

by Yuri Lotman and Jelena Pogosjan

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Many writers and researchers around the world now write prodigiously on the topic that engages all of us several times a day: food. And its history. It used to be that those of us interested in the history of food found the pickings pretty slim. Yuri Lotman and Jelena Pogosjan's **High Society Dinners: Dining in Tsarist Russia** deserves a wide readership among scholars and researchers and writers currently working on food- and culinary-related subjects, as well as curious general readers.

High Society Dinners, originally published posthumously in Russian in 1996 – Yuri Lotman having died in 1993 – technically consists of a number of menus for meals served at the opulent house of Petr Pavlovich Durnovo – Adjutant-General of the Tsar's Imperial Suite – during the period ranging from the spring of 1857 through 1858. Durnovo included diary-like comments with most of these menus, making the material an even richer source. Lotman devotes over 116 pages to a description of Russian cuisine its history, the background to the menus, and social structure and mores. He consistently references Russian literature as a source for culinary comments and digressed on French cuisine – highly important at the time among the Russian noble class. And, in addition, he relies on Ekaterina Avdeeva's 1842 cookbook, *The Experienced Russian Housewife's Handbook*.

The menus themselves would be useful enough for what they reveal about culinary culture in Russia, but Yuri Lotman's commentary is invaluable, dissecting the dining rituals and social circles of the participants. Durnovo's menus and guest lists, interspersed with extracts from

family letters and the leading newspapers and journals of the day, set in context the domestic and gastronomic underpinnings of life in this group at the heart of the Russian empire.

High Society Dinners offers extraordinary insight into the domestic arrangements of the Russian aristocracy. It opens up a window onto a historical period of great interest via detailed primary material not normally associated with food and culinary matters.