

That Cereal Is Greek to Me

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Гречка: buckwheat

As I sat in my kitchen the other day, my eyes rested on a box of the most Russian of Russian grains: ядрица гречневая (whole-grain buckwheat), aka гречка. Odd name, isn't it? It sounds like it's related to the word греческий (Greek).

Assuming that this phonetic association was an inaccurate bit of armchair — or kitchen stool — etymology, I thought I'd look it up. Instead of a quick clarification, I got caught up in a very strange culinary trip involving ancient history, obsolete names and unusual associations.

Hold on to your hats: Russian гречка (also греча, гречиха) really is derived from the word греческий. The grain, which was originally grown in Southeast Asia, found its way into Russia via Greek traveling merchants. Hence it was called греческий злак, cereal from the Greeks.

This might amuse the French and Italians, who call it sarrasin and grano saraceno, the grain

of the Saracens. And in Germany, they know everyone's got it all wrong. There it's called Heidekorn, the grain of the pagans.

Only up north did this traveling grain get a less exotic name: buckwheat, or beech wheat, so called because its triangular shape is reminiscent of the beechnut.

On a culinary-linguistic roll, I decided to check out грецкий орех (walnut) and discovered that the adjective грецкий is indeed an older form of греческий. Yet another Greek import.

But the walnut is also called волошский орех, a name that took a bit more time to decipher. Волошский is the adjectival form of волох, a term used in old Russia to describe, in various centuries, a Celtic tribe that settled in Gaul, Romanians, the peoples living in Wallachia, the Romance peoples of Europe, and Italians.

I can't figure out when in this linguistic evolution the tasty walnut appeared in Russia, nor can I discover whether the two names грецкий and волошский existed simultaneously or consecutively. But in any case, the walnut is "the nut that came from Greek/Italy/one of those places to the west where they speak a Romance language."

Just in case you wondered, fennel apparently took the same route to Russia: Its traditional name is волошский укроп (literally "Romance dill"), although in most supermarkets today it's called фенхель.

The Greeks seem to have left their greatest linguistic mark on Russian in food, but you might hear the Russian version of "beware of Greeks bearing gifts": бойтесь данайцев, дары приносящих.

Данайцы is the ancient Russian term for Greeks and should not be confused with the Danaides, the daughters of Danaus who murdered their husbands on their wedding night at their father's behest. But come to think of it, you should probably beware of those Danaides, too.

Greece and the Greeks also live on in Russia in a phrase from Anton Chekhov's play "Свадьба" (The Wedding) uttered ungrammatically by a Greek confectioner: Это в России ничего нету, а в Греции всё есть! (In Russia there is nothing, but Greece has everything!) Whenever you are astonished by the abundance and variety of something, you can exclaim: Как в Греции! Всё есть! (Just like Greece, you've got everything!)

Гречка has also given the language a few expressions. My favorite is a phrase a friend uses frequently: Гречневая каша сама себя хвалит (literally "buckwheat praises itself"), said of people who immodestly sing their own praises.

But considering the illustrious history of гречка, a little singing is in order.

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