SPRING BOOKS

'If [the American is] to learn how to live well on what is immediately available to him, his best bet is to look to the immigrant for advice.' —ANGELO PELLEGRINI

Self-Discovery at the Family Table

Savage Feast
By Boris Fishman
Harper, 348 pages, $27.99

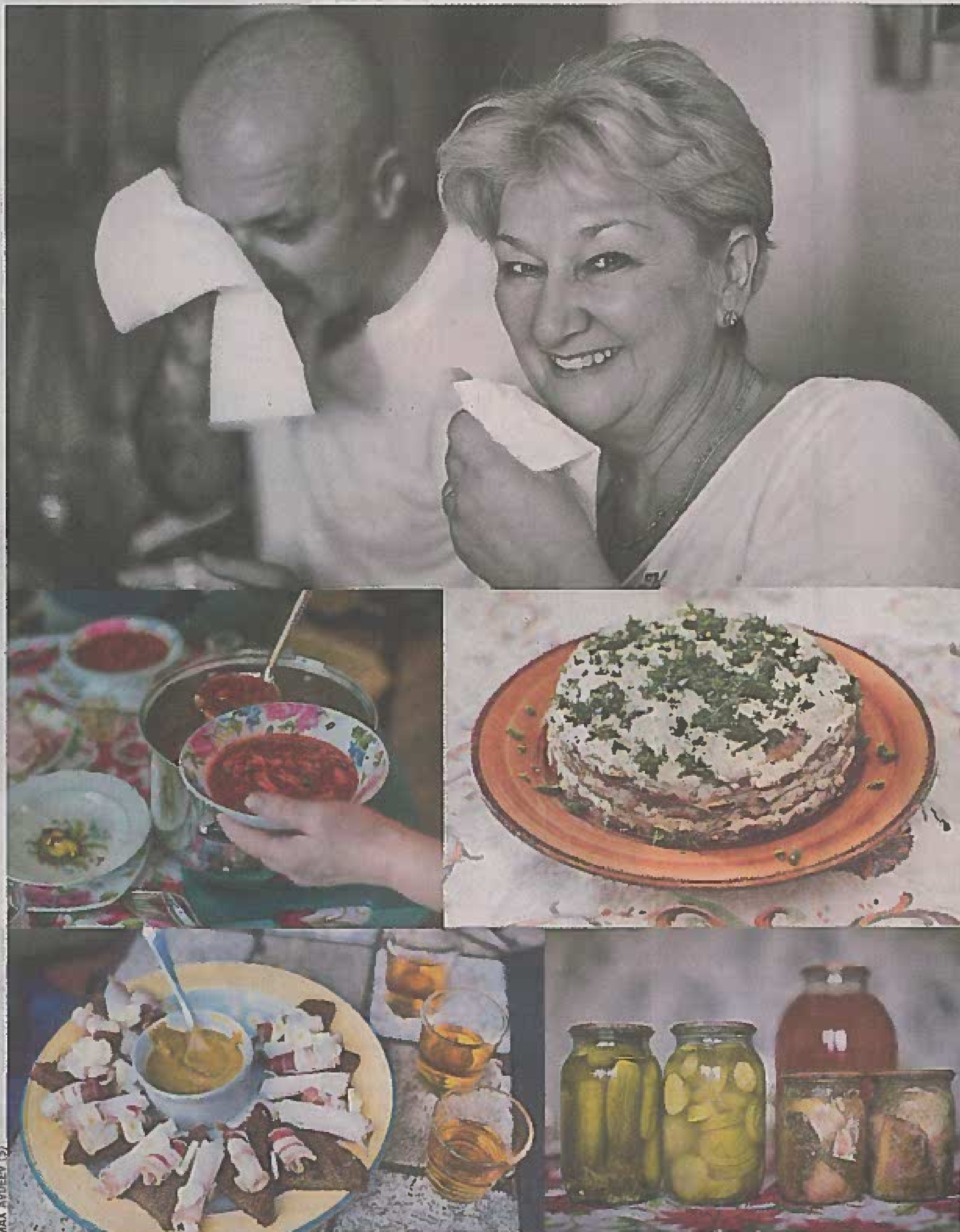
BY LEAH KOENIG

ALMOST three decades after the fall of the Soviet Union, many members of the Russian diaspora—especially those who came of age during the post-Soviet era—are turning a curious and longing eye to the lost flavors of their food heritage. There's first-generation American Bonnie Morales, born in the Chicago area to Belarusian parents and now based in Portland, Ore.; Ms. Morales's restaurant, Kachka, and her cookbook of the same name, have brought national attention to creative Russian fare. London-based Olia Hercules's cookbooks, "Mamushka" and "Kaukasis," explore the dishes of her ancestral Ukraine and surrounding region; and Anya von Bremzen's culinary memoir, "Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking," provides historical and personal context for iconic recipes.

Amid this gastro-literary zeitgeist, writer and novelist Boris Fishman offers a welcome addition with his memoir, "Savage Feast: Three Generations, Two Continents, and a Dinner Table." Mr. Fishman's two novels, the acclaimed "A Replacement Life" and "Don't Let My Baby Do Rodeo," featured Russian characters and themes. In "Savage Feast" the author turns inward, mining his own life and appetites to tell a tale of family, shame, self-discovery and stunningly delicious food.

Mr. Fishman's family left his hometown of Minsk, Belarus, in 1988, when Mr. Fishman was 9, as part of a larger wave of oppression-fueled immigration by Russian Jews to the U.S. and elsewhere. The family experienced its own specific agonies: anxiety-ridden days while awaiting permission to leave, late-night document checks by gruff border guards en route to a first stop in Vienna and, as Mr. Fishman writes, the task of cramming "a century of Russian life into five suitcases." But the confusing mix of dread and adventure that accompanied his family's departure was also universal. Reading Mr. Fishman's story reminds us that all immigrant and refugee stories, regardless of their starting and ending points, are improbably heroic.

Also universal is the lifelong and often-bumpy process that comes with putting down roots in a new home. Mr. Fishman describes his first years in south Brooklyn, N.Y., as disorienting—a blur of drab architecture and graffiti-covered subways; flimsy white bread in the place of the caraway-and-molasses-infused rye loaves he loved; and oversize, bright-red strawberries that were available at every produce market but tasted like nothing.



MAX AVDEEV (5)

PLENTY Clockwise from top: Boris Fishman and Oksana; Oksana's chicken-liver pie; canned delicacies from the Ukrainian countryside; pork fatback on sourdough rye, with a chaser; and Oksana serving borscht at her home in Ukraine.

In one emotionally revealing anecdote, Mr. Fishman describes the time he redeemed a 24-pack of Pepsi cans for money to give to his cash-strapped parents. Unsure of how stringent the return process would be, young Boris painstakingly dried each empty can with a hair dryer and spritzed them with his mother's Parisian perfume before heading to the store. "When my turn came, I gazed at the cashier with helplessness and preemptive resentment," Mr. Fishman writes. "She ran the cans through the scanner with all the ceremony of, well, a bottle return, and handed me a dollar and four nickels. I don't think she looked at me once. I stood there, vibrating slightly."

Like many first-generation immigrants, Mr. Fishman grows to find himself stuck somewhere between his dual identities. Old habits, like packing multiple tin-foil-wrapped bundles of chicken schnitzel, fried cauliflower and a bevy of plums and peaches for even the shortest of plane trips, remain. It is an act of inherited trauma formed in the decades his family spent dueling with scarcity and hunger—first during the Holocaust, then under restrictive Soviet rule. Mr. Fishman is embarrassed by his tin-foil habit and how it outs him as an "other" next to his Sbarro-pizza-noshing seatmate. But, he writes, being prepared is a matter of survival. "Nothing in life—and mine is a disciplined, even self-denying life—feels less bearable than even a faint whisper of hunger."

Meanwhile, he is desperate to shrug off the mantle of his family history. "I've spent my years in America trying to cut so much of them out of myself," he writes of his relatives. He only dates non-Russian women and squabbles with his smothering, risk-averse parents who, despite a great deal of love, can't quite understand their American son. He dreads visiting his grandfather—a brash, pot-bellied hypochondriac (and former black marketeer) named Arkady, at once exasperating and endearing—who still lives in the Brooklyn neighborhood Mr. Fishman abandoned. "I was weary of south Brooklyn," he writes, "the way you give up on someone you cared for once because they're still addicts."

It is around his grandfather's table that Mr. Fishman makes inroads between past and future. There, eating sour-cream-braised rabbit, cabbage *vareniki* with wild-mushroom sauce, pickled watermelon and buckwheat-honey-marinated peppers prepared by his grandfather's Ukrainian home health aide, a "kitchen magician" named Oksana, he is overcome with hunger. The conversation at the table is invariably tense, but the spread is irresistible. Oksana's food is "so ambrosially satisfying to some elemental receptor," Mr. Fishman writes, "that I might as well be a reptile when I sit down at her table."

Oksana's feasts do not offer salvation by themselves. But the ancestral dishes on the table—and the series of cooking lessons she gives Mr. Fishman after a particularly devastating breakup and the severe bout of depression that follows—guide him to a fuller understanding and acceptance of his family and himself.

Fishman still packs chicken schnitzel, fried cauliflower, plums and peaches in tin foil for even the shortest trip.

Mr. Fishman's story—as a refugee, a seeker and an insatiable eater—is inherently compelling. But the book's brilliance lies in the author's self-awareness and honest appraisal of his, and his family's, shortcomings. He writes from the perspective of someone who learned to be comfortable being uncomfortable in his own skin—someone with no secrets left to keep.

Mr. Fishman also writes wonderfully about food. Many of the Russian dishes he describes—braised veal tongue, fried buckwheat patties, liver pie—may be unfamiliar and seem unappetizing to a mainstream American palate. But Mr. Fishman convinces readers to salivate along with him. Describing his grandmother's cooking, he writes, "she made cherry, plum, and raspberry jams so thick, a spoon would stand up in the jars. One of the house specialties involved a thick slab of *polenitsa* bread slathered with 'the noise,' the foam sent up by the jam as it boiled away." The two dozen recipes interspersed throughout the text—for roast chicken with dried fruit and apples, sardines braised in caramelized onions and tomatoes, and braised cabbage with mushrooms—simultaneously enhance the book's narrative and beckon readers to the stove.

By the last third of the book—which chronicles a series of life-altering adventures and the beginning arc of a new romance—it is nearly impossible not to be rooting for the author. Mr. Fishman's struggles and triumphs are uniquely his own, but his most primal desires are universal: to be seen and understood by loved ones, and to eat like a czar.

Ms. Koenig is the author of four cookbooks. Her most recent is "Little Book of Jewish Feasts."