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The Fine Art of Drinking to Your Health, the Russian Way

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Тост: toast



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On various recent holidays, did you raise your glass and pronounce “на здоровье,” proud in the certainty — buttressed by films, books, your own ears and a number of your Russian friends — that you’ve just made the classic Russian toast “to your health”?

If you did, you're wrong. And once you stop shouting and throwing pointed objects at me, I'll explain why.

But first let's take a brief foray into the world of Russian toast-making, which is a bit curious. It's strange that a country so renowned, so celebrated, so closely associated with making clever, touching, and sometimes very long toasts before almost every sip of alcohol should use a borrowed word to describe what must be a homegrown tradition. The word тост (toast), which is both a piece of lightly grilled bread and a short speech as you raise a glass, came from English in the 20th century. Sometimes it was even called спич (a speech): Он говорил вообще очень мало и только в пьяном виде бывал способен сказать нечто вроде спича (In general, he spoke very little and only when drunk was he able to say anything like a toast.)

But surely Russians gave toasts well before the 20th century! There are countless descriptions of glasses being raised and words uttered well before the time of Peter the Great, the great borrower of all things European. What did they call them?

The only word I can find is здравица (a toast to someone's health). For example, in the 16th century a visitor described a drinking ritual at court: Когда произносилась здравица, каждый из гостей выходил на середину комнаты и выпивал чарку. (When a toast was pronounced, each guest went into the middle of the room and drank down a cup.)

At some point здравица stopped being just a wish for good health: Сама демократия, во имя которой в России последних лет было поднято столько здравиц, превратилась в нечто совершенно нетрадиционное (Democracy itself, which had been toasted so many times in Russia in recent years, turned into something completely untraditional.)

But now it's тост, used with the verbs произносить (pronounce) or поднимать (raise): Он произнёс тост со слезами на глазах (He tearfully gave a toast.) Поднимать бокал (raise you glass) is also used. But you drink to something or someone using the preposition за. За вас! (To you!) За нас! (To us!) За твой успех! (To your success!)

So if you are wishing someone good health, you say: За ваше здоровье! (To your health!) To get the hang of it, repeat after me: Давайте выпьем за счастье! (Let's drink to happiness!) Поднимаем бокалы за удачу (Let's raise our glass to good fortune.)

Remember: when you're making a toast, it's "за" not "на."

The confusing bit is this: the expression на здоровье does exist. It just means something else. You say it when someone thanks you for something, and it means "you're welcome" — something like "wear it in good health." Or it can mean "as much as you want": Кушайте, пейте на здоровье! (Eat and drink to your heart's content!) Or it can mean "whatever you say, go ahead, well and good." If someone criticizes you, you might reply: Ты так считаешь? На здоровье! (You think so? Go ahead and think that!)

So say на здоровье all you want — just not while raising a glass!

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