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A Tolstoy Descendant Returns to His Roots in Yasnaya Polyana

Ilya Tolstoy left a journalism career in the big city for his great-great-great-grandfather's famous estate. Now his new apple business is bearing fruit.

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Ilya Tolstoy. **Yasnaya Polyana**

As a descendant of revered literary genius Leo Tolstoy, Ilya Tolstoy spent much of his childhood at the writer's countryside estate in Yasnaya Polyana south of Moscow.

After years of working as a producer at several state-run news channels, Ilya, 33, grew tired of the breakneck pace of life in Russia's capital and yearned for a change.

"At a certain point I realized that I can do something more impactful and became interested in agriculture," Ilya, who is Tolstoy's great-great-great-grandson, told The Moscow Times.

He saw a natural opportunity in Yasnaya Polyana's abundant apple orchards — the name means "clear glade" — and in 2017 he decided to quit journalism and use his life's savings to invest in a new venture there. Three years later, his apple business, also named Yasnaya Polyana, is bearing fruit.

As a portly one-eyed tomcat leads us along Yasnaya Polyana's famous birch-lined avenue, Ilya explains that over 33 varieties of apple trees grow on the estate's grounds today. Some are more than 150 years old. A few were even planted by Tolstoy himself when he wasn't busy writing masterpieces like "War and Peace" and "Anna Karenina."

"I had no idea that someday I would be taking care of those orchards, harvesting its apples and making juice out of them," Ilya said, recalling his childhood.

To develop Yasnaya Polyana's juices, Ilya experimented with many different blends of apple varieties, searching for the best possible flavor combinations.

"We can play with taste depending on the varieties we decide to use. For example, if we mix the Antonovka and Aport varieties, the juice will be quite sour. When adding Skrijapel, the juice becomes a lot sweeter and obtains a very pleasant aftertaste," he said.

The main blend that is bottled and sold today is a mix of Arkad, Korichnoye and Rozmarin apple juices, but new blends can appear depending on the season. The juice is cloudy and golden in color, with a bright, crisp flavor combining a hint of honey and a slight tartness.

While Yasnaya Polyana is today a state-owned museum, Ilya and dozens of other Tolstoy descendants share a special connection to this place. His family still splits its time between the small village of Yasnaya Polyana and Moscow. And, naturally, he's read almost all of Tolstoy's novels, short stories and diaries.

"I still love to read his diaries. It's also interesting to read the diaries of his wife, Sophia Andreyevna," he said. "I've reread some novels two or three times — each time, you always read them in a new light. My favorites are 'The Cossacks' and I really love 'War and Peace' — this novel can be reread throughout your life at different ages."

References to the estate have been woven into Yasnaya Polyana's branding, which was designed by the Transformer design studio and awarded in the 2020 Pentawards for excellence in packaging design.

"Our idea was to create packaging that wasn't just a sticker on a bottle, but something that would ... tie our story, our ethics and the quality of our product together," Ilya said.

The label's font was recreated from the typeface on Tolstoy's Remington No. 10 typewriter, a gift from Eliphalet Remington himself, that is still on display at his mansion. The logo is a nod to the carved woman, horse and rooster figures found in the wood balusters surrounding the house's terrace, where the writer and his family spent countless hours relaxing and entertaining guests.

"According to family legend, the carvings were made by my great-great-grandfather [and Tolstoy's son] Ilya Lvovich together with Nikolai Filosofov, an artist and a close family friend, at another family estate not far from Yasnaya Polyana," Ilya explained. "Sophia Tolstoya

visited him and became very fond of these figures, so Ilya decided to give the balusters to his parents."

Environmental sustainability is another key part of the Yasnaya Polyana brand, Ilya said. The apples are grown without the use of chemical fertilizers or pesticides, and the business works with the estate to preserve the existing apple trees and grow new ones.

"We think about the environment at all stages of production — from picking apples to packaging," he said. "For us, economic development can only exist in harmony with nature."

The brand also sells honey made by bees at the estate's apiary and plans to start producing apple cider and apple cider vinegar sometime next year. The juice and honey can be purchased at the estate itself as well as at restaurants in the Tula region and the Moscow region.

In the future, Ilya sees Yasnaya Polyana becoming a potential agrotourism destination as organic food products become increasingly popular in Russia.

"I see it as a long-term project that will bring together people who not only want high-quality natural food and drinks, but who also think of how we can make our environment better and how we can support it together," he said.

For now, Ilya is happy to be pursuing a new path in a place where he has so many fond memories.

"Before, when I worked on television, I would think that I won't be doing it for the rest of my life ... now my work is a big part of my life and it's also a hobby. It's awesome to wake up on the weekend and think: 'Hmm, why not work today?' And the thought brings you happiness."

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