

An Appetizing Menu of Bad Translations

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Салат: salad, lettuce

Not long ago a friend of mine asked why I'd never written a column on Russian menus — or rather their idiosyncratic (read: hilarious, impenetrable, bizarre) translation into English. I told him it was like shooting fish in a barrel. What's there to say except "Don't give your menu to a machine or your wife's sister's best friend's daughter to translate"?

But then he sent me such a spectacularly mistranslated menu that I reconsidered the topic.

Besides, I just had to share.

On this menu, your first choice is: Cold Collations. Say what? Chilled collated papers? Actually, it's холодные закуски — what we call cold appetizers or starters. If you were a very devout Christian or spent your weekends time-traveling to a monastery circa 1459, you might recognize the word collation to mean a light meal on a fast day.

Then you may choose from a subcategory of collations: branded cool snacks, which sound like amazing tidbits seared with a cow brand. They are really фирменные холодные закуски. Фирменный is a troublesome word to translate. In restaurants, it's what we call house or chef's specialty. So these cold appetizers are the specialties of the house.

Russian grammar causes no end of problems when mechanically transposed into English. Закуски под водочку is not snack under vodka. They are appetizers for vodka drinkers. And you shouldn't translate осетрина горячего копчения as sturgeon of hot smoking. That should be hot-smoked sturgeon.

On this menu, you will find all kinds of interesting food: paprika, greens assort, a cheese table, ruleteki from language, calad rukkola, gentile chicken, tried tomatoes, bahed apples, and "song" sauce. They are really serving перец (pepper), зелень ассорти (mixed greens), сырная тарелка (cheese plate), рулетики из языка (rolls of tongue), салат руккола (rugula/rocket/arugula), нежная курица (tender chicken), жареные помидоры (fried tomatoes), печёные яблоки (baked apples), and соус Песто (pesto sauce). Calad, er, салат might be a salad, or might just mean arugula leaves.

For this menu, if the translator or machine couldn't find an exact match, it went with the closest word. It also didn't know what to do with the word подаётся (served with), so it gave us ассорти (assortment) of options. As a result, we might order such delectable dishes as punishment lamb moved with baked by potatoes. That is, каре ягнёнка, подаётся с запечённым картофелем (rack of lamb served with baked potatoes). I don't think the little lamb suffered кара (punishment).

You might prefer roast beef, moved with stalemate from broccoli, which is really постбиф, подаётся с пате из брокколи (roast beef served with broccoli pate). Here the culprit, of course, is пат (chess stalemate).

Or perhaps you'd enjoy fillet a fish dorado (submits with baked by an eggplant). You'd actually be eating филе рыбы Дорадо, подаётся с печёным баклажаном (Dorado fillet garnished with baked eggplant). Or you may wish to try the acrobatic fillet fried move with air by an omelette. They forgot to tell you what kind of fish is going to levitate on your plate. It is филе палтуса жареное, подаётся с воздушным белковым омлетом (sauteed fillet of halibut served with a light, airy egg-white omelet).

The sad thing about this is that the Russian menu sounds pretty interesting, but English-speakers are going to stick to borshch and pelmeni.

Restaurant owners and chefs, hear my plea: Don't give your menu to a machine or your wife's sister's best friend's daughter to translate.

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