

Putting All Your Eggs in One Basket

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Не стоит выеденного яйца: It's not worth a plugged nickel

Яйцо (egg) is a thing of beauty and the food of the gods. OK, I made up the bit about the gods. But down here on Earth, people like eggs, and I think it's fair to say that Russian people especially like eggs. This used to be very clear back in the days before suburban supermarkets, when at the dacha you fed the family only on what you hauled out from the city. And so on Friday afternoons, every second car leaving the city had a big box of eggs balanced on the back window ledge, safe from rowdy dogs and antsy children.

For the record, the egg consists of a скорлупа (shell), желток (yolk or “yellow part”) and белок (white). At breakfast, your Russian hosts might ask you how you want your eggs and offer you some poetic possibilities: всмятку (soft-boiled, from the now archaic word мясти, to mix up — presumably what you can do to a mushy egg); в мешочек (a medium-boiled egg, when the soft yolk is in a “pouch” — мешочек — of firm white); вкрутую (hard-boiled); яичница-глазунья (fried eggs, from the image of an eye — глаз); or яичница-болтунья (scrambled eggs, from the verb болтать — to mix or beat something). The humble hard-

boiled egg can also be called *крутое яйцо* and is a standard staple at picnics. Some day someone will explain why a boiled egg sprinkled with salt, so disdained in the kitchen, is transformed into the most delicious food on a river bank.

You should know that in most cases with eggs you use the verb pair *есть/съесть* (to eat), although you can also say *выпить* (to drink), which is what you do with a raw egg. Well, not you — but some people who are very hungry or very hungover.

Eating eggs has given us an expression that I found puzzling at first: *не стоит выеденного яйца* (literally, “it’s not worth an eaten egg”). The phrase *выеденное яйцо* (literally, “eaten egg”) means something worthless, trifling, or of no concern. Now why would a nourishing, consumed egg be worthless? It turns out that the *выеденное яйцо* refers to what is left over after you eat an egg — the cracked and useless shell. In American English the equivalent in worthlessness is a plugged nickel — that is, a nickel with a plug in the center (after the valuable metal had been removed). *Все эти секреты яйца выеденного не стоят* (All those secrets aren’t worth a plugged nickel).

Russians raise their children with a little parable about eggs and hens. When a young’un gets too big for his britches and starts lecturing his elders, the elders say: *Яйца курицу не учат!* (literally, “eggs don’t teach a chicken”). In English, this is often expressed by the odd phrase: Don’t teach your grandmother to suck eggs, which brings us back to drinking your breakfast egg raw.

And then there’s a peeled egg — *облупленное яйцо* or *яичко*. This is a nice metaphor for something clearly known (the bare egg) or ready to go (just pop it in your mouth). Some etymologists believe it’s the source of the phrase *знать, как облупленного* (to know someone inside out), another phrase uttered by elders to upstart kids: *И тебя, и Андрюшку знаю как облупленных, кого вы хотите обмануть?* (I can see right through you and Andryushka — who do you think you’re fooling?)

After all, we’re no spring chickens!

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