LOOK HOMEWARD From far left: The dining room at White Rabbit; chef Vladimir Mukhin; one of Mukhin's Russian-sourced dishes (top), featuring caviar from Astrakhan; a view of Moscow from White Rabbit; the restaurant's whelk stroganoff uses pork skin and whelks from Crimea.

"WHEN YOU'RE IN RUSSIA, WHY SHOULDN'T YOU EAT RUSSIAN FOOD?"
–VLADIMIR MUKHIN

EPICUREAN TRAVEL

RUSSIA'S FOOD REVOLUTION

How Putin's embargo is reshaping the country's cuisine.

BY JAY CHESHES PHOTOGRAPHY BY OLYA IVANOVA

AT KUTUZOVSKIY 5, Vladimir Mukhin's restaurant that opened in Moscow last year, just about everything on the menu is grown, raised or produced on Russian soil. What the chef doesn't source from the country he makes himself, from jams and pickles to cured meats and cheese. The dining room, with its portraits of dead Russian heroes and plaster replicas of Fabergé eggs, continues the theme. "When you're in Russia," Mukhin says, "why shouldn't you eat Russian food?"

If Mukhin—who has cooked for President Vladimir Putin three times—has emerged as a public booster for top-shelf Russian ingredients, it's an attitude adopted largely out of necessity. Putin's sweeping embargo on most imported foodstuffs—retaliation against Western sanctions following his Ukraine incursion in 2014—has dramatically altered Moscow's fine-dining landscape, dominated, until recently, by luxury imports. Now other chefs have begun to adopt Mukhin's patriotic approach—most out of need, others in a show of Kremlin solidarity—embracing homegrown flavors and ingredients. Changing food mores may turn out to be one of the enduring legacies of Putin's isolationist policies.

When first imposed in August 2014, the ban on meat, fish, produce and dairy from the U.S., EU, Canada, Norway and Australia didn't seem to have much bite (even though Moscow's high-end restaurants have tended to focus on French, Japanese and Italian cuisine). A gray market in re-labeled goods entering via neighboring Belarus and Turkey kept well-heeled diners in foie gras, prosciutto and oysters. And many legitimate importers, fearing the worst, stockpiled ingredients before the embargo began. Some restaurateurs, with a *pied-à-terre* abroad, took to stuffing their suitcases with the Manchego and Roquefort their patrons could not do without.

The real blow came from economic turmoil hitting Russia at the same time as Putin's food ban. With the ruble shedding half of its value against the dollar, Moscow restaurants began to shutter en masse—some 900 of them had closed by early 2015—including an expat-run outpost from French chef Pierre Gagnaire. "We were still getting 90 percent of what we had before the embargo; it was just much more expensive," says New York chef Brad Farmerie, whose Saxon + Parole in Moscow has so far survived. The chef struggled to find alternatives to pricey contraband, before eventually turning to Russian truffles, steak, even burrata. "Nobody had ever talked about local produce," he says. "There was much more cachet to serving imported things."

Last summer Putin extended the ban for a year, adding Iceland, Albania, Montenegro and tiny Liechtenstein to his enemies list. His new minister of agriculture urged consumers to embrace local ingredients and growers to amp up production. "In 10 years, domestic food products ought to replace and squeeze out imported ones 100 percent," he declared at an agribusiness conference. The regime marked the milestone with a public crackdown.

Customs officials, responding to a new "destroy on sight" directive, seized mountains of Dutch cheese, Polish apples and Danish pork—all of it crushed or incinerated like narcotics. In a video that went viral, illicit frozen geese were flattened by a bulldozer in an empty field. Amateur enforcers in T-shirts emblazoned with *Eat Russian* stormed gourmet stores in the capital armed with *Sanctioned Product!* stickers. In Moscow, police raided 17 sites, taking down a vast smuggling ring, while in St. Petersburg a massive bonfire was stoked with German cheese. "Putin, the czar, said, 'Let's enforce this embargo; let it not just be empty words on paper,'" says Pavel Ivlev, an exiled Russian lawyer who heads the U.S.-based Committee for Russian Economic Freedom.

Mukhin, a boyish, 32-year-old prankster with a beard, was better equipped than most Moscow chefs to deal with these restrictions. He was already elevating humble Russian cooking at his flagship White Rabbit, the only restaurant in the country on the World's 50 Best Restaurants list (at No. 23). A recent tasting menu, focused on the southern region along the Black and Caspian seas, featured Crimean whelks served stroganoff style and Abkhazian persimmons topped with cured horse meat.

A few suppliers were similarly well positioned to thrive in the new draconian environment. "The embargo was good for our business," says Andrei Nitsenko, who helped his father launch Primebeef, a brand of corn-fed beef raised in Russia from American stock that they began supplying to Moscow restaurants last summer. The country's locavore movement, still in its infancy, has seen a serious boost. "Everything you can find in Europe we produce," says Maria Zlatopolskaya, spokeswoman for the LavkaLavka chain of food cooperative stores, which sells direct from small Russian farms. "Sometimes it might not be as good, but we started to care about our products two years ago. In Europe they've been cultivating theirs for hundreds of years. Give us time; we'll catch up."

Even as Mukhin uses locally sourced ingredients, he remains committed to sating the Muscovite appetite for foreign cuisines. The chef, who boasts that he comes from five generations of great Russian cooks, travels widely on the food festival circuit, hobnobbing with stars of contemporary cooking in heavily accented but self-confident English. He's been a quick study of international food trends, translating culinary ideas from abroad into a Russian context.

The chef's fast-growing empire with restaurateur Boris Zarkov encompasses 18 places (and counting) in Moscow and former Olympic host city Sochi, where Zarkov has been snapping up failed restaurants on the cheap. Kutuzovskiy 5, modeled on Heston Blumenthal's history-themed Dinner in London, serves modern riffs on very old Russian dishes, from jellied veal to cabbage soup, each listed on the menu with its year of origin (some dating back to the 16th century). Last August, Mukhin opened Chicha, the only restaurant in Moscow devoted to Peruvian cuisine, with Russian-inflected dishes like sea bass ceviche with smoked cream cheese and Nikkei sushi rolls with turnip sauce on top. "In Moscow nobody knows Peruvian food," he says. "As long as it tastes good, we can do what we want."

At White Rabbit he hosts a weekly "gastronomic performance," inspired by culinary spectacles like Ultraviolet in Shanghai. A recent show, devoted to the 150th anniversary of *Alice in Wonderland*, featured Cheshire Cat "hypnopops" made from red wine gelée and an edible croquet ball filled with strawberry cream. "Lewis Carroll only traveled one time," says the chef, "and he went to Russia."

Putin, who is expected to continue the embargo well beyond next summer, has been urging his citizens to become self-sufficient. In a recent address to parliament he called for a big push in the country's organic farming sector. "Russia," he said, can become "one of the world's largest suppliers of healthy, ecologically clean, quality foods." Though the black and gray markets continue to thrive underground, Mukhin, like most Moscow chefs, has found alternatives to even the most coveted imports. He's proud of his Crimean truffles, Siberian shellfish and that "brilliant" new corn-fed Russian beef. "We have an amazing cheese from the Volga that's like Parmesan," he says. "Not the same, but very good!"●