Nineteenth-century Russia was overflowing with gingerbread—gingerbread in all shapes and sizes, figured, sculpted, and stamped. If we’re to believe the authors of an 1838 guidebook, the town of Gorodets alone produced a staggering 360,000 pounds of gingerbread each year. Gingerbreads (prianiki) were highly localized, with numerous cities and towns laying claim to the very best. Vyazma prianiki were bite-sized, the dough so sticky with honey that it had to be pounded with wooden mallets and tempered for days—sometimes weeks—until it reached the right consistency for baking. The honey provided flavor, of course, but it also kept the cookies moist for months. Connoisseurs knew not to bite down on them but to let each cookie melt in the mouth to release the honey’s taste. Supersized gingerbreads from Gorodets were baked in large loaves embossed with designs made by pressing the dough into carved wooden boards. These prianiki could be six feet in length and weigh up to thirty-six pounds. So famous was the gingerbread baked in Tver that it was exhibited at the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial International Exposition, where it appeared alongside inventions by Alexander Graham Bell and Albert Einstein. This
gingerbread won a bronze medal for its many varieties and the originality of its designs.

Russian gingerbread started out simply as a mixture of rye flour, honey, and berry juice that was left to ferment for a few days before baking. Because honey accounted for almost half of the mixture, the cakes were known as “honey bread” until spices were added some centuries later. Increasingly, bakers used gingerbread as a medium to display their artistry. The earliest gingerbread, molded into symbolic three-dimensional shapes, gave way to decorated rectangular loaves. The gingerbread boards used to press patterns into the dough became an important expression of Russian folk art, one that reflected evolving trends in subject matter, from familiar creatures like roosters and sturgeon to complex narrative scenes scored into individual squares that could be broken off. The most extravagant prianiki were decorated with gold leaf.

This progression from simple to excessive, turning the mundane into the fanciful, can be seen as typically Russian. That bakers would lavish so much effort on a food unnecessary for survival is a telling example of the way in which traditional Russian culinary culture responds to hardship—to a harsh climate, repressive regimes, and austere religious strictures—punctuating frugality with flashes of extravagance.

Most of the Russian populace lived their lives on the edge, teetering towards hunger and dependent on an annual harvest that could be destroyed by untimely frosts, drought, hail, insects, or commissars. During tsarist times, the peasants’ lack of capital meant that they couldn’t buy food when their own crops failed, even though grain and bread might be in abundance nearby; in Soviet times, food often rotted in the fields for lack of spare parts.
FIGURE 1. Wooden gingerbread board from the northwestern city of Vologda, made in the second half of the nineteenth century. Incised patterns allowed bakers to create charming designs that appeared in bas-relief on the baked gingerbread. The best boards were made from hardwoods like pear and birch into which fine details could be carved. At baking time the stiff gingerbread dough was pressed into the well-oiled board and then turned out onto a metal sheet before being slid into the oven. The rooster shown here, with its mix of abstract and organic forms, is typical of Russian gingerbread folk art. Collection of the Kunstkamera, Saint Petersburg. © MAE RAN 2021.
for harvesting machinery, or arrived at its destination spoiled because of unreliable distribution systems. Russia has endured far more than its share of famines. In the twentieth century, the worst periods of hunger—the Volga famine of 1921–22 during Russia’s civil war, the brutal collectivization campaign in 1932–33, and the siege of Leningrad during World War II—were caused not by natural forces but by social upheaval and cynical political determinations.

Even in years unmarked by particular calamity, Russian peasants went hungry, or at least went without, and scarcity became the mother of their inventiveness. While ever mindful of the dark historical record, this book celebrates the Russian people’s ingenuity in dealing with hardship and the gustatory delight that can emerge from privation. Adversity for Russians has given rise to a remarkably vibrant repertoire of foods. When I experience the pungency of garlic and horseradish, the intensity of lacto-fermented vegetables and fruits, the sour tang of black bread and the hearty bite of whole grains, the woodsy flavor of mushrooms, and the dusky notes of cloudberries, I am reminded of the Russian ability to preserve and to persevere.

These are the flavors of the land, transformed through fermentation, slow cooking, culturing, and baking into dishes that are greater than their individual parts. If deprived English speakers live from hand to mouth, Russians live “from bread to kvass”—kvass being a fermented beverage made from stale rye bread. Bread, the mainstay of the diet, was considered sacred even into modern times, and none ever went to waste. It was dried and fermented into effervescent kvass or layered as breadcrumbs in a pudding with puréed apples and a little honey. A sought-after confection known as Kaluga dough for its town of origin was
made by simmering stale breadcrumbs in spiced honey syrup. Oats weren’t just boiled into porridge; they were dried and roasted and pounded into a flour called *tolokno* that imparts a nutty flavor to pancakes and dairy dishes, or they were soaked to produce oat milk, more than a thousand years before it became trendy in Brooklyn. Buckwheat groats were mixed with sautéed chanterelles and onions, then garnished with brined lingonberries, in an early Russian version of a grain bowl. Even though the Russian table has been enriched by the introduction of new foodstuffs from both East and West, the flavors that typify the Russian palate have remained surprisingly constant: the tang of cultured dairy products like sour cream and yogurt-like *prostokvasha*, the bite of strong mustard and horseradish, the zing of fermented cucumbers and cabbage. If we think in terms of the anthropologist Sidney Mintz’s “core-fringe” hypothesis—which holds that a culinary culture’s “core,” usually a bland, complex carbohydrate, is enlivened by bold accompaniments that constitute its “fringe”—we can see the inventiveness of ordinary Russians, who elevate core staples of Russian cuisine like rye, buckwheat, and oats with fringe complements of fermented and cultured foods. These additions add piquancy to starches while also providing necessary nutrients, often in the form of the probiotics we like to tout today.

Frequent famines helped to induce a certain fatalism among the Russian people, which in a cruel irony made hunger easier to endure: If the gods will it, our bellies will be full. If not, we’ll manage somehow. After Russia accepted Christianity in 988, the Russian Orthodox church shrewdly turned privation into a virtue by designating nearly two hundred days a year as fast days. Prolonged fasts coincided with the agricultural seasons of greatest