Introduction:

Unlike Chinese, Japanese, or British tea cultures, in which the tea itself is the purpose for tea-drinking traditions; in Russia, the unique process of making tea distinguishes it from other tea cultures. For example, Zavarka is a product of the Russian desire to mix and layer tea into the right flavor. Highly concentrated, Zavarka is made by adding a small amount of boiling water to loose tea before soaking it in a teapot. Tea is more than simply a beverage in Russia, it’s a social event transcending the drink itself, shared between friends and frequently lasting for hours.

History:

The history behind the introduction of tea to Russia is vague, although it probably entered the country from either Mongolia or China. According to legend, a Mongolian ruler gifted tea to Mikhail Romanov, the founder of the Romanov dynasty, through the first Russian ambassador sent from the north. It’s possible; however, that the tea never made it to the czar himself. Instead, the ambassador may have believed the tea unimportant and declined to take the gift.

Another explanation is tea first entered Russia through a camel convey after the 1689 territorial treaty between Russia and China during the reign of Peter the Great. This treaty simultaneously established a clear border and confined all trade between the two nations to a single spot on the frontier. The subsequent outposts were the gateways to the immeasurable wealth flowing between the countries, although the miserable conditions of the outpost’s isolation never reflected this exchange.

Throughout the centuries following this treaty, Russian caravans would travel four thousand miles from St. Petersburg or Moscow, laden with precious furs to exchange with Chinese traders from Mai-mai-cheng (Buy Sell City). Each convey took almost a year and consisted of two to three-hundred camels, with each camel carrying an average of six-hundred pounds.

Unlike other European nations, Russia bought more Chinese cotton than silk, but its main import was tea. Prior to 1735, tea was still too costly at fifteen rubles a pound for the average person to afford, although Russia was still importing an average of six-hundred camel loads of tea each year. In 1735; however, Czarina Elizabeth established a regular private caravan trade, which increased importation and decreased prices to such an extent that by the time Catherine the Great died in 1796, Russia was consuming over six-thousand camel loads, equivalent to 3.5 million pounds of tea, each year.

Samovar:

One of the most essential components to Russian tea culture, the Samovar, literally translated to “self-boiler”, most likely originated from either the British or the Dutch. Strong evidence; however, points to the British, a theory backed by the high technological growth in England during the late 1680s, the same time that both the British and the Dutch manufactured the first vessels to brew either tea or coffee.

A large urn-shaped vessel, the Samovar is made of metal with a metal pipe inside and a small spout at the bottom. To boil the water, the pipe would have been filled with fuel, the outside container with water and pine cones, while charcoal and wood chips were placed underneath and lit on fire, although electricity is used today. A small teapot containing Zavarka is placed on top, the tea concentrate heated by the hot air passing through the Samovar.

In the three major tea cultures of the world: Britain, Japan, and China, a teapot is used to seep tea leaves and the mixture is poured directly from the pot into a cup for drinking. In Russia, the brew is diluted with water directly in a cup, hence a Samovar to heat the water.

Historically, in most of western Europe, each home would have been equipped with an open fireplace, making it easy to boil water. In Russia; however, each home contained a massive Russian stove, which lacked a naked flame. The Samovar made up for this difference and allowed the Russians to enjoy tea like their western counterparts.

As the Samovar became adopted into Russian culture, the city of Tula became the center of its production from 1740 up until the revolution of 1917. After the revolution, production began again, but was never able to reach post-war levels. Today, most Russian use a tea kettle, but the Samovar can still be seen occasionally as a family heirloom or in use in the countryside.

Modern Tea Etiquette:

Tea culture in Russia is fundamentally a social event, similar to Britain’s afternoon tea, although Russian culture dictates that tea may be served any time, any place.

There are three traditional elements to any Russian tea party: a porcelain tea set, a Samovar, and the tea itself, typically served with food. The Samovar may not be present on a modern-day table; however, because of an increase in kettle use.

Every Russian family normally has several porcelain teapots of varying sizes and decoration, with the plainer pots used for everyday drinking. The most valued porcelain items were traditionally made at the Lomonosov Porcelain Factory, due to the high quality of production. A classical Russian tea set from this company commonly sold in various souvenir shops is their “Cobalt Net”. Russians also drink tea out of glass cups nestled inside metal glass holders.

Russians traditionally drank a Chinese tea, such as Keemun, for the better part of three centuries. During the 20th century; however, preferences began to shift and now most Russian prefer the flavor and aroma of Ceylon tea. Both teas are frequently served next to each other, to respect both the historic tradition of Chinese tea and the modern preference for Ceylon tea.

The tea itself is rarely served with either milk or cream because both change the flavor of the beverage. Instead, tea is served with sugar and lemon. The lemon is normally cut into thin slices, forming a perfect circle that is aesthetically pleasing both on the plate and in the tea. A single sugar cube may be placed between the lips for the tea to soak through as one drinks.

Finally, it is considered rude in Russian etiquette to serve tea without some kind of sweet, such as gingerbread biscuits, waffles, cookies, pancakes with jam, or pie. It is also considered rude to refuse a cup of tea if offered and tea is traditionally served after the shots of vodka have been consumed.

A tea party can and often does last for hours, as the conversation flows, deals are made, and secrets revealed. Tea in Russia is much more than leaves and hot water, it is an entire lifestyle contained by the seeming simplicity of one drink.