighton Beach neighborhood of New York. The interviews offer stories of ordinary community members who spend some time determining their food choices and preferences as a means of coping with the hardship of immigration, celebrating their special events, and self-consciously shifting their identities through newly acquired food practices. A total of eight immigrants were interviewed; five females and three males, 30 to 70 years old, who came from Russia and the former Soviet Union at different times. The group is diverse in the number of years spent as immigrants and the regions of their hometowns. These informally structured interviews were carried out during the summer of 2016. In the interests of confidentiality, I have not used the real names of my informants.

In addition, an ethnographic approach, characterized by participant observation in situ, was chosen because I present a localized ethnic community that is traditionally associated with the Brighton Beach Avenue area. This approach allows me to portray the community

from my own perspective, as a member of it. Reflexivity “involves putting representation into perspective as we *practice* it” (MacDougall 1998: 87).

From this standpoint, I will highlight the food ways that I “see” preserving that, which is “truly Russian”, and contrast, these with food traits that are a result of different social factors: politics, economy, and the newcomers who brought their traditions with them. The resulting cultural conglomerate is the subject of my inquiry, and this essay evokes “experience through the *re-presentation* of experience” (MacDougall 1998:19). This is an effort to re-examine the continuity of the Russian presence in the United States by “knowing by acquaintance” that may help alter the cultural stereotypes associated with “Little Russia.”

### **The Settings**

New York is a world-class city that is a world of its own. We who live here feel a sense of belonging to the place but, paradoxically, it never remains the same for very long. The interplay of political, social, and cultural forces gives its residents a sense of belonging to something bigger than themselves. Its urban life derives its special quality from the many ethnic communities and their lifestyles that add tremendous “color” and diversity. Different immigrant groups “mark” their parts of the city. The claim of a minority community to a particular urban territory is always negotiable.

Located around the Brighton Beach area in South Brooklyn, “Little Russia” is a lively and bountiful neighborhood by the ocean, known for its large ethnic population, which has a distinct character of its own. A casual stroll in the area reveals restaurants, shops, and markets with a unique “Russian flavor,” specializing in the Russian and Eastern European cuisines. Although Brighton Beach Avenue also houses Georgian, Pakistani, Turkish, and Uzbek food enterprises, among others, which resulted from the influx of the immigrants from the former

Soviet republics and the Middle East, it still preserves much of its Eastern European character.

The “celebration” of Russian food on Brighton Beach Avenue is pursued through a specific authentic – and often highly stereotyped - character and atmosphere fostered in the ethnic Russian restaurants. For example, “the pathway [to the “Tatiana” restaurant] is strange and dispiriting: each step takes you to a closer postcard moment of what might happen if certain characters from ‘Boardwalk Empire’ stumbled into the show ‘Russian Dolls’ – gracing most tables multi-layered platters of overflowing seafood and vodka bottles” (Kourlas 2013).

Or:

To walk through the wooden doors of [the “Gambrinus”] restaurant ... is to stumble upon a Neanderthal cave in the middle of a nonstop theme party where the people talk over ice buckets of vodka. The menu is chiefly in Cyrillic ... [a] paeen to what Cold War-era movie villains referred to as ‘Western decadence.’ The broad former-Soviet-bloc heritage is central to “Gambrinus’s” charm (Carter 2014).

A sort of admiration is attached in Russia to the image of Brighton Beach community. But when I visited the place for the first time in 1998, I found myself highly disappointed, wondering what makes the area so popular and attractive to many Russians and how little it resembles Russia. The “national character” has been transformed there, making the community identifiable as “Russian” in a way imagined by its members.

Through the years, my perception of the place has changed and I have gotten closer to answering my questions about the community. I find the location convenient because of the so-called “ethnic markets,” the flamboyantly presented national and non-Russian (but still “Soviet”) cuisines, and the often-low prices. Since then, I run my errands there on a regular basis. However, the place is still enigmatic to me: though it is acknowledged as Russian, it is multifaceted and changing.

My initial alienation from the neighborhood, however, is due to the community conveying a “social sense of foreignness” (Reicher et al. 2006: 248). Visitors approach “Little

Russia” as the immigrant ghetto, often taking pictures on the streets of Brighton Beach. It denotes the culturally distant outsiders within a host society. A clash of authenticity and moral claims, traditions and social activities seems inevitable there. This struggle is about the immigrants versus the political machine of mainstream society.

### **Political Dimensions of Immigration**

As a means to divide and classify people, identity became highly integrated in political relations. By governing identity, and allowing certain “ethnic” expressions of it, the state regulates and ensures its “reproduction and demarcation within a system in which forms of value are unevenly produced, distributed and consumed among the persons and groups whose identities are so constructed” (Kearney & Beserra 2004: 5). The position of an immigrant minority has to be understood through the ways in which the state has authority over “less powerful others”, persuading and coercing the immigrants “into living social identities that originate beyond them; into living, that is, according to ideals and images that enable people to imagine themselves [as] a community, even if their place is one of subordination”, and regulating “the stipulation of inclusion in and exclusion from the national community” (Foster 1991: 237; Shah 2010).

Even though the maintenance of the ethnic boundaries within the city works as a way to control the group, Brighton Beach is also a self-made space of national representation. It is a center of the Russian community since the 1970s when the relaxation of the Soviet Union's immigration policies brought thousands of the Soviet Jews, the so-called “first wave” of immigrants, who settled in the area because it resembles the shores of the Black Sea and probably also because housing was more or less affordable. Invented, contested, transformed, and imagined by the local social actors, although depending on “the state’s power to encompass difference within hierarchy,” the neighborhood became known as “Little Russia”

because it is different from the American society in many ways, including in cultural and social norms and even in its economy, offering cheaper prices and services, yet within the powerful state that is structured to block equal opportunities for immigrant minorities (Foster 1991: 240).

### **Authenticity as Distinctiveness**

Food is a means to contest a space for a minority group that may not enjoy the same position in terms of power and privilege as in the country of origin, yet has significant meaning nonetheless. As a source of identity, it embodies cultural and symbolic values and expresses the categorical distinction between ethnically different immigrants and the mainstream. Excluded from participation in higher status fields of the mainstream society, the immigrants appropriate the Brighton Beach area as a specific neighborhood, where a sense of belonging is generated through articulation of the ideology of authenticity.

Gastronomic actions are a tool through which the group strives for equality with the mainstream society, but not necessarily for homogeneity. The Russian image, nonetheless, has been deeply embedded in the structure of group's food ideology to serve the interests of immigrants. The group's national representation and well-being rests upon on its control over the neighborhood that implies the rights to cultural "maintenance" and the idea of a belonging to the community. The national culinary traditions have been maintained, although to some degree transformed, becoming the important points of reference to a sense of community. The circulation of ethnic foods is a cultural marker of the area that refers back to a more familiar Russian world, while the intentional redefinition of the cuisine is a political action aimed to claim a unique and authentic national identity.

Establishing identity requires authenticity. The quest for authenticity has emerged as a search for identifiable uniqueness. Authentic denotes the "original, real, and pure, [its]



essence and appearance are one” (Lindholm 2008: 4). The discovering of authenticity has emerged from the “superficial conventions of Western civilization” and from the “probing comparison between self and other” as a means to deal with “a generalized anxiety about the ambiguity of social status and representation” (Theodossopoulos 2013: 341). As a way of building and validating identity, authenticity is intertwined with nationalism and contextually adjusted to the political environment.

“Laying claim” to authenticity poses a dilemma. The contradiction emerges from reconstructing “authenticity” on the local level that highlights the notion of imagined communality. There is a sense of illusion in the process of “tradition invention.”

If we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge – which gives rise to profound uncertainties – that our physical alienation from [the country] almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of creating precisely the thing that was lost; that we will create imaginary homelands (Rushdie 1992: 18).

Although the ideology of authenticity is one of continuity with traditions of the past, the quest for authenticity motivates the revision of food practices and their meaning and has been reinforced through the position of immigrants in the host country and re-invented through their entrepreneurial audacity. Rethinking appropriate cultural food inflections for revitalization of the community, the gastronomic representation has been refined in its conception as an authentic Russian enterprise. With an emphasis on the immigrants’ food specialties, it is an ambitious attempt to spark a “newfangled” notion of the national cuisine - the opening of authentic food places as a mode of “giving an objective value to the ethnic food”, transforming an ordinary experience into an extra-ordinary one that looks to the past, “reinventing traditions for a way forward” (Brulotte & Di Giovine 2014: 99; Zukin 2008: 728).

Brighton Beach as an ethnic neighborhood constructed by the local actors is a locus of shared traditions and affective belonging. The “Russian” restaurants and markets are “ritualized” by community members because of their cultural familiarity and the ability to

compete in contested spaces, providing a locale that is evocative of the familiar Russian world. They serve as the meeting places where Russian language is prevalent and the tastes of home are recreated. These “outposts of difference” have been purposefully placed at the core of the visual representation because the national traditions and authenticity are important emotional elements of lived experience that generate feelings of stability and continuity with the past, reflecting the culture and offering a positive means for the construction of identity: eating “ethnic” is being well and being moral (Zukin 2008). For example, even a tiny grocery on Brighton Beach Avenue creates a sense of authenticity in connection to the neighborhood, attracting the shoppers by its name - “Taste of Russia.”

There are a number of “ethnic” markets and restaurants around the Brighton Beach area so that shopping and partying there form a familiar routine for almost every community member. The immigrants freely “perform” their own gastronomic norms and customs there. Certain “authentic” food specialties on the local market are believed to reveal the “Russian soul,” connecting national identity and consumption and playing a central role in the community’s public image as the Russian enclave. For instance, “for the Russian restaurants along the windy Brighton Beach waterfront and the shops lining Brighton Beach Avenue, caviar is not simply a glistening red and black luxury nestled among the hors d’oeuvres. It is a staple of both commerce and the table” (Watson 2006).

*Borscht* is another “soul food” and a “marker” of the Russian authentic gastronomic traditions. This cabbage and beet soup is extremely popular in the country and among the community members. *Borscht* is a “number one” meal for generations of Russians and a symbol of the national cuisine that can be found on the menu at almost every “ethnic” restaurant at Brighton Beach as well as on a dinner table of an ordinary immigrant’s family. It is served hot during the cold season and cold in the summer. Deeply embedded in Russian culinary history and traditions, *borscht* is a favorite theme of native folklore and idioms. This

shared food ideology is an indicator of national “hegemony” of the area and a key to success for “Little Russia”.

All my informants, whatever the number of years spent in the host country, do their shopping at the “ethnic” markets on a regular basis, emphasizing the importance of the “Russian” *magazin* (shop) in the area. They appreciate a sense of home and belonging connected to these places that allows communication within the community. Many of those interviewed shop regularly at the same markets and become acquainted with the sales people and owners. It is a common scene at the Russian stores to see the shoppers chatting with the staff, discussing not only the taste or freshness of the products but also local and Russian politics or simply family news. Food sampling is also frequent as a marker of communal reciprocity and Russian hospitality.

Olga prefers to shop at the “Pekarnya” (the bakery in Coney Island that specializes in fresh baked Russian-style breads) because of the “authentic” taste of the products there – breads and “homemade” salads. Evgenia likes the “Taste of Russia”, claiming the good quality of selling their “Russian” food and emphasizing the extreme importance of ethnic markets in the area, which help her to feel more comfortable.

Another informant, Vitaly, who came from Ukraine more than fifteen years ago, seems fully adapted to the fast food restaurants’ menu. He says: “I was really curious about non-native foods. I tried everything I could, but soon I realized the poor nutritional quality of these meals.” Still consuming American food, he nonetheless prefers to have a traditional Ukrainian or Russian dinner as often as he can, so he shops at the nearest “ethnic” store and finds it suitable to satisfy his needs. His voluntary encounter with the “cuisine of the others” has resulted in an ethnic “comeback.”

Sergey eats “ethnic” most of the time, preferring to shop at the “Gourmanoff” store. The immigrant environment affected his curiosity about non-native foods as well, but over the

years he has “returned” to the authentic meals, although he reports that he avoids traditional “Russian” fatty ingredients.

Although it is constructed and internally complex, authenticity is still relevant for the community. Re-imagining the place as uniquely Russian within the larger, different society and “performing difference from mainstream norms”, the group was able to change an unfamiliar social space into the culturally recognizable and meaningful one known as “Little Russia” (Zukin 2008: 743). From this standpoint, authenticity is challenging because it allows differentiation and restructuring of existing power for the politically vulnerable immigrant minority to assert its cultural authorship. Reinforcing social and cultural distinctions, authenticity plays paramount role in the articulation of identity in connection to the area. Although the process could not be “natural,” “the multi-layered significance of authenticity provides local actors with a tactical advantage: an opportunity to apply their own specific meaning” and redefine the identity as a cultural “version” (Theodossopoulos 2013: 350).

### **Authenticity as a Productive Possibility**

Authenticity is capable not only of providing “consolation to social groups who do not have a realistic chance of gaining rewards from powerful elites or of taking control of powerful institutions” but also offers the possibility to expand the cultural and economic interests of the community (Brulotte & Di Giovine 2014: 112). National heritage is a valuable sign that creates the “cultural bridge” across which the immigrants market and consume foods as the culinary symbols of “Little Russia”.

The community “utilizes” elements of its food ways not only to distinguish itself from but is also to compete with the mainstream society in the “place branding” strategy, creating a space deserving of regards and reciprocity, “contact and encounter, negotiation and transaction,” and attempting to interact as a powerful minority within the American

mainstream (Long 2003: 13). The phenomenon of Russian identity expressed through “authentic” restaurants and “ethnic” food markets plays out in food permutations as an opening for cultural communication and a “dimension of multi-ethnic cross-over exchanges” (Wilk 1999: 248).

The recognizable ethnic choices are not only based on cultural appropriateness but also have consequences for “others”. Once authentic food places become established in Brighton Beach, they shape interactions between the immigrant community and mainstream society, enhancing the dominant group’s appreciation of the Russian culinary traditions. “And today, desires for new flavors, new textures, and new styles of dining send us ... looking for restaurants featuring cuisines we’ve not yet experienced – ethnic cuisines,” food that is “understood as authentic precisely because of its strangeness, its novelty” (Heldke 2008: 334).

Local food enterprises have been promoted as the most authentic destinations – the places to find “real” Russian food. They have been identified as the quintessential expression of national traditions that provides visitors with a clear set of authentic meals, articulating the culinary essence of these places as the “immense pleasure in the enjoyment of cuisine” and as an exploration providing vivid memories (Heldke 2003: 18). These restaurants and markets are prime sites of the designed experience that brings “ethnic” lifestyle into view and where preoccupation with authenticity has been generated by the adaptation to social forces. For instance, the “National” was one of the first “Russian” restaurants in Brighton Beach and today is a successful nightclub and catering hall that attracts non-native visitors by its exoticism and splendor: “There is something bizarrely appealing about feeling like a stranger in a strange land - with so much gold and pomp and circumstance around you, you might embrace the royal St. Petersburg vibe” (National Restaurant, 2016).

Russian restaurants in Brighton Beach offer the imaginative and flamboyant spaces that are intended to be as different as possible from the “official” mainstream culture’s typical

ambiance and embrace both symbolic and economic value as the “economy of sign,” including greater prestige and higher prices. Authenticity appears to have less to do with the taste than with its appearance, and must include the “original” standards, promoting a comparison of ethnic values.

Identifiable cultural space has been constructed through compelling food related myths – Russian folklore provides the place with a heritage status and makes it an ethnic enclave within the multi-cultural city as a timeless and “natural” connection of the community to “their” territory. There is a certain aspect of stereotyping of Russian culture by non-natives, which essentially romanticizes the community’s image, although Russian traditions don’t imply just consuming vodka. These structured connections convey entertainment based on the exoticism and orient the potential non-native consumers to expect certain values, qualities and unusual tastes, which are also generated by the community’s struggle to identify their products as distinctively Russian and encourage possibilities for the group’s development.

Authenticity employs cultural knowledge as a means to construct the social and economic positions in the host country. The introduction of traditional Russian foods into the American milieu is not only an attempt that demonstrates how authenticity can create a space of representation and transform and modify the existing power but also a form of “revelation” of how a food’s value is multiple, shifting, and under negotiations. From this perspective, authenticity is “a risky and inconsistent mode of knowing and marking” that has been recognized as ethnic (Paxson 2013: 211).

The maintenance and insistence on cultural difference is a community’s social accomplishment expressed through food related practices, even though it is merely a symbolic action. However, the process is complex and emphasizes the “inclusion” of the community into the social life of the mainstream, but through the spatial “separation” and exoticism traditionally associated with immigrant minorities. Because authenticity “boxes” “Little

Russia” in with politically defined sets of cultural and economic boundaries “designed” to keep it to its “Russian” way of life and values by not leaving the “borders” of Brighton Beach, the symbolic boundaries work as barriers, locking the community in its space and preventing its members from gaining a significant social and economic footing in the mainstream.

### **Nationalism and Migration**

Integration into a host society is a transformative process of negotiation not only of one’s own identity, but also an adjustment into novel social, political and economic systems. The complexity of immigration involves “crossing [a] variety of social terrains and political constellations” (Anderson 1983: 50). Identity becomes a product of veritable collective imagination that outlines a certain cultural framework but takes place within the state’s ideological options through a complex process of power negotiations, underlying the interplay of nationalism and ethnicity.

Through food-related activities the immigrants adapt to new circumstances by modifying their distinctiveness “in response to identifiable determinants” (Wolf 2010: 390). Yet the self-conscious, self-interested creation of identity becomes not merely a necessity or a choice but a local political claim.

Relations of power ... are the immediate effects of the divisions [and] inequalities; they have a directly productive role, wherever they come into play. Where there is power, there is resistance. Mobile and transitory points of resistance ... [are] effecting regrouping, furrowing across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remolding them. Power relations modified by their very exercise, entailing a strengthening of some terms and a weakening of others, with effects of resistance and counter investments, so that there has never existed one type of stable subjugation (Foucault 1990: 90).

Immigrants’ identity expressed through food becomes a “weapon” and “ecological adaption” of “Little Russia” determined to maintain a community’s own “nation-state identity” and to revalorize its distinctiveness through a symbolic resistance. As a form of collective solidarity, it can be seen as a means to control difference within a host society and

an attempt to reach for political equality and thus presenting some challenge to traditional views of nation-state belonging.

Ethnic groups, then, are distinguished “by the style in which they [are] imagined” across these multiple determinants (Anderson 1983: 49). The power of imaginings, moreover, claims a profound emotional legitimacy, producing affect, exaltation, separation, and non-geographical understanding of political space, and tending to mediate the state’s power and ideology through cultural alternatives expressed in ideas and practices developed by the marginalized groups as “heterodox visions of reality” (Wolf 2010: 390).

Because migration is a physical dislocation from a realm of familiarity, it results in disorientation in an unfamiliar space and can signify a period of important changes in human life. The immigrants belong “to both [countries] and neither simultaneously ... betwixt and between home and host, part of society”, and are living “within and outside” of two different social worlds (Coutin 2008: 123). Uprooted and disconnected from their native countries, the immigrants become socially vulnerable and alien. They often experience stress, losing their cultural norms, customs and social support system – the disturbances associated with displaced people. The anxiety about being an alien and having their culture undermined are among the more problematic factors involved in a shifting identity.

The adjustment to a host country involves a reconstruction of the concept of self and a new sense of belonging, determining not only a shifting identity but also new social priorities on both communal and personal levels.

It is necessary not to be “myself”, still less to be “ourselves”.  
 The city gives us the feeling of being at home.  
 We must take the feeling of being at home into exile.  
 We must be rooted in the absence of place.

Simone Weil.

Immigrant identity has been constructed and reconstructed by complex interactions with the mainstream society along with the interplay of social, political and economic forces and



institutional practices that enable immigrants to identify and act as political subjects and the community to become a self-contained political unit that is able to organize itself as an ethnic entity, highlighting the interplay of nationalism and identity and how they are “produced, reproduced, reinforced and challenged” (Christou 2003: 130).

The significance of immigrants’ actions depends on the contextual logic of their cultural expressions. Culture is used to create a message and afford a set of social possibilities. It serves as “the basis of both *imagined communities* and individual *identities* deemed to be ‘authentic,’” becoming a locus of the community’s efforts for self-determination and exploiting new possibilities and implications (Turner 1993: 419). Insisting on cultural roots implies distinctiveness, providing a capacity for empowerment.

The immigrants claim their culture and their distinctiveness in a novel milieu, and a concern with identity and its construction reflect social changes on both personal and communal levels. The group is active in its struggle for economic interests and addressing of social needs, maintaining “Little Russia” through the communal food-related practices and representing and conditioning the Russian image of the area as a small “polity” inside the large multi-cultural city.

### **Multiple Facets of Food**

Culture is a means to validate a belonging to the collective and to provide the immigrants with a sense of meaningfulness, offering some ways to manage suffering. In this light, food has emerged from a cultural, moral, and social matrix. There is no culture on Earth that doesn’t develop at least some culinary traditions. Every element of cooking and food consumption is an articulation of culture. As a reference to space, it is a dynamic and contextual phenomenon - a mode of relation “between a person and the world, forming one of fundamental landmarks in space-time” (Holtzman 2006: 363). As a reference to the past, it is a historically constructed locus of ethnic identity. As an essentially human activity, it is a

symbolic statement about social order. As a substance providing physical nourishment, food is a mode of communication that presents different kinds of meaning.

Embedded in culture and symbolic in its dimensions, food gives the immigrants a common profile and becomes a coping mechanism that impacts how they engage with national heritage. Asserting a national distinctiveness, ethnic cuisine and its “rediscovery” and promotion in the immigrant context are a means for constructing and regulating the sense of belonging, maintaining cultural norms and social support, and reducing the stress caused by social isolation in a new environment. It shapes and influence relations among community members, defines the parameters for cultural representations, and becomes a way of establishing a position in a new social environment where it provides a realm of the familiar. “A dynamic, living product,” food is capable of creating social bonds among the community and maintaining cultural difference as a symbol of both personal and group identity (Brulotte & De Giovine 2014: 99).

### **The “Russian” Enclave**

Ethnic identity as a cultural product tends to be stereotyped. Although the immigrant community of Brighton Beach encompasses diverse ethnicities, it has been perceived as the Russian enclave. Food plays one of the paramount roles in shaping the common identity. For instance, the groups of immigrants that come from different parts of Russia and the former Soviet republics at different points of time, speaking languages that are frequently mutually unintelligible (all nonetheless also spoke Russian, since this was taught in all Soviet schools as the official language of the Soviet Union) and eating very different food, find themselves establishing a new shared identity as “the Russians,” partially because the mainstream society bunched them into this undifferentiated category.

A sense of ethnic complexity has been conveyed through the numerous multi-ethnic food enterprises of the area, deploying cuisines as symbols of the heterogeneous group that catalyzes their “Russian” way of living. For example, a new generation of Asian immigrants from the former Soviet republics has begun to arrive to the Brighton Beach area – many attracted to the familiarity of the Russian ambiance. They bring their own food to the neighborhood: *lagman* and *manty*, Asian-style soup and dumplings, which have now joined Russian *borscht* and *bliny* on the local restaurants’ menus.

These new immigrants who don’t belong to the ethnic Russian culture intend to settle among the immigrants, highlighting the social changes in the area. The newcomers connect with people who have been identified as “the same,” forming a community with a shared condition of belonging. A humble social background “marks” the area, giving the impression of an immigrant ghetto, despite the splendid appearance of restaurants and markets such as the “National,” “Gourmanoff” and some other “ethnic places”.

The mixed “Russian” populations of the area generally respect each other’s traditions. They find release for themselves in ethnically varied food styles, which become a medium to transform diversity into the shared home, constructing an alternative social space and a new national identification in order to negotiate the isolating immigrant environment. The blended food styles and ethnically mixed employees make the local stores sites that produce social and economic stability in the community, capable of erasing cultural differences and even ideological disparities. They have “the uncanny ability to tie the minutiae of everyday experience to broader cultural patterns,” structuring “Little Russia” as a single unity (Holtzman 2006: 369).

For example, “King Meats” is a Georgian deli on the corner of Brighton 6<sup>th</sup> Street. Although the store is small, it is popular and usually crowded. The predominantly Georgian staff speaks Russian to the customers, offering advices, helping with food choices, and taking

orders. I have noticed a very friendly atmosphere in this place not only toward its Russian-speaking shoppers but also in the employees' interpersonal communication – there are the Georgian, Russian, Ukrainian, and even Latino workers. The latter, who indicates the community's marginal status as well, have adjusted to the place by speaking a little Russian and by tolerating the rude attitudes of some shoppers.

### **The Past and Nostalgia**

Walking through Brighton Beach is much like traveling through time. Though the “Starbucks” and “Dunkin’ Donuts” are fully integrated in this "old world" ethnic enclave, Brighton retains the taste and feel of an immigrant ghetto - memories find place there, “animating” the social space. An imagined and mythologized national identity framed by the memories of the past as the internalized inputs from “outside” of immigrants’ reality drives desires and affects food choices.

Hot *pirozhki* and other typical “Russian” staples sold on the street, highlighting the symbolic “capacity of food to hold time, place and memory” (Long 2013: 4). There are stands in front of some “ethnic” stores on Brighton Beach Avenue that offer along with *pirozhki* the cheap groceries imported from Russia – packs of macaroni and cookies, juice and honey jars, chocolate bars and candies, canned fish, and varieties of traditional “Russian” grain products to name a few. The locals buy these memorable goods with a great eagerness - the stands are crowded even in cold weather, conveying a sense of the “Russian” way of shopping – the bazaar that is familiar to majority of the immigrants, the comfortable atmosphere that is evocative of *déjà vu*.

The way immigrants practice and conceptualize their food practices – organizing tropes through which a community's members try to recreate the sense of home – can be seen as a way of self-protection and a means to encompass cultural and cognitive dissonance of a novel

environment. Gastronomic ideas from the Soviet and Russian past “celebrate the good times of earlier moments as desirable values and features to continue to shape and respond to the unique circumstances” of the immigrants’ life and reinforce “the specificity of a Russian experience at odds with the encroaching outside world” (Caldwell 2002: 302). Being emotionally significant, food may be passionately embraced by the immigrants because it reflects the shared experiences and memories and mirrors their past lives – both communal and individual.

Sergey, who came from Ryazan, the city in central Russia almost twenty years ago, has incorporated non-ethnic foods into his routine consumption. However, he still prepares his mother’s ethnic “Russian” dinner – chicken with fried potatoes and often canned fish, a marker of food scarcity in the Soviet past. These foods carry the symbolic meaning of home and place of belonging for him. Sergey buys them at one of the “Russian” delis in his neighborhood or cooks them at home when he has time.

Evgenia has eaten an “ethnic” dinner every day over the twenty-three years since she immigrated. “Ethnic” for her is exclusively “Russian” cuisine – the staples such as *zharenaya kartoshka* (fried potatoes) and *seledka* (the salted fish with a specific odor that is highly popular in Russia). “Russian” food for Evgenia is symbolic, carrying a sense of home and conveying memories of her childhood. It reminds her of the summerhouse (*dacha*) near Moscow where her family spent many weekends. Evgenia recalls the particular moments when her father used to ask loudly - to be heard by the neighbors - whether his wife will serve *bliny* with caviar or some other stuffing – as a way to call attention to the family’s prosperity. To offer caviar on a weekend menu was a sign of wealth and social status.

As a typical “ethnic” food my informant has mentioned caviar – the delicacy that is traditionally associated with Russian cuisine. Caviar was very expensive during the Soviet period and wasn’t affordable for the majority of Russians. As a luxury food item, it’s still

served usually on holidays or special occasions. And back to her immigrant present, Evgenia told me: “I invited the guests. I’ll serve *bliny* with *smetana* (sour cream) and *seledka* for them because it is so Russian - I can’t eat American.” Evaluating her ethnic identity in the context of the food practices, she said: “I’m a 100 % Russian.”

Another Moscow-born informant, Olga, spent almost thirty years - more than the half of her life - in New York, but she vividly describes her Russian food-connected memories: the black caviar that her father has bought on the family’s special occasions; the places that were famous in Moscow for their pastries; and her grandmother’s homemade breakfasts – *kasha* (buckwheat groats) with *tvorog* (farmer’s cheese) and tea with *sushka* (a very dried small round piece of bread that has been a traditional national tea dessert for many generations of Russians).

Tatiana’s outstanding food memories connected her with childhood and her mother’s meals – the Kazakh meat dishes that are “nostalgic for the mythic tastes, smells, and textures of [her] rural ‘past’” (Duruz 2005: 53). Born of a Russian mother, but raised in Kazakhstan, Tatiana is an “ethnically mixed” person. Immigrating about six years ago, she proudly displays her ethnic cooking skills. During our interview she pointed to the plate on the top of her refrigerator and declared: “This is the dish I use for a Kazakh meal when I serve the table for my family and guests. It requires a round plate to properly exhibit all the ingredients because the process of cooking this meal is time-consuming, but I always add my ‘love’ as a special ‘ingredient,’ so my guests can enjoy the dinner.”

Despite geographical differences in the home locations of my informants, the symbolic connections with their places of origins are conveyed by their memories of the family life, reproducing their “imagined home experiences” in the immigrant context. The sense of jostling in memory shapes the narratives and presents the moments of reflecting and remembering the “comforting” spaces of the past. These memories include the national

cuisine, resonating with the pleasures of childhood and communal life, emphasizing the “difference as unhomely,” and confronting the “changing streetscape with the nostalgia of loss to embrace it as emblematic of possibility” (Duruz 2005: 56).

In the discourse of nostalgia, an ability to reclaim memories facilitates the community’s “efforts to find a usable past in their quest” for identity (Barker 1999: 101). To confront life in the host country, the home food practices work as the “equipment” to cope with the émigré reality and serve as a self-assured marker of identity and as a divider between the community and the mainstream society. From this perspective, the community’s access to traditional national food via ethnic markets and restaurants is essential to the maintenance of “Russian” identity, facilitating not only a sense of community but also a physical presence of “Little Russia” in the multi-cultural city.

Food is a key to the maintenance of a shared identity that is framed by the host society as “Russian”. It is also a factor in the group’s opinions about their past and in their effort to establish an identity in a particular space to call their own. The past offers a cultural unity, forming the community, helping to celebrate the traditions, and making space for a social linchpin. Actively reinvented, a national past is a ground that “makes sense” and defines the present. The community seems passionate and skillful at displaying its “national character.” This offers “a unique minority stance which is at times more powerful than home identity and a forum wherefrom to speak for [the] community or claim rights” (Cardona 2003: 155).

However, the “politics of nostalgia” do not replicate the homeland in a host country, but instead keep certain national customs and maintain some aspects of the culinary heritage. This can be seen as “positive nostalgia [that] does not necessarily involve the desire to ‘go back,’ but promotes the desire of being there *here*” (Cardona 2003: 152). “Little Russia” is the “boundary project” of the moving individuals. As such, it has been created by using an image-based approach, re-creating the cultural food values and a sense of home “to chart subtle

moments of arrival at, passage through, containment by culinary and cultural borders – moments mediated by a myriad of microencounters within the built environment, as well as by discourses and images of 'elsewhere'" (Duru 2005: 59).

### **Food as Politics**

Eating is what we ordinarily think of as an apolitical act. But the structuring of an eating experience involves power relations. Food as a visual symbol of power/powerlessness can "speak" for social justice and correspond to the development of new possibilities for the immigrant minority. Consequently, a social position of the community and an appropriation of certain foods into its consumption are fully relevant political categories.

Despite the fact that the immigrants from the Soviet Union and its former republics have been living for decades in the Brighton Beach area, they are still "enough outcasts" in their acquired home and their representation rests on social and political activism that is seeking to confront the state's power through various forms of the community organizing, including local food enterprises. From this perspective, the gastronomic choices among the members of "Little Russia" communicate engagement with a new social milieu and become a crucial component that defines the community's identity, secures economic and social stability, and makes sense of a specific cultural environment.

Community members are aware of their "separation" from the mainstream of society as an open acknowledgment of political dependence, although many of them may not realize the social nature of this "separation." While the old generation of Russian immigrants often does not want to know about politics and continue living their "Russian lives," the younger community members are actively encouraging new ideological considerations through their food-related audacity as a process of manipulation of alternatives in a given environment.



The complex problem of belonging to a new society and “fitting in” works out through an interactive process between the immigrant’s community and the mainstream society. The articulation of ethnic food practices takes place through their transformation. For instance, “Gourmanoff,” the “upscale Eastern-European food supermarket”, as its advertisement states, is the recently opened and splendid grocery on Brighton Beach Avenue that underlines the changes in the community. Though conveying the sense of European-ness in its name, “Gourmanoff” has been designed and organized like the “Whole Foods Market,” attracting community members with its “American” ambiance.

Yet it seeks to distance the community members from their Russian origins with an emphasis on spectacle and display. Located in the old theater building, the usually crowded “Gourmanoff” offers the selections of non-native foods, for example, the baked-in-store European-style breads, gourmet pasta similar to those at the “Dean & DeLuca,” while the “Chief’s corner” presents sushi and salad bar along with burritos, and thus expanding the local shopping experience across the ethnic borders, although “paying” homage to its neighborhood roots with the Russian staples – caviar, salty fish, imported from Russia sweets and juices, and freshly made *borscht*.

The multi-cultural food-exchange economy becomes the product of the community’s identity. The opening of new “ethnic” places and offering non-native foods alongside with “authentic” national products signals a kind of adaptation to the immigrant context and an attempt to overcome the structures of community’s space as an endeavor to fulfill the desire for social maneuvering. The “Tashkent” store, which is coming soon to the intersection of Brighton Beach and Coney Island Avenues, is another example of the multi-cultural food economy in Brighton Beach - the billboard advertises the hamburgers and hot dogs along with traditional Uzbek meals and the salad bar. Or the newly opened “Best Buy Food” in the

intersection of Brighton Beach Avenue and Brighton 4<sup>th</sup> Street claims the “international food” in its assortment.

Non-ethnic foods become a cultural “instrument” that has been “absorbed” locally, shaping and re-shaping traditional Russian tastes. The mixed cuisines and modes of shopping – salad bars and indoors and outdoors cafés - signal the culinary influence of the “superior” mainstream and European culinary traditions and a new way the immigrants define themselves. The difference is emphasized as a disjuncture, as an embodiment of a new cultural milieu, as a “divorce” from the conventional national food practices that are associated with traditional Russian moral and social matrix.

It reflects the changes in tastes and demonstrates the meaningful connection within the food consumption and construction of identity that make possible for the group members to think about themselves and to relate to the American society in a novel way. Because food occupies one of the central roles in the development of the community’s representation, it has been regarded both as a national expression and a mediator of the cultural traditions and changes at the same time. From this perspective, the “rates of inclusion” into the active participation within the mainstream imply the notion that satisfies the tastes because food is a means to create a cultural hegemony with “some sense of the depth and stability” (Keil & Keil 2002: 273). As a political action, it implies different degrees of inclusions and exclusions, social boundaries and transactions across them.

### **The Traits: Old and New**

Food is not only contested, but also a variable phenomenon. And food traditions are often invented. The “distinctive character” of the area is a result of the community’s ambiguous “experiment” with non-native food practices and a “mutual effort of sameness and difference, cohering into one performance” that provides an opportunity for a “unique” new

identity, contradicting both cultures - Russian and mainstream American (Appadurai 1988: 18).

A phenomenon of identity probably could be answered taking into consideration “the role of the imagination in social life” (Appadurai 1996: 13). Imagination can confront the boundaries of ethnicity and has a potential to promote new identities. A desire to present themselves as a powerful group inside the mainstream of American society is not self-delusion but rather “a source of cultural permeability and vulnerability, which is a necessary condition for living together-in-difference” (Ang 2001: 69).

The self-promotion of an already excluded community finds expression in the discourse of non-native foods, where the new environment facilitates new tastes, producing a group of consumers characterized by multi-ethnic and westernized tastes and self-conscious about these tastes as “different” from what they would have had at “home”. It combines the sense of refinement, experimentation and elaboration as “the seductiveness of variety”, which cuts across the ethnic and regional boundaries (Appadurai 1988: 17). The “affective coloring” of living in a moment and not being highly influenced by ethnic norms in the intersection of different cultures is a key to shifting identity and a way of “expressing affects” through eating “performances.” Such in-between positioning recognized by the “inescapable impurity of all cultures and the porousness of all cultural boundaries in an irrevocably globalized, interconnected, and interdependent world” (Ang 2001: 4). In fact, some of my informants emphasize the notion that the “Russian-ness” of Brighton is in reality a cultural hybrid rather than an authentic or “pure” enclave.

The community members make sense of what they eat: their eating habits are directed toward concrete goals and modified by the new environment and newly available foods. The renewed immigration-related self-esteem includes a sense of “European-ness” among community members who adopt diverse food choices. While holding true to the favorite

national meals, the dwellers of “Little Russia” draw on foods imported from Europe and locally produced goods, which are traditionally associated with European cuisines.

Different companies were established to satisfy the immigrants’ demand for non-native foods. For example, the “Kiev” is one of the most popular “Russian” bakeries that, however, specialize not only in the traditional Russian-style cakes and candies but also in French pastries. “Gourmanoff Bakery” is coming soon “with a European artisan bakery ... featuring classy macarons, lemon tart, guava cake, Sacher raspberry pastry, and more” (Sheephead Bites, 2017). Another popular distributor for the “Russian” market is “Alex’s meat” that supplies almost every Brighton Beach “ethnic” store with “European styles” of meat products and sausages.

The elevation of some European foods to the status of food-of-power makes a contribution not only to a status of the community but also allow a novel way of a communal shopping. The community displays its political and commercial reach through a visual representation of the supposedly ethnic markets. For instance, the largest “ethnic” stores of the area the “Brighton Bazaar” and “Gourmanoff” offer along with the Russian foods the “exploration” of European food products. For example, a variety of European cheeses are presented at these “Russian” markets - the selections that can be comparable with “Whole Food Market’s” cheese sections or with specialized cheese stores in the city. These are the gourmet “islands,” offering cheeses from pasteurized and raw milk; the cow’s, sheep’s and goat’s cheeses - soft and hard, blue, and brie as well as with different kinds of stuffing – from herbs to truffles – that can satisfy and please even the most sophisticated tastes.

Through the novel consumer experience that emerges from the exploration of European products the community publicly situates itself within an acquired social distinction that has been “expressed, respected, celebrated,” permitting the improvisation of national traditions and “layering” of identity “by aligning themselves with the values and ideas associated with

specific food choices” (Caldwell 2002: 306; Keil & Keil 2002: 87). The incorporation of foods that come from “superior” cultures has been transmitted into a powerful mechanism of restructuring ethnic identity and stabilizing a political position within the mainstream society.

Taste is not entirely objective; it is also a form of social awareness that has been conditioned by the community’s position and relevant to the present differentiation of power, mirroring the different ways of absorbing it. Food ideology represents hierarchy as well. European culinary traditions have been reinforced as gastronomically superior. “European” taste has social status. Continuously negotiated, the process reveals the articulation of power that affects the production of meaning in relation to these non-ethnic products that are “deemed to transcend borders” of a national representation, signifying the dynamics of changing identity as “a sensibility towards cultural transformation” (Christou 2003: 119).

Immigration allows linking different food practices that are resulted in the unusual connections: producing unique food patterns, cosmopolitan taste, as a form of lifestyle shopping is a way to “enlarge” reality. My informant Pavel has Russian origins but grew up in Kirgystan. He still consumes ethnic Russian and Kirgyst food, but his preferences became mixed in the fifteen years since he immigrated. The major cause is availability of non-ethnic products. As examples, he pointed out that the Chinese restaurants are the places where he orders his dinner and that these tasted exotic to him just a few years ago, or the convenience of a morning coffee from the nearest bodega makes his “American” breakfast. Pavel “sees” his identity as “expanded” in the context of his food-related practices affected by the multi-cultural environment. It “blurs” his “Russian-ness” and softens the “borders” of his ethnicity.

Maria recalls her admiration connected to imported American foods and how it affected her desire to taste products labeled “made in U.S.A.” The unfamiliar appearance and taste of these previously unavailable foods have formed a strong connection to the powerful American

culture and influenced Maria's food preferences. She immigrated to New York from Tashkent recently and still retains the desire to "taste everything" American.

Zoya became interested in Korean cuisine and even learned about the food-related cultural practices over just a few years since her immigration, citing as an example the traditional chicken wedding meal that a groom is expected to offer to a bride's family. Zoya was happy to discover Asian supermarkets in Brooklyn because she has "some Korean" ancestry and this ethnic cuisine makes her "feel more Korean," changing the perception of her identity and shaping her new food preferences. The provisioning and cooking are a result of Zoya's changing food tastes significant with the available food choices. It contributes to the entertaining atmosphere of her dinner parties that represent her elaborative non-ethnic cooking creativity. The Korean meals cooked by Zoya carry social status due to the difficulty and unfamiliarity of their preparation. But her family and guests always appreciate its exoticism. She even emphasizes the difference of eating etiquette, finding the Asian food traditions more appropriated.

Olga eats "Russian" food occasionally. There are significant changes in her food ways and practices over the long immigration period – she incorporated sushi, sweet French sauces and some Italian meals and soft cheeses in her routine consumption, pointing out that she was always curious about trying as many non-native foods as possible. "I feel cosmopolitan in the context of my food preferences," she said, "Even Brighton Beach doesn't look Russian to me any more. The people and foods are diverse there – I can't name an essentially "Russian" restaurant. Russian ethnic is just a few food items: kasha, potato meals and some sorts of breads."

But, like many of my informants, Olga always serves a "Russian" dinner for her guests. Maintaining the likes and dislikes, a heightened sense of the culinary background is activated when my informants face something completely different or when the occasions are meant to

be special – family celebrations, guest parties, and the national holidays are “marked” with “Russian” food.

Negation of identity is an illustration of the conscious decisions about how to be Russian through foods or how not to be Russian and what are the appropriate situations to express these stances. Identity here can be an effort to construct a new and more cosmopolitan life-way. It develops from and represents the social processes dependent upon the transformation and negotiation of one’s own food culture. “The result is a sort of synthesis, a reproduction of ‘mine’, which only makes sense with the acquisition of ‘theirs’” (Reiterer 2008: 51).

Although the often challenging and contradictory new social environment works as a way for shifting configurations of identity by providing the availability of different foods, many community members remain living their “Russian lives.” There is a palpable desire and effort to establish better standards of life and a better place of living through maintaining the small self-sufficient “Russian” world inside the alien city.

Culturally appropriated, the habitual way of eating still makes sense for the community members. For instance, for many families the traditional Russian three-course dinner with *borscht* as an appetizer is almost a must. This category of the immigrants is “blind” to non-native foods, buying and cooking exclusively the familiar “Russian.” Taken for granted the “Russian” way of eating is one of the community’s visible traits that have been maintained by the ethnic stores’ assortment.

The power of cultural norms has been expressed through *habitus* (Bourdieu 1984). Though *habitus* is not a fixed category, it is being reproduced by the immigrants, affecting their food choices “without any conscious concentration” (Bourdieu 1984: 20). The social background of the community members plays a profound role in shaping their eating habits. For immigrants from the Soviet Union, the ability to choose is a relatively new experience

because of the USSR's scarcity economy. Their past was characterized by lack of food choices and their food attitudes can be seen as a social remedy against poverty. There are both appreciation and confusion about the extent of choice.

Perhaps, the majority of those who stuck with "Russian" food came from a humble social background and simply lacks the knowledge about other cuisines. They shop for the recognizable brands they used to buy back in the country, while staying ignorant of unfamiliar American, French, Dutch, or Italian products. For example, the cheeses imported from Russia and the former Soviet Republics – even the Polish ones - are always on demand at local "ethnic" stores. Conversely, the unusual appearance of non-native products makes them unacceptable for some shoppers.

For example, "Brighton Bazaar" offers fig and plum cakes along with cheeses at its dairy department. I witnessed a scene when some shoppers look at these products with astonishment and disbelief: the products that are never been common in traditional Russian consumption have been rejected because of their unfamiliar appearance. One of these shoppers assumed that it is a sort of cheese, while looking in doubts at a slice of fig cake. For some, *Roquefort*, for example, is an "abnormal" product with an odor that is impossible to tolerate, as well as some sorts of sheep and goat cheeses. "We've hardly washed away that stinky odor", one of the person told me at "Brighton Bazaar," pointing to the product. The shoppers enjoy the cheap *Rossiysky* (Russian) cheese that is in high demand because the brand even "sounds" familiar.

While acquiring European tastes by conducting "judicious 'raids' across the boundaries of ethnicity", "Little Russia" traditionally has been appropriated for the national cuisine (Duruz 2005: 52). Consequently, newly acquired food habits and the reinforcement of ethnic identity through traditional national consumption are two major aspects of cultural expression for the community members. As the tool for cultural and social empowerment, these are the



ways by which the group operates on a set of gastronomic norms that are related to cultural moralities, local economy, and U.S. politics. The different “angles” of community’s self-fashioning seem as an evaluation and an open promise for social fulfillment and new identity.

### **Discussion**

Immigration is a social process that provides the conditions for defining self in relations to “others”, raising the issues of a national regime of belonging, translation of cultural capital, and constructed nature of ethnic identity. Conceptualizing the self as different from the American mainstream is based on a process of cultural exclusion and tends to maintain the boundaries between the self and “other.” As a result, Brighton Beach has been known as a Russian neighborhood. The immigrants articulate a diasporic national ideology there, reaffirming their position and participation in the mainstream society and linking the community’s affects with its experiences.

“Little Russia” as the immigrants’ space engenders the possibility of blurring the limitations of existing political boundaries. Food serves to recreate and reinforce the image of the community as a cultural enclave within the host society, providing the opportunity for a better and clearer display of the traditional visions of national culture, and a means to create a space for the manipulation and recreation of this image that allows social differentiation and clears the road for power manipulations. Food becomes a medium to express the cultural and social values and a mechanism by which communicate the national distinctiveness, revealing its ideological basis and forming a “durable network” of the community’s self-representation, one that has also resulted in the group’s recognition by the mainstream society. “In a world that marks ethnicity, conceptualizing food as a marker of identity opens up an avenue for the community to gain cultural awareness, freely assert the identity, and aspire to visibility and economic stability” (Paxson 2013: 198).

Because the process takes place in a novel milieu, the revision, negotiation, and renewal of ethnic practices is enunciated in a way intended to be *productive*, not merely reflective. The group creates a unique social stance and its “national character” throughout the culturally appropriate or “authentic” food practices that are traditionally associated with Russian cuisine as well as through newly acquired food habits made accessible by the immigrant environment - the community members’ self-fashioning attempts to present themselves as a powerful immigrant minority by opening “non-ethnic” food enterprises and emphasizing the newly acquired notion of “European-ness” in Brighton Beach. That makes “Little Russia” different from Russia in many cultural traits, including some food practices.

Losing its “Russian-ness” as a substitute for the comfort of the American, European and other non-native gastronomic traditions, the community’s identity, however, becomes negotiable through the national image. The immigrants’ food encounters often aim to make a sense of a new environment or are simply the curious person’s deliberate experiments; still, the many opportunities to “eat across borders” have resulted in multi-ethnic food choices among them, who, nonetheless, continue consuming ethnic food as the “nostalgic” eating style. Such elaboration of characteristics deemed essentially national contributes to the image of Brighton Beach as the Russian enclave. From this standpoint, the space-bounded identity of “Little Russia” reflects social inequalities, nationalism and local activism, while the “newfangled” notion of authenticity becomes a self-advertisement of ethnic distinctiveness, highlighting the ambiguous roles the immigrants play in the multi-cultural environment of the city.

Authenticity offers the possibilities to change the status and “modify” identity, giving “a fairly accurate image of perfect competition or perfect equality of opportunity” (Bourdieu 1986: 241). The difference from the mainstream is used as a strategy for collective action to transform the national cuisine through “a certain functional principle, by which one limits,

excludes, and chooses” in a locus of ethnic uniqueness (Foucault 1999: 90). It determines the social world of the community and its economic strength.

“Little Russia” as an emblematic “alternative playground” rests on the mediated and re-articulated national power expressed through authentic food-related practices, defining the group as the political entity and offering an economic opportunity to promote authenticity. The construction of an authentic space is a community-oriented “project” that encompasses the system of cultural knowledge. The scope of a national representation has been provided by the cultural capital translated from the economic stance of the group, but the self-interested type of identity dictated not only by the economic reasons. Food as a form of cultural capital implies the shared knowledge that reflects, constitutes and reinforces the power and competence of the “stigmatized collective”, while the transformation of economic capital into its social forms requires a concern (Bourdieu 1986).

The rise of ethnic restaurants and markets, offering authentic Russian food in Brighton Beach is a clear example of the community’s awareness of its political dependence on the mainstream and a case when the cultural capital has been converted into its symbolic form. The local food enterprises are representative and emblematic, conveying a sense of distinctiveness from the rest of New York. This “symbolic logic of distinction” is related to the immigrants’ social conditions and can be seen as a strategy for a better positioning and a collective strength of the group, “which receive effective social existence only in and through representation” (Bourdieu 1986: 242, 251).

The identification of the community is tied to “the very logic of representation” and stands for the anticipatory politics of the host country (Bourdieu 1986: 251). It is relational to the community that claims the authority of cultural knowledge about a particular ethnic food. Russian identity has been associated with the spatial boundaries of “Little Russia”, while the immigrants from Russia and the former Soviet Republics have been referred to Brighton

Beach, which does not quite fit with the mainstream norms and values and thus is perceived as ethnic and exotic by the American society. There is a link between identity and the group's space that makes it spatial and political.

Identity has been negotiated with the mainstream in a process of social interaction expressed through food. Russian Brighton Beach has to be understood as an amalgam of a sense of "fitting in" within the American society, while insisting on a cultural difference. Juxtaposed against the mainstream politically and culturally, "Little Russia" is recognized as a cultural enclave – the result of the group's social activism and its ability to present themselves as a unique minority in the multi-cultural social environment. The complex process of fashioning the community – "contesting and accepting values, negotiating power, finding commonality and determining difference, adapting to new conditions, and finding meaning in experience" – has resulted in the "messy" Russian identity (Pesmen 2000: 8). The categories of representations of food, power and identity might be mixed together, but the emphasis on the community's social network is a necessity.

Although the symbolic Russian identification is characterized by the community as an ascription by the host society, the identity and cohesion of the group don't always have clear ethnic boundaries. "Russian" cultural representations have a variety of structural interpretations and adaptations in Brighton Beach expressed through authentic, multi-ethnic, and novel food practices that are constantly in flux in ways that change the immigrants' cultural self. Thus, "Russian-ness" is not the essence of the community, but a means to distinguish a group's membership, especially in the context of immigration, when a part of living experience is defined by the cohabitation with specific "others."

Immigration is a "game" of determining preferences. As a position of representation in the host country, identity is the subjective and often idealized visualization of self. The diversity of experiences of the community members is reflected in forms of identity

construction that requires knowledge about other cuisines and is resulted in “performative acts” articulated through food. While for some of my informants the question of identification is an affirmation of Russian identity, for others it is a result of imagination as an “autonomous” expression of personality through available food discourses and practices. As a personalized social construct, identities of the community members are linked to a variable sense of self that the immigrant environment is prone to create and are apt to accumulation and assimilation, defining cultural values, shaping food practices, and determining a group membership; it is history, rights and obligations vs. an assumed identity.

As the practical change-oriented idea, identity is a contextual social category that remains open to manipulation. The community is constructed from “inside and outside” that makes identity a fluid, multi-dimensional, and a fundamentally flawed concept because the group’s culturally expressed food adaptations are so subject to change. There are multiple alternatives. As a relational category of social order, it is the positional and strategic “temporary attachment” constructed by the community’s discursive applications such as political dependence and social activism expressed through the available food-related practices.

Through references to food, the group expresses its concerns and satisfactions because food is one of the concrete ways in which humans enact culture. Yet it is a multi-layered phenomenon, including social, psychological, physiological, and symbolic dimensions that are culturally constructed. Food is an embodiment of place and an expression of identity, explaining it in the space, novel or habitual but always practical. Food is distinguishable by its incorporation in cultural practices that are “rooted” in space, and as a vehicle for convey a sense of the community and its symbolic values, and for promoting place-based distinction. As an essential human need, food has political, economic, social, and cultural power as a status marker. As a complex cultural artifact, food is saturated with politics. From this

standpoint, negotiation of identity through food often represents just an ethical compromise between reality and illusion: “those who have the power to define identity also have the power to keep us in our place” (Reicher et al. 2006: 259).

### List of Participants:

Evgenia is a native Russian in her early sixties who spent her Russian period of life in Moscow. She immigrated about twenty years ago.

Maria is Russian, but grew up in Uzbekistan. She is a young lady who immigrated recently.

Olga, Moscow-born, has a Jewish father and a Russian mother. Now in her fifties, she spent more than a half of her life in the U.S.

Pavel is in his early thirties. He was born of a Kyrgyz mother and a Russian father. He immigrated from Kyrgyzstan about fifteen years ago.

Tatiana is forty-one-years old. She has a mixed background. Born of a Russian mother and a Kazakh father, she claims Korean and Jewish ancestry as well. Tatiana immigrated from Tashkent six years ago.

Sergey is in his late forties. Ethnically Russian, he came from Ryazan, a city in central Russia, eighteen years ago.

Vitaly is from Ukraine. He is in his early fifties. He spent about twenty years in the U.S.

Zoya is in her seventies. Ethnically Korean, she was born in the Soviet Union and immigrated about fifteen years ago.

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