The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

One Russian Blueberry or Two?

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

July 24, 2019



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Малина: raspberry, group of thieves, hang-out

It's midsummer, and despite the decidedly autumnal weather in Moscow, the markets are overflowing with bounty. I'm doing my usual greedy purchases of every berry and fruit on sale in the capital, dithering over the finer distinctions between Uzbek and Azerbaijani apricots and discussing in minute detail with the vendors which varieties of each fragrant offering will hold up best to the sugar, heat and canning I'm going to subject them to. I won't even tell you what my kitchen looks like — although I have to say it smells divine — even if it is a bit sticky.

After I found myself wondering for the 12th time what exactly the difference between черника and голубика was, I thought a bit of berry deciphering might be useful for other shoppers, eaters and/or canners.

To settle that first question, черника is small, very dark blue — its name comes from the adjective чёрный (black) — and a bit sour. Голубика is bigger, lighter blue, sweeter and juicier. In U.S. English, both can be called blueberry, but черника is actually a huckleberry, a word not much used in the northern parts of the country except in grade school when reading Mark Twain.

Another berry important distinction — sorry, but I just had to make the pun once — is between клубника и земляника. The first is a cultivated strawberry; the latter is that lovely, small, slightly floral wild strawberry, also called a field, wood or alpine strawberry.

Other berries we have in common are малина (raspberry); красная и чёрная смородина (red and black currant); ежевика (blackberry); крыжовник (gooseberry); клюква (European cranberry); брусника (called in various countries and regions lingonberry, red bilberry, cowberry, red huckleberry, red whortleberry or foxberry); and рябина (rowanberry).

Be sure you know the difference between two basic kinds of cherries: черешня, which is used to describe several varieties of sweet cherry, and вишня, a sour, tart, or pie cherry. The first is good for eating and makes bland jam; the second is very tart and makes magnificent jams and preserves.

Then there are some berries that Russians grow, gather and eat that you don't find in many other parts of the world. One is калина, part of the Viburnum genus. There are several subspecies in Russia, including the one that might be familiar from a film title, калина красная — in English most commonly called a European cranberry bush.

In the northern part of Russia, as well as in Scandinavia, Alaska, part of Canada, and Scotland you can find морошка (called cloudberry, Nordic berry, bakeapple, knotberry, low-bush salmonberry, averin or evron). It looks like a yellow raspberry (and in fact is sometimes called a yellowberry or mountain raspberry) and has a delicate creamy flavor when very ripe.

When speaking about berries in Russian, there's one trick: you virtually never use the plural. So you don't buy blueberries at the market, you buy a blueberry. Like a pound of blueberry, as in this old recipe: Из двух фунтов малины, когда её очистить и протереть, выходит половина фунта ягодного пюре (Two pounds of raspberries, after being cleaned and crushed, yield a half pound of berry puree.) В ресторане стояли корзины с рынка ⊠ с лисичками, малиной, овощами (The restaurant had baskets with chanterelles, raspberries and vegetables from the market).

Although today in Russian stores you can find джем (jam, preserves, jelly), the traditional way to preserve berries is simply to boil them with sugar: варить (to boil) to produce варенье (preserves). Sometimes the berry is used to mean "berry jam," so that when you are offered чай с малиной (literally tea with raspberry) you'll be served tea with raspberry jam.

In slang, ягода can mean a healthy, attractive woman. Бабы у нас, как ягоды, ⊠ румяные, смешливые, страсть хороши бабы (The women around here are like berries — rosy, with a good sense of humor — man, these are some fine-looking women.) True, I've never met a giggling berry, but who knows?

Ягодка is a nice little affectionate name for your sweetie. This is the sort of nickname you

might use when you are trying to sweeten him or her up for something: Шура, ягодка моя, балкон будем делать? (Shura, sweetie, are we going to fix up the balcony?)

There are two lovely berry expressions. One is said of people: одного поля ягода (literally berry of one patch). In English, we change this from an agricultural to an avian image: Я так тесно сблизился с актерами театра, потому что мы одного поля ягодки (I became so close with the members of the theater because we're all birds of a feather.)

The other was, for me, slightly counterintuitive. Это цветочки, а ягодки будут впереди. This is literally, "these are the flowers, the berries are yet to come." That sounds like a good thing, right? First you see lovely flowers, and then in a few weeks you take in your harvest of strawberries. But... no. It's the opposite. It means "this is just the beginning — the worst is yet to come." Если первая тюрьма была только веселым предисловием, то вторую можно охарактеризовать старинной поговоркой: "раньше были только цветочки ⊠ ягодки будут впереди" (If the first prison was just a fun prelude, the second could be described by that old saying, "you ain't seen nothing yet.")

And finally, there two slightly odd bits of slang associated with the word малина. On the one hand, не жизнь, а малина (literally, not life but a raspberry) is what you say when you're in clover, that is, when things are great, like finding yourself in a soft bed of clover or a raspberry patch. Хочешь - отправляйся купаться на речку, хочешь ⊠ в лес за ягодами и грибами. Не жизнь, а малина! (If you want, go swim in the creek. Or if you want, head to the woods to pick berries and mushrooms. This is the life!)

The other is almost the opposite: in criminal slang, малина can mean either a place where thieves and criminals hang out, or it can mean a group of crooks or, more figuratively, a gang of some sort. Малина была в сборе (The whole gang was there.)

And that, of course, must not be confused with сбор малины (harvest of raspberries). Enjoy!

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/07/24/one-russian-blueberry-or-two-a66544