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Day 1 at Omnivore: Turnips Take Center Stage

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Seaweed butter, rye-bread spaghetti, gooseberry mascarpone cream, leek powder, pine cone jam, turnip confit—with such a parade of ingredients, the Omnivore Food Festival earned its name in its first day in Moscow. And those curious preparations were featured in just the first three cooking demos.

The day began with the festival tent mostly empty, minus a handful of spectators and the crew of jolly organizers, who had arrived in Moscow from France at 3 a.m. Tuesday morning, then had hotel issues and were forced to put up at the notorious Kosmos hotel (notorious for, among other things, the wealth of the prostitutes who stalk the premises). Somehow, all the group members were alert and cheery nonetheless.

Soon enough, more spectators and, mostly, photographers and journalists crowded around the tent's metal prep tables, and the aloof pony-tailed chef of Delicatessen, Ivan Shishkin, began introducing his dishes. He promised three in total, two of them to be based around

the humble turnip (one of the few products currently in season here in Russia, he explained). Omnivore promotes new cuisine, and, as festival founder Luc Dubanchet pointed out later in the day, the new cuisine of the day nudges the simple and the base to the center of the plate, replacing the grand and extravagant products that typically sit there. So, in showcasing Russian cuisine, Shishkin switched out sturgeon caviar and Kamchatka crab legs for turnips and rye bread.

The chef known best for his burgers opened with a kind of appetizer that required no cooking, just assembly, of marinated turnip slices sprinkled with wasabi-coated sesame seeds. With that dish quickly constructed and set aside, Shishkin unwrapped something that resembled a two-foot-long Tootsie Roll. The sepia cylinder turned out to be pasta dough made of dark rye bread (actual bread, not rye flour), some wheat flour, and water. He proceeded to push this through a black-and-gold contraption that attached to the end of a coffee table—some kind of antediluvian Italian pasta maker. Plopping the resulting noodles into boiling water, Shishkin placed paper-thin turnip slices into sunflower oil to poach them and then sliced up a few leaves of the herb called *cheremsha* in Russian, known in English as ramson, a long leaf with a mild garlicky flavor. When the noodles finished cooking, all components were combined, and voila, dish number two took form.

The finished product couldn't exactly be called appetizing—the noodles were vaguely reminiscent of feces, a resemblance reinforced by the grass-like ramson strewn on top—though upon tasting, I found it had an intriguing combination of savory, tangy, and sweet notes and a pleasant range of textures. It seemed to be a rite-of-passage kind of dish, like a song penned by a gifted but still-green guitarist that reveals deep knowledge of theory and modern trends, but that no one is sure he likes.

The dish also seemed to strike an odd pose in comparison to the upright (if also fancily dressed) burgers and pizzas that line most of Delicatessen's menu. Dubanchet asked whether the turnip appetizer was on the menu at Delicatessen, and Shishkin replied that no, it wasn't, adding that he had about 3,000 dishes he would like to put on his menu, but that that just wasn't possible. (Which warms the heart to hear, given the tendency among Moscow restaurants to have novella-length menus...) Shishkin hinted to me recently that the Deli crew has expansion plans in the works, though, so perhaps those Asian-tinged turnips will have their day yet, perhaps with other more subtle and boundary-stretching fare alongside them.

Shishkin finished with a dessert of sliced dried persimmon leaned against a cloud of sweet baked ricotta and topped with pine cone jam. This ethereal mix was promptly devoured by audience members and journalists (among whose clamoring ranks I am stubbornly proud not to have been). The murmurs of satisfaction emitted from those who got a nibble make me assume it was a successful combination.

Next came Brooklyn-based chef Carlo Mirarchi, whose restaurant Roberta's was described by Dubanchet as a pizzeria-cum-fine-dining café-cum-cocktail bar—which is topped, by the way, with a greenhouse where they grow chili peppers and other produce for the restaurant. Mirarchi cooked only two dishes, both with squab. There is less to say about them—one was a pasta with a tomato-and-squab sauce topped with shaved frozen fois gras, the other a pan-roasted squab breast with gooseberries and ramsons, and neither were complex preparations.

I had to make my exit soon after the squab had sung, so tales from day one end there, but look out for an interview with Mirarchi coming soon, as well as for exploits from day two at Omnivore...

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