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A Pedestrian Nook in the Heart of Moscow

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Sampling honey in Romanov Alley

Over a decade ago, the Luxembourg-based firm Moscow Construction & Development acquired a choice parcel of land in the center of Moscow.

Called Romanov Alley by the developers, it is a quiet courtyard tucked between Romanov Pereulok and the Journalism Department of Moscow State University on Mokhovaya Ulitsa. It came with seven buildings dating from the 17th to the 19th century in various states of dilapidation. Project head Yevgenia Panfilova said they wanted to reconstruct the buildings and create Moscow's eighth pedestrian street with either a variety of retail shops or one kind of business, like banks, bridal shops or restaurants.

Undecided, the developers polled some of the residents, office workers and journalism students. They voted overwhelmingly for food: shops, cafes, restaurants and quiet outdoor space. No neon. No garish signage. No new buildings. And so the idea of a "gastronomical

street" was born.

The project is being developed in several stages, the first of which was completed in July. Two reconstructed buildings opened their doors to the Paul Bakery & Cafe and Dolmama, the Moscow branch of a celebrated Yerevan restaurant. The grand opening was celebrated with a weeklong "Art-Food" festival including photography, contests, children's games, music and street food ranging from grilled sausages to flavored honey.

The developers expect the project to be completed in 2016. Five more buildings will be reconstructed, and a kilometer-long pedestrian street with cafes, restaurants, food and wine shops, and culinary schools will stretch to Ulitsa Vozdvizhenka.

Right now, with only two eateries open for business, there isn't much foot traffic. But diners who find the space seem to appreciate what Panfilova calls "a place with a special atmosphere where European architectural traditions and the historical legacy of the Russian capital meet." Frederick Muller, an office worker, agrees. "I like the European feel of the place. I work nearby and come here often." Another diner, Anna Yermakova, a retail assistant, plans to return. "We like it very much. It is one of the few places in the center of town that is quiet."

But the project has its detractors, too. Conservationists at the architectural watchdog group Archnadzor complain that one of the buildings was not reconstructed to its original appearance. And members of the congregation of the 17th-century Church of the Icon of the Mother of God of the Sign, which is located next to the new alley, wish the developers had chosen banks instead of restaurants. Churchgoer Andrei Klyuyev said: "Noisy drinking establishments are not appropriate next to a church. We would have preferred offices or libraries, or art galleries, or even the kind of cafe where you can relax with a cup of coffee after work, without any cigarettes or alcohol. This place is part of our history that we must preserve."

Romanov Alley is accessible from Romanov Pereulok, through the courtyard of the Romanov Dvor office center, or by walking up the access road from Mokhovaya Ulitsa to the left of the Journalism Department.

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