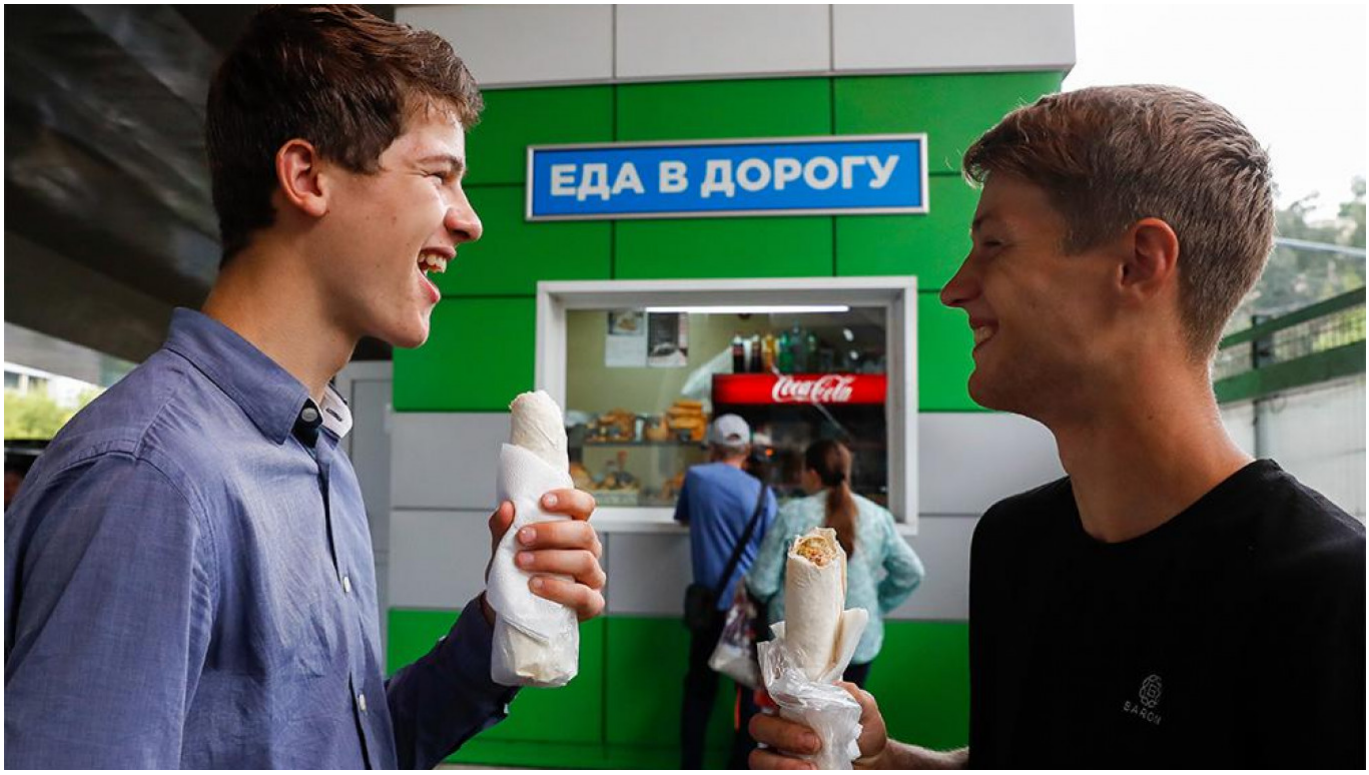
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Shawurma? Shawerma? What Do You Call the Scent of Russian Summer?

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Atryom Geodakyan / TASS

Шашлык: shashlyk,⊠grilled meat

Let's say⊠you're on a getaway weekend in St. Petersburg. You've splurged on a hotel —⊠canal views — and have just given a scalper half a month's salary for great⊠seats at the Mariinsky Theater. So you are feeling rather poor. But hungry. You⊠look around for a cheap bite to eat. You suddenly have a craving for some⊠classic street food: a gyro. What do you ask for?

Okay, this⊠is a trick question. If you're in Moscow, you want шаурма (shawurma, stress on the last⊠syllable). In St. Petersburg you want шаверма (shaverma, stress on the⊠middle syllable). Why does the same food have two different names in the two⊠Russian capitals?

I'm not an⊠Arab speaker, so I'm relying on commentary by Russian scholars who

actually⊠know something about this. Arabic, they explain, is a consonantic language,⊠which means that it is written as consonants with diacritical marks placed⊠above or below the letters to indicate the vowel sounds. This food is spelled⊠something like SHWRM with vowel sounds as marks above and below the letters.⊠Russian doesn't have the "w" sound. It gets transliterated either as a Russian "В" — Dr. Watson is Ватсон — or the Russian "У" — Oscar Wilde is Уайлд. So that "w" gets transliterated⊠two ways: шаверма and шаурма.

That makes⊠sense, but it doesn't explain how the transliteration turned out to be⊠different in the two cities. Here happenstance seems to have played a role.⊠According to one source, the first gyro stand in St. Petersburg was opened in⊠1992 by two brothers from Syria. One of the brothers thought it would be easier⊠for Russians to pronounce as шаверма, so that's what they painted on their sign. But in Moscow their⊠compatriot — профессиональный шаурмист (a professional shawarma-maker) —⊠had already opened a stand and called it шаурма. And⊠that's how it has gone down in culinary history.

So when you⊠are listening to folks in St. Petersburg, one might tell a story like⊠this: Уличный торговец-армянин отдал им⊠шаверму бесплатно, "дэвочки, на сдаровье!" (The Armenian street food vendor⊠gave them a shawarma free, saying, "Gurlies, jest for yous!") But in Moscow,⊠someone will tell you: За 100 рублей мы взяли мегаогроменную шаурму (For just⊠100 rubles we got a mega-huge shawurma!)

Today there⊠are Turkish stands making more or less the same dish — vertically grilled meat⊠popped into a pita bread with a bit of lettuce and sauce. But they have painted⊠Донер Кебаб or Дёнер Кебаб (doner kebab) on their signs.

Just so you⊠know: they are called gyros in parts of the English-speaking world because the⊠first stands were opened by Greeks, and that's what they called them. In⊠centuries past, Greeks had used the Turkish name, but changed it due to⊠political considerations, thus reminding us how politics get into everything,⊠even street food.

In Russia,⊠pieces of meat grilled on skewers are called шашлык, now sometimes transliterated as shashlyk⊠instead of translated as kebabs. That word is, however, not native Russian,⊠even though the concept of grilling meat over an open fire is certainly as⊠Russian as it gets. The earliest version of the Russian spinning gyro dates to⊠the 18th century, when it was called верчённое мясо (rotisseried⊠meat, from the verb вертеть — to turn). Even though today shashlyk is associated with cuisine from⊠the Caucasus, the word is a Russification of the Crimean-Tartar word шиш (skewer). One source explains:⊠"Шишлык"⊠– это буквально "что-то⊠на вертеле" (Shishlyk is literally "something on a⊠skewer.")

As⊠linguistic proof that the word was from the Tatar language, the Georgian and⊠Armenian names for skewered and grilled meat are different — mtsvadi and⊠khorovats, respectively.

The person⊠who makes the шашлык is шашлычник, a masculine noun for a masculine profession, because as everyone⊠knows, only men can be entrusted to grill meat properly. It's, like, a law or⊠something.

Incidentally,⊠you may be amused to know that in the 1990s шашлычник was also slang for any kind⊠of small business owner, then someone who had a кооператив (cooperative).

You may also be amused to know that шашлычница, which could conceivably be used to describe a female meat griller, is more commonly used to describe a plug-in rotisserie. This is what you dig out of the back of the pantry and put on the porch at the dacha when a downpour soaks your fire wood.

But who cares where the name came from? As a Russian journalist in New York once wrote, appropriating a line of poetry about Moscow by Alexander Pushkin: О! Шашлык! Как много в этом звуке! (O! Shashlyk! How resonant is that sound!) Шашлык is the sound and smell and spirit of summer, an entire evening conjured up by just a few words: Разводили на берегу костёр, жарили шашлыки (We made a bonfire on the banks of the river and grilled shashlyk.) Ели шашлык, пили коньяк, заказывали музыку и угощали друг друга анекдотами (We ate shashlyk, drank cognac, asked the band to play songs for us and treated one another to jokes.) "Выезд на природу" — это рыбалка, охота, шашлыки и обязательные возлияния ("Going out into nature" is fishing, hunting, shashlyk and the prerequisite drinking.)

This is the last weekend of summer, folks. Go out and get some шашлык, хоровац, мцвади, дёнер кебаб, шаурма, шаверма or gyros. And enjoy.

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