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Meat-Free No Longer Bourgeois

By Alex Chachkevitch

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A vendor selling corn on the cob near metro Dynamo. Vegetarian restaurants have noticed a jump in diners. **Vladimir Filonov**

When Ekanga Davova decided to become a vegetarian in 1993 in an effort to cleanse her body, it made her the odd one out in her social circle.

Davova, an Uzbek native who was then 25, recalls her friends' extreme wonder and disbelief with her "new" lifestyle, which excluded meat, fish and poultry.

"It was hard to keep up with it then because there were no other vegetarians around me," she said. "I struggled to find inspiration."

Vegetarian Sabji Maharaja (Jagannath)

You will need:

- Fresh vegetables: zucchini, bell peppers, cauliflower, olives, eggplant, tomatoes and broccoli

- Cheese
- Buttered bean sprouts with sesame seeds
- Other greens and spices of your choice
- Flat bread

Preparation:

1. Chop vegetables, mix and stew for 5 to 10 minutes in a pan, adding cheese and spices.
2. Serve on flat bread.

Davova, now 42, works at Cafe Ganga, a vegan restaurant in Moscow, with a staff of about 30 other vegans and vegetarians, and she said the environment for those abstaining from meat is blooming.

Vegetarian restaurants such as Cafe Ganga and Jagannath have been around for more than a decade but have noticed a jump in visitors in the past three years.

The trend may be reflecting a tectonic shift in gastronomic habits of Muscovites and Russians elsewhere, who are finally drifting to vegetarianism after decades of rejecting "bourgeois" meat-free diets.

The way is long. There are no recent statistics, but data from the mid-2000s indicates that only about 200,000 Russians — 0.14 percent of the population — were actually vegetarian, according to figures circulating on Russian vegetarianism web sites. By comparison, according to the European Vegetarian Union, Germany and Britain combined boast more than 12 million vegetarians.

But efforts to educate people about vegetarian and vegan cuisines and philosophies, as well as raw foodism — a diet based on unprocessed food — are spreading, even sparking an annual vegetarian festival that last year drew about 2,000 people.

The second vegetarian festival, which will be held from July 29 to July 31 in the Kaluga region, will offer informational panels, seminars, live entertainment and a vegetarian market and — most important — the chance to taste delicious vegetarian food, said Yevgenia Repnikova, a coordinator for 2011 VegFest.

Tofu Magic (Loving Hut)

You will need:

- 150 grams (1 1/3 cups) tofu, cubed
- 40 grams (1/3 cup) onion, chopped
- 50 grams (1/2 cup) tomatoes, chopped
- 10 grams (2 cloves) garlic, minced
- 50 grams (1/2 cup) bell peppers, chopped
- 50 grams (1/2 cup) mushrooms, chopped
- 30 grams (2 tablespoons) vegetable oil
- Mint, dill, curry paste, some ginger, cilantro and cardamom
- A lemon

Preparation:

1. To make the curry sauce: Fry chopped onion, tomatoes, cilantro, cardamom, dill and ginger, and blend it together.
2. Fry tofu, bell peppers and mushrooms separately.
3. Cook the curry sauce in a frying pan for a few minutes and mix in the fried tofu, bell peppers and mushrooms, adding salt and other spices to taste.
4. Serve with lemon slices and flatbread.

There are no aggregate statistics for Moscow's vegetarian restaurants, but all agree that business is blooming. For example, Cafe Ganga, which has two locations in Moscow, noticed a 45 percent jump in demand for its delivery services over the past 18 months, said Lolita Tomayeva, its director of development.

Restaurant Avocado, which opened a second location in 2008, has seen a 30 percent rise in traffic every year for the "past few years," said its director, Anna Raisner.

Loving Hut, an international franchise of vegan fast-food places and restaurants, arrived in Moscow in October and has seen a steady increase in customers since, said the restaurant's director, Oleg Dmitriyev.

Of course, restaurateurs react accordingly, and both chains and menus expand, new establishments tickling their guests' appetites with exquisite Oriental meals like samosa (stuffed pie) and pakora (vegetables covered in crispy batter).

Conservative new converts will also find themselves on familiar ground, because popular Russian dishes — which always include meat — are transformed into vegan and vegetarian with the help of soy products. Thus, pelmeni, plov and even shashlik remain on the menu.

Shy diners can opt for food stores catering to vegans and vegetarians, such as Indian Spices, Produktovaya Apteka (Food Drugstore) and Jagannath's own shop.

Besides easily found staple crops, such as rice, potatoes and bread, stores are offering soy products and rare spices used for preparing Indian cuisine, which is largely vegetarian and vegan.

"It's increasingly easier now for vegans and vegetarians to eat out in Moscow," said Tomayeva of Cafe Ganga.

Anna Kuznetsova, director of development at Jagannath restaurants in Moscow, said she noticed more people coming to Jagannath, which opened two new locations in February, in search of new tastes and getting interested in learning about vegetarianism.

Vegan Carrot Cake (Cafe Ganga)

You will need:

- 250 grams (1 1/4 cups) carrot juice
- 75 grams (5 tablespoons) vegetable oil

- 150 grams (2/3 cup) sugar
- 350 grams (2 3/4 cups, rounded) all-purpose flour
- 15 grams (1 teaspoon) baking powder
- A drop of vanilla
- Fruit, e.g. cherries, or other preferred topping

Preparation:

1. Mix ingredients.
2. Pour into a greased or lined baking pan.
3. Bake at 180-200 C (350-390 F) for about 20 minutes.

For Cafe Ganga's Davova, who said she adores almost all fruits and vegetables, it was not hard to switch to a meatless lifestyle.

As she learned more about vegetarian cuisine through the years, Davova grew fond of creamy avocado, fried spiced tofu and tangy ginger drinks.

"People don't realize it, but there is a lot of variety in vegetarianism," she said.

Now other hungry but health-conscious souls can share that discovery. Cafe Ganga, Jagannath and Loving Hut each have more than 80 different menu items to choose from.

Vegetarianism itself is not a new concept in Russia. The global meat-free movement, whose roots reach back to the late 19th century, was strongly supported by literary legend Leo Tolstoy, who linked it to his Christianity-based religious teaching.

The first Russian vegetarian society was formed in 1901 in St. Petersburg. This was also when predecessors of Cafe Ganga and Jagannath began to pop up, cafeterias offering tasty meatless dishes that were especially in demand during Lent.

But the 1917 Revolution did away with both religious fasting and the vegetarian movement, ruling vegetarianism an invention of a rotten capitalist society. And after 70 years of a bad reputation, skepticism about vegetarianism still lingers.

"Eating habits are the most stable and hardest to change," said Kuznetsova of Jagannath.

There is not much research done on vegetarianism in Russia compared with Europe and the United States, which may fuel some people's concerns, said Yekaterina Belova, who heads a Moscow-based dietetics center called Palitra Pitaniya (Nutrition's Palette).

Not all worries are unfounded, as vegetarianism can potentially deprive a person of some vital amino acids, vitamin B12, calcium and iron if he or she is not careful in picking the right supplements and foods, she said.

But a well-planned vegetarian diet is generally considered to be healthier, especially for those who need to lower their cholesterol level, Belova said.

"Russians tend to look at everything new with a touch of doubt," said Irina Denisova, 50, a vegetarian for two decades, adding that she had never even heard the word "vegetarian" as

a child.

"But it's really just ignorance and lack of information that causes that," said Denisova, who is married to a vegetarian and has raised three vegetarian daughters.

She said even doctors are often biased about not eating meat. When her husband got an infection and went for a medical check, his problems were immediately blamed on his vegetarian diet, though it turned out not to be the cause, Denisova said.

But Denisova said she believes that people will become more open and understanding of vegetarianism eventually as information spreads.

"I tell people, 'food is just food,'" said Marina Gladkikh, a raw foodist who has written several books on the topic. "It's not fair to judge a person from what's on his or her plate."

Vegfest 2011 will be held July 29-31 in the Kaluga region village of Petrov, about 100 kilometers southwest of Moscow. Tel. +7 495-627-5190, 710-7345, vegfest.ru.

Cafe Ganga is located at 37b Leningradsky Prospekt in the Start shopping center. Metro Dynamo. Tel. +7 495-743-4984, cafe-ganga.ru.

Jagannath has five locations. Tel. +7 495-628-3580, jagannath.ru.

Loving Hut is located at 1B Pravoberezhnaya Ulitsa in the Kapitoly shopping center. Metro Rechnoi Vokzal. Tel. +7 495-785-1236, lovinghut.ru.

Restaurant Avocado has two locations: 12/2 Chistoprudny Bulvar (Metro Chistiye Prudy) and 5/6 Tverskaya Ulitsa (same building as Yermolova Theater; Metro Okhotny Ryad). Tel. +7 495-988-2656, 506-0033, no web site, but its menu can be viewed at en.restoran.ru/msk/detailed/restaurants/avokado.

Indian Spices has five locations. Tel. +7 499-240-1236, indianspices.ru.

Produktovaya Apteka is located at 8/10 Ulitsa Artyokhnoi Dom. Metro Tekstilshchiki. Tel. +7 499-178-0680, prodap.ru.

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