

Expat Cooking Class Fills Niche

By [Irina Filatova](#)

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Taste of Russia students absorbed in the process of making pirozhki. **Irina Filatova**

The laughter gets louder as six ladies roll pieces of dough on a table covered with flour, trying to form chubby pirozhki, or traditional Russian pies, while red borshch simmers on the stove, next to a pan of beef stroganoff.

A similar scene takes place every week in the spacious kitchen, whose windows face a cozy Moscow yard tucked between narrow lanes near the Kurskaya metro station.

The ladies, four of whom are Dutch, are students at Taste of Russia, the first English-language culinary school.

Understanding traditions of Russian cuisine is becoming a popular form of entertainment for expats, as they try to learn to cook local dishes themselves, to surprise relatives and friends.

"I cooked borshch and draniki with mushrooms for my mom and her colleagues in the

Netherlands, and they liked it very much," said Bonnie van der Velde, who frequents the school.

Borshch, a traditional Ukrainian beetroot soup, is only one of the possible dishes to be mastered at Taste of Russia, which focuses on Russian cuisine and recipes from around the former Soviet Union.

Students can learn how to make blini, pelmeni or okroshka, as well as Caucasian dolma (grape leaves stuffed with rice), Georgian lobio (stewed kidney beans with herbs and spices) or Uzbek pilaf.

"There are many restaurants offering Russian cuisine abroad, but you won't learn how to make pelmeni or blini there," said Victoria Agabalyan, founder and chief executive of Taste of Russia.

The school, whose students are usually expats and foreign tourists, opened in September, and Agabalyan hopes that targeting foreigners will make her project successful.

"The niche of foreign-language culinary schools in Russia is free. No one is doing it yet — I wanted to offer something new to the market," she said in an interview.

She wouldn't specify the size of investment in the project, saying only that the school wasn't profitable yet because a lot of money was being spent on leasing space, buying products and paying guest chefs.

Agabalyan, who is also the financial director at a large Russian company, whose name she declined to provide, said attending a culinary school in France had given her an idea of what Europeans expected from such schools — national cuisine recipes and a homey atmosphere.

Taste of Russia invites chefs who know how to conduct culinary workshops and help students participate in the cooking process, while Agabalyan or the school's administrator translate.

Agabalyan, who sometimes works the stove to share her favorite recipes with the students, said Russia needs to develop a culture of culinary schools. It is good family entertainment, she said, adding that she plans to open branches of the school in other Russian cities.

Students pay 3,500 rubles (\$125) for a three-hour class and appear to enjoy cutting vegetables and kneading dough.

"The atmosphere is very friendly and open here, and we're obviously having fun," said housewife Angeline Sandmann, sipping tea and nibbling handmade pirozhki stuffed with eggs and green onion.

Such pirozhki once earned high praise from Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who tried them in the village of Mandrogi near St. Petersburg, where teacher-chef Yekaterina Gorina obtained the recipe.

Expats said one of the benefits of attending the school is that it helps them learn to navigate the shelves of Moscow supermarkets.

"It helps me to shop easier," said Sandmann, who has been living in Moscow for two years with her husband and two children.

"When I went shopping in Moscow for the first time and wanted to buy yoghurt I accidentally bought smetana [sour cream] instead," she said.

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