

The Fruit of Our Language Labor

The Word's Worth

[Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth](#)

October 02, 2020



skeeze / Pixabay

Фрукт: fruit, literally and figuratively

In good years, autumn is a glorious season in Moscow, the last blast of bright, lush technicolor before the descent into the black and white months of winter. And even though Russians are now used to fresh produce year-round in grocery stores, they still celebrate the local harvest, when the tables at farmer's markets are groaning under piles of locally — or almost locally — produced fruits and vegetables. Best of all: everything is cheap.

As I trudged to my car after buying too much at my local market, I found myself regretting that I hadn't bought some айва, too, since I've been wanting to make some jam. And then I realized I'd totally forgotten what айва is in English. Time for a refresher on fruit names in Russian.

Fruit lexicon starts out easy. It's фрукт, which not only means the fruit you eat but the fruit who works with you. The slang meaning of фрукт has been around for at least over a century and means an unreliable and, well, fruity sort of person. Соседка по лестничной площадке мне нравится, но её муж – фрукт, целыми днями сидит и изобретает то, что никому не нужно. (I like my next-door neighbor, but her husband is a real fruitcake who sits around all day inventing things that no one needs.)

And the lexicon continues to be easy with most fruits that were not traditionally grown or sold in Russia. It's not hard to ask for банан (banana); нектарин (nectarine); киви (kiwi); манго (mango); авокадо (avocado); кумкват (cumquat); абрикос (apricot) or лайм (lime).

Лимон (lemon) is also obvious, but be sure to memorize and ask for узбекский лимон (literally Uzbek lemon), which is very close to the Meyer lemon. Note that if your vendor is from Azerbaijan, that thin-skinned, juicy, almost floral citrus is азербайджанский лимон (Azerbaijan lemon), and if he's from Georgia, it's грузинский лимон (Georgian lemon). The name seems to change with the vendor's nationality.

The only foreign fruits that might cause a stumble among English speakers are the pineapple, called ананас, and the orange, called апельсин because it came to Russia from Holland (and is appelsien in Dutch). This allows you to say something in Russian that you really can't say in English: Мы купили ярко оранжевые апельсины (We bought very orange oranges.)

Another tricky fruit is the pomegranate. In Russian it is гранат, which is fine until you decide that such a pretty red fruit must be a feminine word and ask for граната. That will get either a look or horror or a belly laugh from the vendor, since you just asked to buy a grenade.

I did that. Once.

Then there is the vast assortment of fruits that have their own Russian names, or that have been traded so long in Russia that their foreign names from the Caucasus or Central Asia are now part of the Russian language. In addition to the native names of the fruit in general, there are hundreds of whimsical, lyrical and expressive names for the cultivars. Wouldn't you buy a kind of apple called Слава победителю (Glory to the Victor)?

The peach is easy to remember if you like Russian art: just think of Valentin Serov's famous painting Девочка с персиками (Girl with Peaches). These days the New Thing is плоский персик (flat or donut peach), but most people still prefer the peach cultivar with a boring name: обыкновенный персик (the ordinary peach).

Слива is plum, which comes in many types and colors. If you plan to turn your plums into prunes, called чернослив, try one of the Венгерка (Hungarian) types. If you want to make that delicious Georgian sauce called ткемали, ask for plums called алыча, which is sometimes just called ткемали.

Виноград (grapes) have the most delightful names. Кишмиш are sultanas or seedless grapes. Дамские пальчики (Ladyfingers) are, in fact, elongated grapes that look very elegant. You might also find the dark Изабелла (Isabella) or the pale Лора (Lora), or grapes that had wine named after them, like Саперави (Saperavi). Or consider trying Память Учителя (Teacher's Memory), Долгожданный (Long-Awaited), or Восторг (Ecstasy). You

could arrange an entire seduction using grapes alone.

Груша (pear) is grown within a few miles of Moscow, in dacha gardens and larger holdings. If you want these homegrown varieties, look for Москвичка (Muscovite); Конференция (Conference); Просто Мария (Just Maria); Забава (Fun); or Любимица Яковлева (Yakovlev's Favorite). Those cultivars could be the basis for a sit-com.

Дыня (melon) and арбуз (watermelon) have clearly non-Russian names, but they are now part of the vocabulary, diet and even landscape of Muscovites, when huge piles of them appear on street corners. The most common (and delicious) kinds of melon have homey names: Колхозница (Collective Farm Girl) and Торпеда (Torpedo, for its long shape). This year non-traditionally colored watermelons were all the rage. You could buy a very sweet sort with bright pinkish red flesh called Чёрный Принц (Black Prince) or opt for ones that are оранжевый (orange) or жёлтый (yellow) inside. For some reason the last two are kiddie favorites.

And what about that айва that began my contemplation of fruit? It's a quince. Not all of my Russian friends buy it, since you can't really just grab and eat them, you need to turn them into jam or bake them in pies or roast them with meat and poultry. Another fruit considered a bit exotic to Russians is the bright red кизил (Cornelian cherry, European cornel or Cornelian cherry dogwood). Like the quince, you can't do much with it raw (except maybe clean your face with it — it's a strong astringent), and it's usually turned into jams and jellies.

But a third exotic fruit is, unlike the others, much loved: хурма (persimmon). Russians turn them into jam, cakes, pies, and puddings, and often roast poultry and meat with them. But mostly they wait until they are super-soft, cut them in half and eat them with a spoon.

And now if you'll excuse me, it's time for a tea and fruit break.

Original url: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/10/02/the-fruit-of-our-language-labor-a71636>