

Q&A: Nostalgia and Need Bring Entrepreneur Home

By [Natalia Krainova](#)

January 31, 2013



Manyenan's home cooked breads are only part of the holistic recipe for making guests feel welcome and fulfilled.

When Yelena Manyenan's husband, Andre, lost his job in Paris, the couple was left with no money, three children to provide for and a mortgage to pay off for a house in Burgundy where they were living.

Andre, a French native and a journalist, was nearing retirement age, while Yelena didn't even speak French. The situation was desperate.

The experience of selling homemade baked goods at a rural market in France led her to open a small hotel in rural Russia that has become a popular retreat for politicians and stars.

The Private Visit guest house, in the picturesque town of Plyos on the Volga River, now offers traditional Russian cuisine and a 19th-century atmosphere, which is created by the design

and the entertainment offered to guests.

Yelena Manyenan

Education

Graduated from a vocational school
in Moscow, received diploma with honors;
certified as a watch assembler.

Work experience

2005-Present — Private Visit guest house
in Plyos, Ivanovo region, owner and general
manager

1994-1997 — Farmers market food seller,
Burgundy, France

1988-1994 — Housewife and mother
in France

Prior to 1988 — Various jobs in Moscow,
including:

Center for Contemporary Arts M'ARS, junior
researcher

A factory producing medical equipment,
metrologist

First Moscow Watch Factory, watch
assembler

Favorite book: "Daniel Stein, Interpreter"
(2006) and "The Green Tent" (2011)
by Lyudmila Ulitskaya; "A Year in Provence"
(1989) by Peter Mayle; Viktoria Tokareva's
novels.

Favorite films: "Household Accounts" (2003)
directed by Tonino Cervi; "The Chef" (2012)
directed by Daniel Cohen.

Hobbies: painting, writing prose.

For Manyenan, dreams nurtured since her childhood in the stagnation of late Soviet-era
Moscow have come full circle.

"Since early childhood, I've dreamt at night that I am living in a beautiful, sunny house. One
morning [in Plyos], I came outside ... and turned around to enjoy the view of this magical
place. For a minute, I was speechless because I realized that ... like in my childhood dreams, I
am looking at my beautiful house, which gives me warmth, comfort and the feeling of calm,"
Manyenan wrote in her memoir.

But back in the 1990s in Burgundy, a depressed Andre sat in his room with his head in his hands and kept repeating, "Wait. I am thinking."

In panic, Manyenan looked around for something to sell. She caught sight of a sack of flour and an idea came to her as a flash.

Their French friends had always praised her baked foods, based on Russian recipes. She could suddenly see in her mind the traditional grocery market in the small French town where their family had always gone shopping on weekends.

Yelena spent the following night baking three baskets of cookies using her grandmother's recipe. The next day, she sold all the treats in 30 minutes for \$300 and received an order for a basket of pirozhki, traditional Russian small pies.

For the next two years, cooking and selling her baked foods at a rural market became Manyenan's exhausting routine. She spent nights in the kitchen and days at her stall, with little time left for sleep. Her husband interpreted for her at the market.

But Russia was always on her mind and part of her brand. To attract customers, Manyenan decorated her goods and the stall with traditional Russian symbols. She attached price tags to her pirozhki in the form of matroyoshkas and placed them in wooden dishes painted in khokhloma style. She also placed a samovar and old wooden toys on her counter.

Her goods were selling well, but the routine and the physical exhaustion bred in her a desire to return to Russia, where she could speak her native tongue and hopefully find a better job.

She gradually persuaded her husband, who had long dreamt of writing a book about the Russian provinces, to move to her homeland. In 1997, she re-emigrated, and two years later they bought a dilapidated house in Plyos.

"At first, we simply enjoyed our lives, throwing our doors open to our many friends, as we were used to," Manyenan, 54, said in an interview with The Moscow Times.

"It didn't occur to us that if we were setting the tea table five times a day, soon we would be faced with the question of how to receive pay for our hospitality," she said.

One of Manyenan's sons suggested that his mother open a mini-hotel because hosting guests, treating them to tasty food and entertaining them was what she did best.

Manyenan was struck by the obviousness of the idea. Within several years, she and her family had turned their run-down house into Private Visit, a cozy hotel and restaurant surrounded by a beautiful garden.

In 2009, Manyenan's hotel won a special award from Ernst & Young as a successful small business, and in 2008 Citi Foundation named Manyenan the best private entrepreneur in the country.

And her clientele reflects the successful effort she and her family have put in. Children's ombudsman Pavel Astakhov, former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin and Russian television host Tina Kandelaki have visited Manyenan's guest house, among others.

Even Dmitry Medvedev has dined at her table several times since he first started visiting Plyos in August 2008.

Her guest house has also become popular with foreigners, who spread the word about her magic.

Manyenan's multicultural experience and international appeal have left her with an intense mix of philosophy and patriotic hospitality, which she expressed in a book titled "Thanks to and in Spite of."

"It depends only on us whether it will be enjoyable for us to live and spend leisure time in Russia," she wrote. "We have to reverse the status quo right now, today, and I am trying to show with my own efforts that our homeland is like our mother. We have only one. We can't replace it, so we have to love it, accept it and take care of it every day."

Manyenan sat down with The Moscow Times to discuss her journey. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: Why did you decide to do business in Russia?

A: I was born in Moscow. My husband, Andre, is a French journalist. We came to Russia in 1997. During the 12 years that we lived in France, I missed my homeland, while Andre had a dream to write a book about Russian rural life. The book was completed, and in the process we took such a fancy to the Volga River's broad expanses that we decided to settle here permanently.

Q: What does it take to make a successful business in Russia?

A: It's like it is everywhere: You have to work day and night and forget about weekends and sleep. For instance, I literally live at work. Sometimes I finish my workday at 3 or 4 a.m.

Hotels and restaurants have their own specifics. The main obligation is to coddle guests and guess even their smallest wishes. We try to work little miracles every day so that we never stop to surprise our guests. I always think about how to develop myself to remain interesting not only for those who come to visit us for a first time but also for regular guests of our house. They call someone like me a "self-made person."

You also have to love Russia, the place where you live. We put in maximum effort so that people form a positive image of our region and develop the town.

Q: What is the difference between doing business in France and in Russia?

A: Everywhere, you have to work a lot and do business creatively. Perhaps in Russia there are more bureaucratic obstacles and more control structures. The knowledge and experience I gained in France were of great use to me in Russia. It is this experience that tells me that until there are good roads connecting villages and towns, like in Europe, tourism will not develop properly. Until there is a small life-supporting infrastructure consisting of shops, cafes,

medical facilities, mail service, shuttle buses and a newspaper kiosk in each tiny village or town, no tourism miracle will happen.

And if there are no such things, you must create such a miracle on your own property. Our hotel and restaurant, Private Visit, shows that even on a small land plot of 1,400 square meters and based out of your own home, you can create a place that will fill the world with more humanity, beauty and kindness.

I do not approve of people who throw garbage under their feet and then go on vacation abroad to have a rest from "the Russian dirt." We create both the dirt and the cleanliness ourselves.

Q: Is there a difference in communicating with Russian business partners as opposed to French?

A: People are the same everywhere. It is very important to maintain good neighborly relations and to compete fairly with similar businesses. Healthy competition is a path toward development and growth.

Q: What kind of business opportunities are there in Plyos for a foreigner?

A: This town is a tourist attraction, so one could invest in developing the town's infrastructure, first of all in entertainment and leisure as well as restaurants and hotels. The town needs a big amusement park, a fitness center, a swimming pool, a beauty spa, a good barber shop, a nail salon and different types of banyas. There isn't one cafe for children in town, and we could use some interesting private museums here.

Q: Have you encountered corruption while doing business here?

A: No. In our sphere of work, it is hardly possible because our business, although successful, is very tiny, even by local standards. Such a small-scale operation is of no interest to corrupt officials.

Q: What inspires you in your work?

A: First and foremost, my love for Russia! And my love for the people for whom we reveal Russia's provincial life from the inside through our hospitality, through introducing them to interesting people and through beautiful Volga landscapes.

For foreigners, spending their vacation with us is a chance to discover for themselves the real Russia — a beautiful, a positive and a poetic one. On one hand, they see the country unadorned, but on the other hand, they see it without the frequently mentioned horrors.

Our close cooperation with local musicians and painters leaves a lasting impression on foreigners.

Sometimes people who come to stay with us are so interesting that we would gladly pay

ourselves to talk to them, and we don't want to charge them money. In some sense, we have taken a semicommercial approach to our work, rejecting the principle of "nothing personal, just business."

Every person who stays with us leaves as if he was departing from his mother's or grandmother's home — with a basket of our original small pies, a can of homemade mushrooms or a jar of jam. But we don't do anything on purpose! It's the way we live. It would be impossible without inspiration. And through us, people learn what the Russian soul and Russian hospitality are really like.

My grandmother made the biggest impact on my life. She taught me how to be a good housekeeper. This is a larger concept that includes the skill to do household chores, create comfort, cook tasty food and love the people around you.

Contact the author at n.krainova@imedia.ru

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