

Saratov: Stuck Between Kansas and the KGB

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Zhiguli restaurant on Prospekt Kirova in Saratov.

There is a Broadway on Saratov's central street, the pedestrian Prospekt Kirova. There's a Carl's Jr. ("charbroiled burgers") and the Kansas Bar, decorated with a giant banjo and offering pizza and sushi.

There is a giant coffee cup on the Kirova that reads in English, "Keep Calm and Drink Coffee," with the said beverage on offer inside the cup. It's just a short walk from the Saratov Conservatory, which looks like a cross between a Gothic mansion and a Disney castle.

There is even a French Confectionery on the Kirova, formerly titled German Street to mark the fact that once, in a time of tsars, the city on the Volga River had a thriving German diaspora who moved to Russia — wait for it — in search of a better life.

The French thing is especially adorable, given how Saratov was the epitome of Russian

provincial life for the country's 19th-century great, French-speaking writers.

Admittedly, Alexander Griboyedov quipped about mixing "the Nizhny Novgorod dialect with French" in his 1825 comedy "Woe From Wit," but Saratov, which is not that far from Nizhny Novgorod, was explicitly attested as a "backwater" in the same play, which every Russian learns by heart, at the risk of flunking the lit exam.

But does that mean you don't get Russian signs in Saratov? Well, perish the thought.

There is the Volga Restaurant (which probably could be seen coming) and the Zhiguli. There is the Lapti (named after bast shoes) and a restaurant titled simply "Russian Cuisine."

There are stranger places like the "Black Pearl," a stone's throw away from the embankment. River piracy has not been an issue for centuries, and whatever pirates there were never used ships like the one that decorates the entrance. The Caribbean buccaneers that did use them surely never served the cold Russian soup okroshka, but who cares if you can get okroshka on a hot summer day?

The crown jewel of Saratov street nomenclature is definitely the KGBar. If the untranslatable Russian wordplay explaining the name to mean "a sorta bar" doesn't fry your brain cells, the fat meter-tall Buddha idol sitting inexplicably at the entrance certainly will.

All of this is a perfect metaphor for Russia, which is, and always was, eager to embrace foreign influence, but only by grafting it to its own trunk, and culture clash be damned. If naming is not enough proof, just swerve off Saratov's busy main streets to find yourself in a drowsy lane of single-story houses from the mid-20th century, populated by bare-chested youth in sweats and with incomplete rows of teeth that you don't want to talk to.

The Lapti serves burgers and hot dogs. Only Griboyedov would be able to tell if it's naivete or irony.

See also:

[Saratov Region Welcomes Bosch Boiler Plant](#)

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