

Gutted Chickens Coming Home to Roast

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Ножки Буша: Bush-era American frozen chicken legs

One of the peculiarities of language acquisition is discovering that you have a pile of words sitting on the Russian shelf in your brain without little strings attaching them to equivalent words on the English shelf. For example, after remodeling my apartment, I have a mental shelf buckling under the weight of Russian construction materials, bottles, cans and tools. Somewhere in the gray attic of my head there might be another dusty shelf with similar junk in English, but the two shelves remain unconnected by translation. Ремонт and repair are totally unrelated.

I've also got untranslated mental pantries for Russian and American food. This works fine — I know what I'm eating — until I'm using a Russian recipe in New York or an American recipe in Moscow and looking for equivalents or substitutions. So I've started to put together a kind of cook's translation guide. It's trickier than I thought: Different traditions make for different ways of talking about food, especially in the meat department.

Take домашние птицы (poultry): курица (chicken), цыплёнок-корнишон (Cornish hen), индейка (turkey), гусь (goose) and sometimes утка (duck) — often called фермерская (farm-raised). You might also be offered бройлер (broiler — that is, a bird up to 12 weeks old) or цыплёнок (a bird that is 8 to 10 weeks old).

In the old days, poultry came whole and the big issue was whether it was потрошёная (gutted), полупотрошёная (partially gutted) or непотрошёная (ungutted). Believe me: Back-to-the-land fantasies end the day you gut a chicken. Today, thankfully, poultry comes cleaned and often precut into грудь (breast), крылья (wings), голень (drumstick), бедро (thigh), offered на кости (on the bone), без костей (boned), or the wildly expensive диетические (skinless, literally “dietetic”).

Boned breast meat is called филе (fillet). Sometimes, especially with индюшати́на (turkey meat), you can choose between малое (small) or большое (big) филе. This distinction, which apparently you can find in Europe but not in the United States, is between the (tougher) large outer fillet (большое) and the (more tender) smaller inner fillet (малое).

At the table, an American host or hostess will ask a guest: “White or dark meat?” Russians sometimes speak of белое мясо (white meat), but they usually contrast it with ножка (leg). Now the concept of тёмное мясо (dark meat) — as, I assume, a calque from English — is used, but it’s unfamiliar enough to require explanation: Это доказательство того, что тёмное мясо, то есть ножки, не менее полезны для здоровья, чем куриные грудки (This is proof that dark meat, that is, legs, are as good for your health as chicken breasts).

In the 1990s, cheap frozen American chicken legs appeared and were quickly dubbed ножки Буша (Bush legs). Later the word окорочка was coined from окорок (beef or pork leg). A plural noun with stress on the last syllable, окорочка first seemed to refer to thighs, but now can refer to whole legs. I thought it was a singular feminine noun and would ask for две окорочки. Wrong. When I realized it was plural, I tried двое окорочек. Ridiculous. A literate cook told me to say: Окорочка — три штуки (Thighs — three pieces). But now Russians are saying: один окорочок (or окорочек), два окорочка.

What’s right? I don’t know. I wait until the butcher asks “Сколько?” (How many?) and reply: Три (three). When in doubt, leave it out.

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