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Russian Horseradish With a Real Kick

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Хрен: horseradish; euphemism

How is it that I've never written about хрен (horseradish)? It's one of my favorite words, not only because it is so gratifying to say — really lean into the opening salvo of the "x" — but also because of the crucial and multifaceted role it plays in Russian language and life.

First of it, it's horseradish: plant, root and sauce — which is generally just the grated root with dashes of salt, vinegar and sometimes sugar. You can make it yourself, if you have goggles and a gas mask. Really. Fresh horseradish is a gazillion times more irritating that the strongest onions.

The fiery, piquant, bitter-sweet flavor is one of Russians' favorite condiments, and one day the world will remember it and make it as chic as wasabi, aka Japanese horseradish, which is more or less the same thing only green.

Its bitterness has given us two terrific expressions. The first is хрен редьки не слаще (literally "horseradish isn't sweeter than a radish"), which is the Russian equivalent of "six of one thing, half a dozen of the other" when both options are terrible. This phrase seems to be used a lot in Russian when discussing leaders and political figures: Корпоративная солидарность сейчас, увы, ничуть не меньше, чем в советские времена. Впрочем, хрен редьки не слаще. (Corporate solidarity today isn't a bit less than it was during the Soviet era: out of the frying pan and into the fire.)

The other expression is старый хрен (an old geezer), used to describe an ornery, bad-tempered old man.

If you are wondering what to call that curmudgeon's female counterpart, it's the other half of the previous expression: редька (a radish), although this is much less common, probably because women are just naturally sweet. Really.

But the word хрен figures more often in expressions as a euphemism for another word that begins with "x". I thought this was simply a matter of a similarity of sound until I saw a horseradish root pulled straight up from the ground. You could get arrested for just thinking

about it.

In any case, first of all we have the adjective хреновый and adverb хреново (lousy). Я хреново себя чувствую сегодня — не буду на работе. (I feel lousy today — I won't be at work.)

Then we get хрен as a euphemism in all kinds of everyday expressions, like ни хрена (not a bit). Он обещал покрасить кухню пока нас не было, а мы вернулись из отпуска и увидели, что он ни хрена не сделал (He promised to paint the kitchen while we were gone, but we came back from vacation and saw that he hadn't done a damn thing.). This might also be Ни хрена нет! (There isn't a damn thing!) Только не говори, что нету денег. Денег всегда ни хрена нет. (Just don't tell me that you don't have any money. There's never any money.)

Хрен его знает is a more philosophical turn of phrase, meaning "who knows?" This is not the answer you want to hear to life's important questions: ⊠ Ты меня любишь? ⊠ А хрен его знает! ("Do you love me?" "How the hell should I know?")

In the same ball park — horseradish field? — is на кой хрен (why on earth?), usually with the phrase тебе это надо (do you need that?), for example, like this annoyed fellow complained in the 1980s: На кой хрен такая гласность, когда мыла нет! (What the hell do you need glasnost for when there's no soap?)

And then there is perhaps the most popular хрен expression: ни хрена себе! (I'll be damned!) This is an all-purpose expression of surprise and astonishment, either very good or very bad. Он стал гендиректором? Ни хрена себе! (He became general director? Shut the front door!) Он сломал ногу в двух местах? Ни хрена себе! (He broke his leg in two places? Shut the front door!)

In social media this often gets compacted into one word: нихренасе (or sometimes нехренасе). This confused me until I figured out it was the Russian version of OMG!!!!!! Машина стоит 262,000 евро (без учета налогов) или около 332,000 евро с налогами. Нехренасе налоги (The car costs 262,000 euros (without taxes) or about 332,000 euros with taxes. OMG!!!!!! Can you believe those taxes?)

Finally there is the rather backhanded benediction: Хрен с тобой! This has two quite different meanings. One is a general sentiment of "go to the devil": Не нравится тебе, как я живу ⊠ и хрен с тобой! (You don't like how I live my life? Tough luck!). But the other is more like "go with God," like in this case when a man felt sorry for his poor neighbor, who had stolen his apples. Он остыл, злость выветрилась. ⊠ Ладно, хрен с тобой. Бери сколько хочешь, ⊠ сосед сказал. (He cooled down and his anger dissipated. "Oh, the hell with it. Take as much as you want," the neighbor said.

Нехренасе!

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