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Moscow's Underachieving Restaurant Kings

By The Moscow Times

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Imagine for a moment that the coach of an Olympic swimming team is asked what his goals for the squad are in the upcoming games, and his answer is, "Oh, you know — that they swim rather well. We're not gunning for any gold medals."

"How's that?" you might ask. Perhaps you posit that he's downplaying the competitive aspect of the, err, competition, in order to focus on ... diplomacy? Admittedly, the Olympics are certainly not just about the medal count or the glory of the podium. But you still might think the guy's a little cuckoo, right? And that he might not be able to, you know, drive his kids to victory?

In the world of Moscow dining, an equivalent sentiment is, apparently, completely kosher. A few weeks ago, the fine folks at culture magazine Afisha interviewed the two men who are arguably the most powerful players in the world of Moscow dining: Dmitry Sergeyev, one of the heads of restaurant conglomerate Ginza Project, and Arkady Novikov, who runs

a similar holding. Ginza has more than 30 places in Moscow alone, with dozens more in St. Petersburg, and Novikov has just about a half century in Moscow, including some of the city's best known. To extend the analogy, these would be the two men in charge of the Chinese and U.S. Olympic teams, respectively — the former slowly overtaking the latter, but both sporting huge rosters, with many dominant performers who, one would think, would compete to be top of the heap.

And yet this is one exchange the two of them had with the Afisha journalist:

Afisha: What's popular right now [in the Moscow dining scene]?

Novikov: I don't go after what's fashionable — I go after results. That means large numbers of guests, high-quality food and adequate service. That's it. It's the formula for any restaurant. To say that I want to turn the world upside down and make the best restaurant in the city — that's not true. Do you want [to do that]?

Sergeyev: No.

I understand that, unlike heading an Olympic team, running restaurants is a business. But these guys aren't McDonald's franchise owners or food court managers. They are responsible for many of the city's most luxe establishments, a few of which are, incidentally, mentioned often when people talk about the best places in the city to dine. So are they being disingenuous, trying not to provoke a culinary arms race? Or maybe they feel that icy Muscovites want them to appear aloof — to seem like Men in Control — instead of like pompous upstarts?

Maybe. Or maybe it is, sadly, just further confirmation that the Moscow dining scene is dominated by underachieving (in the gastronomic department), food-indifferent executives — not by, say, chefs. And that in Moscow, restaurants, which are institutions that always stand at the intersection of culture and business, are often more corporate tools than profferers of anything inspired, let alone inspiring, as the rare epiphanic food can be.

The direction they steer the conversation with Afisha seems to support this notion. They talk politics — Novikov is a member of the party that has so many successful businessmen, United Russia — and then they discuss the rapid pace at which both companies open new places. (In 2010, Ginza debuted seven new ones, Novikov three.) Novikov also grumbles about high electricity prices. Food is barely mentioned, except when Novikov, carping once again, calls on Russian farmers to get to work already, saying that there are very few local products available at the moment.

That seems to me to be an admirable cause. But I wish he wanted to turn those products into medal-worthy dishes, too.

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