



T-Bone Whacks and Caviar Snacks: Cooking with Two Texans in Siberia and the Russian Far East

Sharon Hudgins

Tom Hudgins

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The Russian Far East is little known to outsiders, but Sharon Hudgins vividly captures a fair slice of its fascinating food culture in *T-Bone Whacks and Caviar Snacks*. Hudgins and her husband Tom, Texans and professors both, taught in Vladivostok and Irkutsk in 1993, shortly after the end of the Soviet Union and during a time of political and economic transition, and in 2006, when the new market economy transformed shopping, cooking, and traveling.

Part culinary memoir, part travelogue, *T-Bone Whacks* (the chunks of frozen beef that market vendors split off to order with an axe) vividly observes how Siberians cook, celebrate holidays, forage, garden, and preserve traditional foods. Chapters are capped with numerous recipes cajoled from the Hudginses' friends and neighbors and from their extensive travels. Sidebar discussions of cultural tidbits and photographs of markets, vernacular architecture, and cooks at work in their tiny kitchens evoke even more imagery of this distinct region.

Hudgins is a genial guide. Instead of grumping about rolling blackouts (no heat in the midst of winter!), tap water of varying hues and odors, and wacky stoves, she gamely prepares the meals described with winning humor and charm. During both sojourns, the Hudginses lived in brutalist concrete apartment blocks with indifferent elevators; there are memorable tales of epic feasts eaten in friends' improvised dining rooms, their tables groaning with a mosaic of dishes and drinks. Indeed, it seems that the biggest challenge the author faced was soldiering forth after yet another night of heavy eating and vodka.

The Hudginses are adventurous travelers and explored a lot of territory, from wilderness hikes with scientist colleagues to nibbling freshly slaughtered sheep parts with a Buryat family north of Lake Baikal. Though the volume reveals much that is exotic, there is also an underlying message of our shared humanity and the universal pleasures of communal dining. As the book concludes: "Siberians are actually a lot like Texans: Bigger is better, food is friendship, and no guest ever leaves the table hungry."

RACHEL JAGARESKI (May/June 2018)

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