



Stefan Hard/Times Argus

Mikhail Ivanov of Moscow, Russia, samples several vodkas during a vodka-tasting and dinner cruise sponsored by Russian Life magazine on Lake Champlain, Sunday evening. Masha Isaeva of Novosibirsk, Russia, looks on.

## A taste of Russia

Montpelier-based magazine hosts 'elite' taste test aboard Lake Champlain Ferry

By David W. Smith

TIMES ARGUS STAFF

BURLINGTON — Mikhail

Ivanov of Moscow paraphrased a well-known Russian proverb.

"There are only two kinds of vodka," said Ivanov. "Good and very good."

The executive director of Russian Life magazine, Ivanov was about to taste some very good vodka. He set up six plastic shot glasses of the clear liquid next to his plate on a table in the dining room of the Spirit of Ethan Allen II ferry, which had just departed from the dock in Burlington.

"OK, I'm going to start my tasting," said Ivanov.

While Americans delicately sipped their samples, which were labeled only with letters from the Russian alphabet,

**"There are only two kinds of vodka.  
Good and very good."**

Mikhail Ivanov

Ivanov knocked the contents of his cup to the back of his throat in one motion.

"I do it the Russian way. Sorry," he said.

Ivanov may be one of the best-qualified individuals taking part in the vodka tasting competition. The tasting was sponsored by Russian Life, a magazine published in Montpelier which has been one of the premiere sources of information on life in the Soviet Union — now limited to Russia — in the United States since the 1950s.

The taste-off, which was attended by people from all over the northeast, gave 125 participants a chance to rank 16 vodkas in a blind test. They also enjoyed an authentic Russian dinner while the Ethan Allen cruised Lake Champlain and shared their interest in Russian life and culture.

"The fate of a \$4 billion dollar industry is on hand here," said Russian Life publisher Paul Richardson, before announcing the results of the contest after dinner.

This is the third and largest taste-off organized by Russian Life. Ivanov, visiting the U.S. for a series of editorial meetings, was only too happy to participate.

"I think we have different perceptions of the taste of vodka," said Ivanov. "In America, smoothness is everything."

Although he feels vodka is something quintessentially Russian, Ivanov said the art of distilling fine clear potato spirits has spread to all corners of the world.

"I think they (non-Russian vodkas) are good. I personally like Absolut and the Finnish vodka — Finlandia," said Ivanov. "These are the elite. We're choosing from the best."

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# Russian Life

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Spirits bolstered and ranking forms filled out and turned in, the enthusiastic crowd turned to a dinner that included chicken in a walnut sauce, cabbage with cranberries and a pre-dinner staple of the Russian diet – garlic minced with cheese and egg – which is spread on black bread. All the recipes came from *A Taste of Russia*, a cookbook written by the magazine's food editor, Darra Goldstein of Williamstown, Conn.

"I think Americans have a certain stereotypical view of Russian cuisine, that it's very heavy and mostly meat," said Goldstein. "We mostly know the Russian celebration foods."

Goldstein said she was enjoying the cruise, and felt it was a very appropriate place to celebrate Russian culture.

"Many of Chekov's stories took place on boats going down the Volga," said Goldstein.

"I love vodka, but I only like it when it's ice cold" she added. "I like the way it tingles when it goes down your throat. It cools you in the summer and warms you in the winter."

Looking very western with sunglasses propped atop her head, 23-year-old Masha Isaeva who was visiting from Siberia, said she actually wasn't much of a vodka drinker.

"I chose three of them," she shrugged.

On the tenth day of a four-month travel program to the U.S., Isaeva is staying with Richard Kay of New Hampshire, whom she met while working as a translator when he visited Siberia. She reflected on what she's learned about the U.S. from her two visits.

"It's quite different from the place I live. The way of life is



Stefan Hard/Times Argus

## Some of the 16 samples at Sunday's cruise.

more comfortable here," said Isaeva. "More comfortable in a material sense."

Life in Russia has changed immeasurably in the last 10 years, she added, but people her age tend to take the new world in stride.

"You can hear a lot of the older people complaining that things were better under Communism," said Isaeva. "Not the younger people."

Arthur Yachenko, the director of the School of Russian and Asian Studies in Boston, moved to the U.S. from the southeastern corner of Russia near the city of Vladivostok on the Sea of Japan six years ago.

"The U.S. is the best place for business. It's a very efficient place to work but my heart is in Russia," said Yachenko.

"Vermont is a big state for Russian studies. It's very similar to Russia – the mountains

and the countryside. I feel sometimes a little like I'm in Russia."

Yachenko mentioned the summer Russian programs at Middlebury College and Norwich University, as well as the Russian writer Alexander Solzhenitzyn who lived in Cavendish during a period of exile from the Soviet Union.

"I think the fact that Solzhenitzyn lived here added a lot to the aura," said Ben Rifkin, director of the Russian School at Middlebury College, who spent the meal talking to Ivanov in English and Russian about history, politics and food.

"I would say vodka is smooth and elegant," said Rifkin. "One of the things I like is that I don't get that aftertaste you get from whiskey."

Rifkin, whose students gave

the audience a taste of the language by reading poetry in Russian, was the designated driver for his group and thus did not sample the vodkas.

As the evening darkened, the ship headed for the lights of Burlington and the musicians playing mournful Russian folk songs grew looser and more passionate, Rifkin was heard asking if tea would be served.

"It's true that while not all Russians drink vodka, I've yet to meet a Russian who didn't drink tea," said Rifkin.

Russia, while faring well in the competition, failed to take the top Vodka spot which went to an English vodka called Three Olives, which is bottled in Maine. Other countries with entries included the United States, Poland, Finland and Ireland.