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Anatoly Komm and Gastronomy Beyond Food

By The Moscow Times

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Moscow's dining scene's king of pomp and bombast, the inimitable chef Anatoly Komm, made an unusual comment in culture magazine Afisha last month. Komm is known for making inflammatory remarks, such as one that Russians "prefer to eat [expletive]" and that modern Russia is, in a culinary sense, like "a wild forest full of wild animals." He has, in other words, made his low opinion of Russian eaters abundantly clear.

The comment he made in Afisha touched on a different, though related, topic. It appeared in a very cool article about the creative process of various artists, and Komm described creating a dish he calls Luzhaika, which means "lawn" or "grassy field." The dish is a complicated and really rather striking composition — he is, for all his huff, an accomplished chef — of asparagus coins, sorrel sauce, poached eggs, truffle "snow" and a bunch of other things. He details the feeling he wants to communicate with this combination and the nitty-gritty of how everything is cooked, but the first words from him that appear on the page are the following:

"At these kinds of restaurants, you're not talking about stuffing your face. It's about the idea that ingredients are an artistic tool of the chef with the help of which he wants to tell you a story. The stomach does not interest me at all. I'm interested in evoking a response from your heart and mind." (Emphasis mine.)

Ignoring the implicit disdain in Komm's comments for the utilitarian side of dining — I'll get to that — his more radical declaration is what interested me. It's true that most haute fare is known for leaving you peckish afterward, but Komm doesn't even mention flavor as a priority — he talks about the "artistic" side of cuisine, tapping into your emotions. Asparagus with poached egg and truffle sounds pretty scrumptious to me, but he doesn't seem to care exactly whether it is or not (and I'm guessing he would disapprove of my particular descriptor), as long as it tells the story he wants to tell.

Which begs the question: Is this a kind of "post-food" gastronomy? Because don't we think of food as that which provides physical sustenance? Which Komm's dish is explicitly not aiming to do?

Komm is not alone in his eschewal of the more primal functions of cuisine. One of the world's mega chefs, the dynamo from Catalonia, Ferran Adria, founder of what many consider the best restaurant in the world, El Bulli, has made it clear that he cares very much about flavor. And I would assume, given that meals at El Bulli can include as many as 35 courses, that diners generally leave sated, and possibly even with their belts loosened a notch. But Adria has inspired an entire generation of chefs, especially in Spain, who have taken his innovative approaches to cooking and are running wild with them — or, some might say, running amok. In a recent New York Times piece about the legacy left by El Bulli, which is closing July 30, a term coined by Adria disciple Andoni Luis Aduriz is mentioned, one he uses to describe a new, feeling-centric style of gastronomy:

"Technomotion, a fusion of technology and emotion. (The word 'food' is not represented.) 'It consists in finding the inspiration in a landscape, and embodying the taste, aroma and sometimes the emotion the place contributed to you,' Mr. Dacosta said." Mr. Dacosta is Quique Dacosta, another avant-garde Spanish chef, known, the article says, for his "edible landscapes."

One can identify this sort of "edible landscape" in Komm's Luzhaika, but there are far more grandiose examples. Take a "young Mozart of pastry," Spanish chef Jordi Roca, whose exploits at the restaurant El Celler de Can Roca were described by the New Yorker's Adam Gopnik earlier this year in the pages of that magazine. Gopnik asks Roca whether he has a dessert that really reaches conceptually, and the chef replies that he does:

"'Yes, there's one I'm working on. I haven't really ... perfected it yet. You see, I'm a big fan of F.C. Barcelona' — the football team — 'and I wanted to make a dessert that would re-create the emotions Lionel Messi feels when he scores a goal.'" (Lionel Messi being the famous Argentine soccer star who plays for F.C. Barcelona.)

Gopnik is then served the dish, which is an outrageously extravagant display. It includes audio narration of Messi racing toward the goal during a match; various edible soccer balls and a white candy net; fake grass that emits a true grassy aroma; and instructions given to Gopnik by the server for a specific order in which to consume the myriad edible pieces.

For me, just a description of this dish brings a variety of associations to mind, including children's birthday cakes, as well as the Seinfeld character George Castanza's futile quest to combine the pleasures/emotions of hot pastrami, television and human love.

In actually eating the small balls filled with passion fruit cream and chocolate pop rocks, Gopnik feels something of what the chef wanted him to feel — that ecstatic rush Messi must get when netting a score for Barcelona. The problem for him is that he wanted some guidance for home dessert cooking, and so was not, obviously, much helped.

A lot of people pooh-pooh such edgy cuisine for further proliferating laboratory techniques like foams, jellies and other admittedly overused no-longer-novelties from so-called molecular gastronomy. Perhaps the moaning about such methods is justified. But I think it bears pointing out that molecular cuisine and so-called "technomotion" cuisine are different, even if laboratory-type methods are incorporated in technomotion cooking. Molecular gastronomy is a set of techniques, while technomotion food conveys a message.

There are plenty of eaters, chefs and journalists alike who disparage this conceptual cuisine, too, though, waxing rhetorically about why chefs can't just cook traditional, or somehow "normal," delicious food. But I say let those who choose to do so eat their exploding-soccer-ball cakes. To me, questioning the merit of such cuisine is kind of like lovers of Renaissance painting writing off all the Jackson Pollacks of the world for their failure to color inside the lines. If there can be art that breaks all the rules, why can't there be food that does so, too?

Those who want a full stomach will still have their pick of places to eat, simple and sophisticated alike. As New York restaurateur Danny Meyer said in the New York Times about Adria: "He inspired a generation of chefs as performance artists — selling an experience, if not always an act of restoration. In the end, I suspect that the umami one gets from old-fashioned techniques like roasting and sautéing will win out over sous vide."

At its worst, this food as performance art is avoidable. But at its best, food as a field for play — especially when that play involves fancy toys like liquid nitrogen and edible seaweeds — is fun.

And that's Komm's problem. He is anything but fun. His modus operandi is to be disgruntled. As Russians have continually spurned his attempts to run a successful restaurant in Russia that serves conceptual food, he steams and spouts about his compatriots' culinary backwardness instead of, say, trying to improve his marketing or encouraging people to try new things.

What Komm's doing culinarily is not, it turns out, all that radical when compared with others in the world. His take on Russian cuisine still does strike me as interesting —and I think more Russians would think so too if he didn't so frequently call them yokels when it comes to dining. Maybe most people here are not yet prepared to shell out $300 for food that won't fill them up and that they have to think about in order to appreciate — but he doesn't strengthen his hand, or win many new fans, by lambasting everyone for it.

If he wants instant domestic fandom, he could always put some soccer balls onto his grassy field like Roca did. Russians may still be meat-and-potatoes folks for the most part, but they're just as rabid about their football as the Iberians.

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