

Moscow's Foodies Look East

The capital's culinary scene seeks inspiration abroad, and finds a world full of flavor

By [Matthew Kupfer](#)

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Danilovsky Market

It's nearly 8 p.m. — an hour before closing time — but an enthusiastic crowd of twenty-somethings is still queuing at Bò, a food stand at Danilovsky Market that is widely regarded as the best Vietnamese cafe in Moscow.

"It's interesting, it's cheap, it's delicious," says Olga, a regular customer who has just ordered spring rolls and a mango smoothie. "But there are always long lines."

Up on Danilovsky Market's second-story seating area, Pavel, another regular customer, has just finished off a heaping bowl of Pho, a Vietnamese soup made with noodles, beef, and herbs.

“My friend went to Vietnam and said there isn’t anything as good as this over there,” Pavel says.

It may only be a small Vietnamese food stand, but Bò and the highly acclaimed market it calls home represent one of the most significant cultural developments in Moscow’s recent history: an explosion of creativity and internationalism in the city’s culinary landscape.

In the past, mediocre sushi and Italian dominated Moscow’s bland foreign food scene. A dedicated gourmet could find other foreign flavors, but at a steep price. On the whole, restaurants were big halls serving expensive food—places intended for a rare special occasion.

Today, that is changing. New, complex international cuisines are proliferating throughout the city. At the moment, Vietnamese is one of the trendiest.

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The growth of “exotic” foods has been extremely noticeable in the last few years, says Anna Maslovskaya, senior food editor for the Afisha website. It represents not only the introduction of new cuisines to Moscow, but also a shift in public attitudes toward food.

Previously, chefs were trained in state vocational schools and many of them were simply people who did not get high enough grades to enroll in a university, Maslovskaya says. Cooking was just a job—like plumbing or repairing cars.

Around seven years ago, however, a new generation of chefs trained outside vocational schools entered the profession, bringing with them a different attitude and a zeal for food as an art form. The new chefs were well-travelled, with broad interests, and they brought this passion to the kitchen.

“All these people are, first of all, foodies,” she says. “They are simply interested in food.”

Maslovskaya cites restaurants like Delicatessen and Ragout as two of the first establishments to offer high quality, creative food—dishes like pasta with Korean kimchi or burgers with inventive toppings.

That process has only continued, but the last four years have brought another development. Young people—often trained through culinary internships—are entering the profession, bringing the startup culture to Moscow’s restaurant scene.

Many of these projects go bust, and sometimes the food leaves much to be desired, but these new eateries add dynamism and creativity to Moscow. Now, even established restaurant holdings are trying to partner with these startups.

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Maslovskaya believes the new restaurants go hand in hand with the city’s changing culture. Since the Soviet collapse, Russians have begun to travel abroad extensively. Wider access to

the internet has also helped connect ordinary people to the world beyond Russia's borders.

Even an economic crisis and the sharp depreciation of the ruble have not reversed these changes. Russians want to learn about other cultures, and "food provides a direct path," Maslovskaya says.

"The new generation sees going out to eat as a normal part of life," she says of people in their twenties and thirties. "Going to restaurants, photographing food, putting it on social media, and being a chef have all become popular."

Politics have also played a surprising role. Russia's agricultural sanctions—imposed in August 2014 as a response to Western sanctions over the country's involvement in Ukraine—have limited the public's access to food products imported from the West. The result has been a transition to locally produced goods—despite growing interest in foreign cuisines.

"In the last two years, we've seen a big shift from Italian to Vietnamese, Chilean and Chinese," says Anastasia, a woman enjoying a bowl of pho at Danilovsky Market. Under the sanctions, "even Russian food has gotten new attention," she adds.

The irony here has not been lost on foreign visitors. As Russia's politics grow markedly more anti-Western, its restaurants have increasingly provided the kinds of international delicacies commonly found in the West.

Danilovsky itself is one of the brightest signs of Russia's evolving culinary culture. A market has existed there for centuries, but, in 2014, the government discussed converting it into a modern shopping mall.

"Our task is to make this a civilized marketplace," Vladimir Efimov, head of Moscow's City Property Department, said at the time. It appeared a trade pavilion of produce, meat and dairy stalls had no place in the government's vision of civilization.

Then, in March 2015, a subsidiary of the Ginza Project restaurant holding purchased the pavilion from the state, and began to develop and renovate the market. Since then, Danilovsky has transformed from an ordinary Russian fruit and vegetable bazaar to an innovative farmer's market known for its fresh produce and food court filled with international edibles.

Today, besides succulent fruits and crisp vegetables, the market boasts Dagestani baked goods, Israeli falafel, artisan dumplings, deli sandwiches, Uzbek plov and the famous pho. And the list of cuisines is ever-expanding. Soon, two new eateries satisfying Moscow's growing appetite for Asian cuisine will launch at Danilovsky: Three Ducks, a Chinese cafe headed by a Michelin star chef, and the Korean cafe K-town.

The market has also become a platform for culinary master classes and food festivals. This trend looks set to continue. In the near future, Danilovsky's management plans to open one of celebrity chef Jamie Oliver's culinary schools on site, according to Olga Kukoba, Danilovsky Market's creative director.

Now, other marketplaces are taking notice and following a similar path, but Danilovsky remains the originator. This places it on the cutting edge in a city where Russians increasingly take an international view of food.

“Today,” says pho-devotee Pavel, leaning back in his chair at Danilovsky Market, “people are really interested in what they eat and drink and how it all fits together.”

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