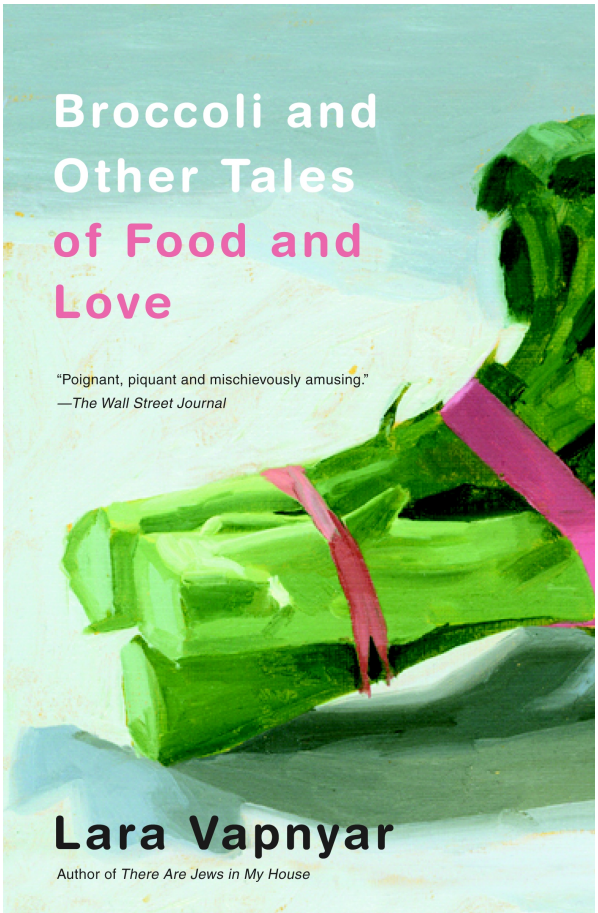
REVIEW

Eat, Love, and Hope: A Review of "Broccoli and Other Tales of Food and Love" by Lara Vapnyar

by Qing Xu



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Food is always absent, or at best making occasional appearances in a stealthy and unobtrusive manner, in the history of literature. Virginia Woolf has remarked on the menial role of food in literature in her essay "A Room of One's Own": "It is part of the novelist's convention not to mention soup and salmon and ducklings, as if soup and salmon and ducklings were of no importance." Yet in Russian American writer Lara Vapnyar's second short story collection, *Broccoli and Other Tales of Food and Love* (2008), all her six stories are centered around the motif of food. Dream-like broccoli, rich and flavorful borscht, crispy puffed rice, juicy and sumptuous meatballs, along with the delicate and tender Sauteed spinach: they not only offer readers a memorable feast for their imaginary palates, but also weave together the bitter-sweet diasporic experiences of the East European immigrant protagonists in those stories.

Often referred to as part of the so-called Fourth Wave of Russian émigrés by literary critics of Russian American literature, Vapnyar herself moved to New York from Russia in the 1990s with her husband. She has published two collections of short stories and four novels.

In the opening story "A Bunch of Broccoli on the Third Shelf," the title food broccoli is used as a symbol for the protagonist Nina's love life. Originally from Russia and immigrated to the US as a computer programmer, Nina has a seemingly peculiar obsession for vegetables, especially broccoli, and her habit of hoarding vegetables begins on her second day in America. She likes their look, their touch, and how their names sound in English. The way Vapnyar describes those fruits and vegetables is poetic and imaginative: tomatoes feel "smooth and glossy like polished furniture," "the light, feathery bunches of dill and parsley," and broccoli that "smelled of young spring grass." Nina buys broccolis every week, but she is too busy to cook them, so they invariably end up being tossed away into the garbage bin. Like those broccolis quietly wilting away in her refrigerator, her marriage is also hitting rock bottom without her realizing it. One day, she finds that her husband, artistic and full of charisma and to whom Nina has always felt inferior, has left her suddenly. Gradually pulling herself together, near the ending of the story she is on a cooking date with a guy she met at her friend Pavlik's weekly party. Having bought everything, from kitchenware to aprons to olive oil and spices, Nina has left out, however, the most important thing — the vegetables. Luckily, they manage to find some still-edible "broccoli mummy" hidden between her shelves, a relic of her vegetable-hoarding habit from her previous marriage. The last scene ends with the two boiling the broccoli and Nina, filled with happiness as she is enveloped by the "warm aroma of broccoli" and hopes for a new love.

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Lara Vapnyar © Masha Rumer

“Borscht” is a heart-warming and slightly comedic tale about Sergey, a Russian carpet installer in New York, who one morning, wakes up “with an erection and a headache.” This acute physical aching is perhaps partly due to the fact that he has been separated from his wife Lenka, who stayed behind in Russia, for almost a year. But this is definitely also a metaphor for his yearning for his homeland, as he feels he is kind of trapped in America to earn more money for his family. Vapnyar skillfully captures the sense of displacement among emigrants. Sergey has kept a snapshot of his wife, however as time goes by, he gradually feels the woman in the snapshot “was not a picture of Lenka but of some other-strange-woman.” Not only has the image of his wife grown increasingly elusive, the idea of Russia itself is also becoming more and more hazy. When Sergey goes to Brighton Beach to visit a hooker to take care of his physical longing, he claims that this area, New York’s “Russian” Neighborhood, to be “the fake Russia, the parody of Russia, that made the real Russia seem even farther away and hopelessly unobtainable.” Sergey’s visit to the hooker, named Alla, turns out to be much more innocent than he expected it to be. They do establish a sort of connection, not on Alla’s bed, but at her dinner table. Like Sergey, Alla is also an immigrant from Russia. She invites Sergey to have freshly boiled borscht with her, and they chat like old friends. For a temporary moment, they forget about displacement and let themselves be healed by the warmth of borscht soup.

“Puffed Rice and Meatballs” is composed of framed stories, some of which are told and others left untold by the Russian immigrant heroine Katya, about her childhood and adolescence. Like many of Vapnyar’s East European immigrant heroines, Katya is equipped with an American lover who has an almost voyeuristic curiosity towards her home country: “Tell me about your childhood. Tell me about the horrors of communism.” To please her lover, Katya carefully selects two childhood anecdotes: her stumbling upon the teacher’s two boys munching away on kindergarten kids’ lunch leftovers, which are nothing but “shrunken meatballs and pale mounds of mashed potatoes”; and her exploration of sexuality with another boy in kindergarten, which leads to her mother’s great outrage and moralistic lectures on chastity. The emphasis on poverty and sexual suppression in the Soviet Union, coupled with titillating details of her sexual encounter, leaves her American lover satisfied. Yet, Katya herself feels a pang of guilt, if not shame, of having betrayed her mother “for a strange man’s entertainment.” The story that she really wants to tell, the one that is truthfully narrated, without selling any stereotypes to the Western eyes, is told to no one but herself. It

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is an anti-Bildungsroman story, in which the teenager Katya, at first self-conscious of her blooming youthful beauty in her new German dress, becomes hurt and disillusioned when she is used by a store staff “as a battering ram” to push a crowd-turned-mob demanding to buy more out-of-stock puffed rice. This whole incident gives her a harsh lesson on the power of food and the fragility of feminine beauty.

“Salad Olivier” is, in a way, an “American Dream” story. The star food of this story is, of course, Salad Olivier, dubbed “Russia's Thanksgiving turkey” by Vapnyar in “Roundup of Recipes” near the end of the book, where she shares homemade recipes of the dishes mentioned in these six stories. This national dish has become the binding thread that weaves through the settling experience of a Russian family in the US in this story. The narrative opens with an animated domestic dining scene back in Russia, where the protagonist Tanya and her extended family are shocked to learn that according to Hemingway’s *A Moveable Feast*, Salad Olivier is made without meat in Paris. Salad Olivier and the making of it have played a big role in Tanya’s childhood and there are many fond memories related with it. However, after they emigrate to the US and during their family’s first American anniversary, the same bowl of Salad Olivier is consumed in a dispirited mood: the family has failed to settle — Tanya’s jobless father holes up all day on the couch and Tanya’s mother nags about Tanya’s inability of finding a suitable boyfriend. After a string of futile and painful blind dates, Tanya miraculously meets her current boyfriend Vadim on the New York subway. Vadim becomes a new member of the family and brings life into it. The last scene of this story ends with the whole family joyfully preparing Salad Olivier together and Vadim assuring them that the salad in *A Moveable Feast* is not Salad Olivier, echoing with the opening.

"Broccoli and Other Tales of Food and Love" by Lara Vapnyar

“Luda and Milena” is typical of Vapnyar’s stories of female rivalries. The story takes place in an English language class held in Brooklyn College. Both Luda and Milena are from Russia, single, and in their 70s, and they vie for the attention of a 79-year-old widower in the class called Aron. The weekly International Feast where students are supposed to bring to class dishes to showcase their home countries’ culinary culture, becomes the battlefield for these two women to win the love of Aron as they realize “the path to a man’s heart ran through his stomach.” The killer dish (in its literal sense for unexpectedly becoming, in a twist of irony, the cause of Aron’s gourmet death) is the Russian meatball, which Lara

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Vapnyar herself admits in the “Roundup of recipes” that “I like Russian meatballs so much that I always thought if I ever wrote a story about two women trying to seduce a man with a certain dish, meatballs would be the dish.”

Unlike the domestic dining scenes portrayed in the previous stories, the last story of the collection, “Slicing Sautéed Spinach,” explores the experience of eating in public. The heroine Ruena, originally from Prague, is now in the US to pursue a PhD degree in, ironically, Women’s Studies, when she is actually going out with an American guy, who unabashedly tells Ruena that he is already engaged with someone else at the start of their relationship. This imbalanced dynamics is represented in her inability to order for herself at a restaurant — intimidated by the complicated items in the menus — each time she goes out with her lover. Since her lover’s “gastronomic preferences were limited to salmon, rice, and spinach,” Ruena chooses spinach, being the only one she can eat. When her lover condescendingly confesses to her that he cannot marry her, she creates a fictitious fiancé, with the name of “Pavel,” to counterattack. The more detailed the image of the fiancé she portrays, the more power she gains in this relationship. The story culminates with Ruena using the mouth of Pavel to express her dislike towards spinach in their last dining out, when she finally finds the courage to walk out of this toxic relationship.

The book is a quick and pleasant read, filled with wry humor and vivid details. It is especially relatable to anyone who has ever lived abroad: the disorientation, the persistent sense of lacking, the longing of a homeland that could only exist in one’s mind, the anxiety of fitting in, the fear of being different, the loneliness, the sadness of being made use of because one is a foreigner, the exasperation at certain stereotypes, the pressure of unconsciously conforming to certain stereotypes and the shame of doing so. One could see oneself reflected in the thinkings, emotions, and sentiments of those characters in the book, struggling with their new life in America. And Vapnyar is kind and optimistic, for she ends each tale in a bright tone: we see families achieving their “American Dreams,” women finding their inner strength and women walking out of toxic relationships, strangers finding solace in each other’s company. This engaging collection of stories about food and love is like a steaming bowl of the iconic Russian soup borscht, cooked with great care and love, and leaves one with warmth and hope.

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