

Food for Thought: Fine, Melancholy Dining --- Russian Restaurants Yearn for Moscow -- And Lighter Food

By Robert Templer

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Singapore's sole Russian restaurant, Shashlik, is 14 years old but it feels as though it might have been around for decades more. With its elderly, amnesiac waiters, its interior so dim and dated it looks like a KGB holding cell, and its plates of beef stroganoff served with crinkle-cut fries and diced mixed vegetables, Shashlik is as gloomy as an evening alone with a volume of Solzhenitsyn.

Yet it was a similar melancholy air that was actually the best thing about the old Queen's Cafe in Hong Kong. Long after everything in Hong Kong had been covered with chrome and marble, it was a fortress of Formica and cheap wooden paneling. It combined Chekhov with old Shanghai, a city where you can still buy Russian pastries and Jewish challah. It was also cheap and, without ever spilling a drop, the old waiters could fill a vodka glass until the meniscus trembled at the brim.

The Queen's Cafe was set up by a family who had cooked for White Russians in Shanghai before 1949. It served mediocre borscht, shashlik and chicken Kiev, as well as heavy Russian cakes and breads. Gradually it took on something of a cult status. The film director Wong Kar-Wai even featured it in his movie "Days of Being Wild," as it was one of the few places in Hong Kong that had barely changed since the 1960s, when the movie was set.

FULL TEXT

There is always something ineffably sad about Russian restaurants. Dowdy, crepuscular places, they always speak of lingering regrets and long lives in exile. Behind lace curtains and amid dusty samovars, you always get a sense of ennui and longing for Moscow.

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was one of the few places in Hong Kong that had barely changed since the 1960s, when the movie was set.

Inevitably, the restaurant was closed so the building could be redeveloped, doubtless into another much-needed shopping mall. But the name was revived. A group of investors that includes actor and Cantopop star Leslie Cheung Kwok-Wing opened a new version in Causeway Bay, keeping some of the decor and staff.

This may be a sign of the times. In the search for new ideas for restaurants, Russian food may be poised for a comeback. For most people, Russian cuisine means little beyond caviar, but in fact it is a varied and inflected cuisine that brings together a host of influences from east and west.

For centuries, most of the influences came from Asia. One of the key dates is 1638 when the Mongol leader Altyn Khan sent 200 pounds (90 kilograms) of tea to the first Romanov czar, Mikhail Fedorovich. Spices such as cinnamon, cloves and pepper also came on the trade routes through Central Asia.

Peter the Great turned the country toward Europe, and from that time on it developed a cuisine that blended local ingredients with Scandinavian and French influences. The Russian Orthodox calendar was filled with fasting days that restricted the eating of milk, eggs and meat so the cuisine has a greater emphasis on fish and vegetables. There is a preference for the sour taste of pickles and dark breads as well as a love of pies and dumplings.

Though suited for long winters and harsh climates, this cuisine of sour cream and heavy bread, fatty meats and glistening soups could do with an update.

One sign of a renaissance of all things Russian is the re-opening of the Russian Tea Room in New York after what must be the most lavish and costly restoration ever of a restaurant. The owner, Werner Le Roy, has spent more than \$20 million turning a venerable but shabby restaurant popular with actors and agents into a fantasy of the czarist past. There is even a working diorama of the Kremlin with a miniature czar who comes out of his palace to take a salute. Downstairs is a ballroom lined in mirrors that are etched with dancing bears and frolicking hares. Bears also dance on the shimmering bronze chandeliers and on 50 candelabras.

Below that is a dining room where a five-meter-tall, bear-shaped acrylic aquarium rotates at one end of the room. (It was supposed to be filled with specially bred small sturgeon, but they kept on getting sucked into the water pump. Instead, a single goldfish swims around the bear's stomach like a living Damien Hurst art work.) Beneath a huge Tiffany glass ceiling, there is a towering gilt tree decorated with \$500,000 worth of football-sized Venetian glass eggs.

The only room that has been kept mostly the same is the once-shabby downstairs dining room that was featured in movies like "Tootsie" and Woody Allen's "Manhattan." It still has large red banquettes, polished samovars and walls lined with third-rate Russian modernists and photographs of Russian dancers. (The Russian Tea Room was founded in 1927 by former members of the Imperial Ballet who had fled the Revolution). The staff have Russian tunics decorated with angular motifs at the shoulder -- I'm told they come from Constructivist paintings, but they give the waiters the look of attendees at a Star Trek convention.

There are walls of copper and blue glass, enough gold leaf to re-cover every temple roof in Bangkok and too many types of marble and precious stone to name. Ice sculptures of the Kremlin are pushed around on trolleys, loaded with bottles of champagne and vodka. The overall effect is more Caesar's Palace than Winter Palace but its scintillant excess is not without a kitsch charm.

The food? Well it was never a priority at the old restaurant and it still plays second fiddle to the atmosphere. Mr. LeRoy has brought in Fabrice Canelle to liven up the Russian menu. There is caviar (about 30 kilograms of it is served a week), borscht, kulibyak of salmon (a type of pie made with thin crepes) and pirogi (small pies). But Mr. Canelle has also lightened and refreshed some of the heavier classics from a country where the words "you've gained weight" are a heady compliment.

A tasting menu offers a few striking touches -- a succulent piece of salmon comes with pickled watermelon that is alternately sweet and sharp. A radish soup is a lighter, paler version of borscht brightened with horseradish and smoked fish. Quail Kiev was oily and perhaps too lush -- it is a dish that may work better with blander chicken. A heavy Georgian nut cake was well matched with a delicious and sharp sour-cream sorbet.

The food is much better than it was in the past but amid all the glitter and excess, something has been lost. The restaurant has shed its links to the past and its connection to the Slavic gloom and nostalgia that once made the Russian Tea Room and the Queen's Cafe so captivating. Like so many renovations, it has scoured away the history and atmosphere.

Send comments to Robert Templer at awsj.food@awsj.com

Borscht for the Masses
The Queen's Cafe is at 8 Hysan Avenue, Eton Tower, Causeway Bay, Hong Kong. Tel: 852-2576-2659. Appetizers \$8 to \$13, main dishes \$16 to \$26.
Shashlik is at 545 Orchard Road No.06-19, Far Eastern Shopping Centre, Singapore. Tel: 65-732-6401. Appetizers \$5 to \$12, main dishes \$15 to \$18.
The Russian Tea Room is at 150 West 57th Street, New York. Tel: 212-974-2111. Web site: www.russiantearoom.com . Appetizers \$6.50 to \$17.50. Main courses \$13 to \$34.

DETAILS

Business indexing term:	Subject: Restaurants; Industry: 72251 : Restaurants and Other Eating Places
Subject:	Restaurants; Motion pictures; Food
Publication title:	Asian Wall Street Journal; Victoria, Hong Kong
Pages:	P8
Number of pages:	0
Publication year:	2000
Publication date:	Feb 25, 2000
Section:	Personal Journal
Publisher:	Dow Jones &Company Inc.
Place of publication:	Victoria, Hong Kong
Country of publication:	United States, Victoria, Hong Kong
Publication subject:	Business And Economics--Banking And Finance
ISSN:	03779920
Source type:	Newspaper
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	NEWSPAPER
ProQuest document ID:	315472283
Document URL:	http://search.proquest.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/newspapers/food-thought-fine-melancholy-dining-russian/docview/315472283/se-2?accountid=11311
Copyright:	Copyright Dow Jones &Company Inc Feb 25, 2000
Last updated:	2023-11-20
Database:	ProQuest One Business,ProQuest Central

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