Broccoli and Other Tales of Food and Love
By Lara Vapnyar
Pantheon
148 pages; $20

Lara Vapnyar is a quick study. When she left Moscow for Brooklyn in 1994, the 23-year-old emigrant didn’t speak much English. Her husband, “like all the educated Russians,” got a job as a computer programmer, while she raised their two kids and honed her language skills by reading and then writing. “Lonely and starved for conversation” she began to invent characters. Feeling “a little bit like being from Atlantis,” Vapnyar tried to capture the vicissitudes of Russian émigré life in New York City. In 2003, she published a collection of short stories, There Are Jews in My House. Memoirs of a Muse, her first novel, appeared in 2006.

Broccoli and Other Tales of Food and Love continues the conversation. Six witty and winsome stories link food with seduction, sex, love and longing. And Vapnyar concludes the volume with the recipes for meatballs, spinach, borscht, broccoli and the "plebeian," "aristocratic" and "something-Americans-might-eat" versions of Salad Olivier, the centerpiece of New Year's Eve meals in Russia.

Although they remember the regimentation and repression they left behind, Vapnyar’s émigrés don’t talk about it. And, amid America’s abundance and anonymity, they’re often nostalgic for the sights, scents and sensations of home - even though they have no intention of returning.

In "Borscht," Sergey, who lays carpets, awakens with "an erection and a headache." Lenka, his wife, agreed to remain in Russia for a year while he earned money in America. Eighteen months have passed. Sergey arranges an assignation with Alla, but when he sees her "red wrinkled neck, blotchy face and smudges of mascara in deep creases around her eyes," he feels "woozy, almost panicky, with disappointment." However, the odd couple connect at the kitchen table, as she serves him a steaming bowl of borscht and a dark brick of rye bread - and shows snapshots of her two daughters. Pouring vodka into two shot glasses, Alla makes a toast: "For going home? No matter if they’re waiting for us or not." Sergey feels "a chill on his tongue followed by a great immediate warmth spreading down his throat and chest."

Vapnyar is especially adept at supplying vignettes that reveal the character of her characters. In "Luda and Milena," the best story in the collection, she follows two Russian-born 70-somethings as they use spinach pies, cheese puffs and meatballs to compete for the attention and affection of an elderly gentleman on "International Feast Day" in their English as a second language course at Brooklyn...
College.

Milena, Vapnyar writes, has nine chairs in her apartment, purchased at garage sales, all but one of them used as stands for large photographs and posters, vases and "as hangers for her dresses, because the sight of good clothes never failed to cheer her up." On the ninth, she keeps her pills, "some squeezed out tubes of expensive antiwrinkle cream" and a sketch of the man who had been her lover for 20 years.

Luda's favorite acquisition was a leather armchair, which she had rescued from a garbage pile six blocks from her apartment. Paying a taxi driver 10 bucks to deliver "the huge thing," she was so happy when it arrived "she added two more dollars and half of an Entenman’s apple pie as a tip."

Unfortunately, Vapnyar doesn't always trust readers to figure out for themselves the significance of such delicious details. She tends to tell, after she shows. "Slicing Sauteed Spinach," for example, is about Ruzena's affair with a man she meets at the library, while waiting to check out books on 18th-century birth control and feminine hygiene. Since he's still living with his fiancée, he asks that she not tell anyone about their relationship. Assuring herself that "it's his moral dilemma, not mine," the request doesn't bother Ruzena: "She even liked it in a way. She didn't have a boyfriend, but she had a secret." Why, one wonders, does Vapnyar feel compelled to add: "Her life had become more interesting with a secret: more mysterious, less straightforward. Loneliness, if not disappearing entirely, didn't follow her as closely as before."

The émigrés in Broccoli and Other Tales of Food and Love experience their new lives as variations on a single theme. They are in America, but not yet of America. They can't go home again - and don't really want to. They yearn. The women - and all the protagonists except Sergey are women - are destined to be disappointed and ditched by their men. They're making do, but not yet able to move on.

And so it is with Lara Vapnyar. Like her characters, she has been there and done that. She, too, says she prefers a pile of mashed potatoes and a piece of pickled herring to all that's nouvelle. In three books now, Vapnyar has captured a slice of émigré life, elegantly and elegiacally. It may be time for this talented young writer to move on and fill her fiction with a new cuisine.

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