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Moscow to Tackle Problem of Unmannerly Waiters

By The Moscow Times

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If you live in Moscow long enough, you get used to dreadful service. The scowling cashiers, the flippant waiters—everyone has their horror stories. But generally, you get over it.

Short-term visitors take more notice. Moscow has consistently been ranked in the basement — sometimes at the very dimmest, deepest level of the basement — among world cities when it comes to service. Now, the Moscow government, apparently concerned about this fact, is instituting a program to try to change the culture.

Beginning in February 2012, the city will run a program it is calling "Hospitable Moscow"—a name that at the moment has as the same ring of unreality to it as, say, "Smog-Free Shanghai" or "Peaceful Mogadishu"—that will include classes for restaurant waiters on how to smile and be polite to customers. Special electronic terminals will then be installed in city restaurants where diners can give feedback about their impressions of the service they received.

The city faces some obvious hurdles in attempting to produce jovial servers. One Moscow waiter of 15 years and co-owner of buzzing gastro café Delicatessen, Yevgeny Samolyotov, speaking to web site The Village about the planned program, posed the most fundamental question: How exactly do you teach someone to be courteous?

Samolyotov says that at Delicatessen, they teach strictly by example and actually prefer people without experience, since so many waiters in Moscow get into the habit of being cold or indifferent to diners. The veteran waiter also drily questions the city's priorities for what to train restaurant staff:

"It's actually a little strange that they're planning to instill politeness in waiters in order to attract tourists. I would think that the most vital need is to teach them English—that's more important for tourists than politeness," Samolyotov said.

From personal experience, I can say that in Moscow anyway, mutual understanding and conviviality go hand-in-hand. When I first arrived to the city as a Russian-deficient student, I remember the women at a blini stand shouting so sternly that I thought perhaps I had unwittingly uttered a curse word. In fact, they were just clarifying my order. But when you can clearly articulate yourself, you generally face no wrath.

Even when you can properly pronounce kotlety (cutlets) or rassol'nik (cucumber-pickle soup), you rarely receive a smile, however. Encouraging Moscow service staff to flash grins at customers will likely be a stiffer challenge, especially given some Russians' belief that a person who smiles all the time is simply obtuse.

Although, there always is, Samolyotov notes, the Chinese method.

"There, they force you to keep a pencil in your mouth. That trains your facial muscles to form a smile at a moment's notice."

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