

A Door To A New World

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Culture is a door to a new world. It is the shared language of a community, the holidays that are celebrated, and the religion that is practiced. It's the recipes that are made, the material objects passed down through generations, and the ways we communicate with each other. Culture is what forms our way of being—it's what shapes our beliefs and values and influences our behaviors. For example, tipping somebody in Lebanon is considered essential, yet it is seen as disrespectful to do so in Japan. Our world is becoming bigger, richer, and more culturally diverse. Understanding different cultures is more than having an appreciation for differences; it's paving the way for a world where we all rise together. You engage in understanding culture every day, in small ways and in large ones. I believe that those who live and experience more than one culture on a regular basis are lucky, as they can benefit from both. I grew up in a Lebanese-Russian household, which has exposed me to both countries' cultures.

Lebanese culture is incredibly diverse. It was a home to Phoenicians, Assyrians, Greeks, Romans, Ottoman Turks and the French. This resulted in Lebanon having a very rich history. The main culture is fundamentally conservative and shows a great deal of respect for traditions, drawing on many Arab customs. However, many practices and lifestyles can reflect European influences. This is partly due to its coastline's proximity to Europe (a key point of contact for trade between the East and West), as well as a period of French occupation in the 20th century. Ultimately, Lebanese society is highly diverse. It is common to see both traditional Lebanese attire and modern European fashion in city streets. As a result, the Lebanese people are familiar with a plurality of lifestyles and are often capable of easily fitting in with other societies.

The Canaanites, the first known settlers in Lebanon, spoke a Semitic language. In the Hellenistic era Greek was spoken along with Aramaic. Latin later became common, and finally the Arab invasion in the eighth century introduced and assured the hegemony of Arabic that we know today. Today, all Lebanese people speak Arabic. The Lebanese language exhibits a lot of French

influences, especially with words such as *balcon* (balcony), and *gateau* (cake). You will often see close friends greet each other with three kisses on the cheek, alternating cheeks in the French style. Hospitality also is very important. Travelers to Lebanon are often received genially. It is not uncommon for locals to offer food and services to tourists for free.

Beirut, Lebanon's capital was once known as the "Paris of the Middle East" and nomadic tribes who passed through brought all sorts of exotic delights. They brought dried fruits and spices from the Far East, ideal foods for transport as they didn't spoil in the scorching sun. The influence of tribes from ancient Levant, a region that includes modern-day Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, and Palestine, is reflected in many Lebanese traditional dishes, such as *hummus* and *man'oushe*. The choice of ingredients in Lebanese food, the way it's presented, and the order in which it's served is a significant and vital part of Lebanese culture. By far, the most significant impact on Lebanese cuisine came from the Ottoman Empire, which occupied Lebanon from 1516 to 1918. Under the Ottoman influence, lamb became the meat of choice, stuffing made of minced meat and vegetables became very popular. Armenian food, such as *Soujouk* and *Makanek*, is also commonly found in Lebanese cuisine, since approximately 156,000 Armenians reside there.

Music and dance are important in Lebanon. In most family gatherings there is plenty of dancing, and it's not all modern pop and rock. Lebanon has its own version of a traditional Arab dance — the *Dabke*. In Lebanon's rural areas, roofs were originally made of mud and twigs. With the change of season from cold to warm, the roof would begin to crack. To fix their homes, the dirt had to be compacted evenly which required stomping the dirt hard in a uniform, so villagers would form a line and stomp on the mud. This eventually became known as *Dabke*. It evolved into a flashy dance performed at gatherings and events. It is prevalent throughout the Arab world, and every country — even every city — has its own variation. With Lebanon's history of war, social change, and uprising, it's not a surprise that a lot of writing and art has risen from the strife. Many local authors have reached international fame and have impacted the lives of

thousands. Gibran Khalil Gibran and Mikhail Naimy's work has been translated into over 50 languages.

Traditional Lebanese handicrafts are considered to be a major part of the living cultural heritage in the rural areas of Lebanon. Agricultural activities in Lebanon date back to Phoenician times. That period witnessed the creation of baskets to aid with harvesting crops. Baskets were produced from the raw materials found in the region, including reed, grass, and palm leaves. Rustic baskets were utilized to carry figs, olives, and different fruits during harvesting season. For centuries, rural communities were keen to weave baskets and sustained the handicraft for several generations as part of their heritage. Archaeologists have found traces of pottery in Lebanon from the Neolithic Period, c. 5000 BC. In almost every kitchen and house in rural regions, you can find pottery objects such as bowls, plates, jars (used for conserving olive oil and vinegar) as well as water jars (made to keep water cool at any time and any season of the year).

Similarly, Russian culture is a valuable piece of the country's intangible heritage, combining traditions from Russia's various ethnic groups, sub-cultures and world views while reflecting its complex history and diverse geographical features. Within Russia's borders more than 120 ethnic groups reside, many with their own national territories, speaking over 100 languages. Over the centuries, the development of Russian culture was heavily influenced by its geographical location between the East and West. Its seemingly limitless and diverse landscape is shown in both artistic and literary works as artists and writers sought to portray the reality of Russia, a reality that could vary greatly depending on the region. Due to its vast territory and the evolution of its civilizations over time, Russia has become the homeland for diverse nationalities whose traditions meshed with the existing culture, gradually transforming it. All of this, in turn, has caused the development of modern-day Russia's cultural richness.

The Russian language was shaped by multiple major influences. These included the 9th-century Christian missionaries Saints Cyril and Methodius, who used Old Church Slavonic in their work

among the Slavs, and Peter the Great (reigned 1682–1725), whose Westernization policies opened Russian to western European languages. Some Russian words derived from German include *Штраф*, originally *Strafe* (penalty). The word *Макияж* was influenced by the French word *maquillage* (make-up).

Russian cuisine was influenced by the country's connection to Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. The vast territory of the country, the wealth of its forests, valleys and rivers, also formed the traditions of the Russian people and its national cuisine. The Slavs cultivated cereals and vegetables, then cooked porridge and soup from them. Traditional Russian recipes include the use of cereals, berries, vegetables, flour and fish. These are products that were present largely in the lives of ordinary people. It is impossible to imagine modern Russian cuisine without a traditional dish as pelmeni. Many people debate about the origins of this dish as different countries around the world have their own versions of it. There are Uzbek *mantı*, and Georgian *khinkali*, and Chinese *xiao-longbao*. Many believe that the recipe came into Russia from China via Siberia, back in the 15th century.

Ballet is a well-known and notable art form coming out of Russia. Founded in 1776, the Bolshoi Ballet is a classical ballet company based at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow and known across the world. Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky, a 19th-century Russian composer, is internationally renowned for "Swan Lake" and the "1812 Overture," among other pieces. There are several museums, which showcase his personal belongings. Russian literature has also had a worldwide impact, with the work of writers like Lev Tolstoy (author of "Anna Karenina" and "War and Peace") and Fyodor Dostoevsky (author of "Crime and Punishment" and "The Brothers Karamazov") still being read around the world.

Russian nesting dolls are popular symbols of the country. These sets of dolls, known as matrioshka dolls, consist of a hollow wooden figure that can be opened to reveal another smaller version of the same image inside, and so on, often with five or more dolls nested inside one another. The painting of each doll, which can be extremely detailed, usually symbolizes a

Russian peasant girl in traditional costume. A style of Russian ceramic, Gzhel, gets its name from a village in the Moscow Oblast where pottery has been produced since the 14th century. The distinctive blue and white surface originated in the 1830s. Today only around thirty villages southeast of Moscow produce the unique Russian handicraft.

Despite these two countries being over 5,000 kilometers apart, they both embrace their culture and keep it alive. They share some similarities, and some differences. I'm truly grateful that I grew up in a household where both sides of my family have held onto old traditions, and I aim to share them with younger generations. When travelling, I enjoy learning about different ways of life, whether it's through trying a country's traditional food or visiting a local museum.