

Matryoshka: Leading the Russian Revolution

Latest addition to Maison Dellos empire reinvents the Russian restaurant genre

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Matryoshka's restrained aesthetic and contemporary approach take the Russian restaurant into bold new territory. **MATRYOSHKA**

It's always a pleasant surprise to find your expectations turned on their head — or at least it is when you head to a new Russian restaurant expecting bear-and-balalaika stereotypes and find the bar has been raised and the rules rewritten.

For foreigners who've spent any real time in the country, the notion of the "Russian restaurant" comes with a list of clichés longer than the Volga. So it was natural to assume that the new doll on the block, Matryoshka, would justify the trepidation that years of false log-cabin interiors, peasant-style tablecloths and stuffed animals program you to associate with

dining out “à la Russe.”

Occupying two floors in the Congress Park complex on the embankment next to the Hotel Ukraina at Kievskaya, Matryoshka is the newest member of Cafe Pushkin creator Andrei Dellos’ eponymous stable of upmarket restaurants, along with the likes of Fahrenheit, Kazbek and Bochka.

Maison Dellos has clearly set out to create a restaurant aimed at contemporary Moscow urbanites rather than tourists — Russian cuisine reinterpreted for sophisticated, post-hipster tastes. This is served in a setting which, if not entirely original, takes the genre out of the peasant cottage and the 19th-century drawing room and into an aesthetic that’s part English country hotel, part 1940s Soviet apartment and part Brooklyn deli (yes, those beveled white tiles have life in them yet).

The upper floor fuses modern elements — an open kitchen and overhead industrial ventilators — with high-backed floral armchairs, wooden paneling and potted palms. Downstairs, antique lampshades hover over tables alongside racks of pickled tomatoes and leather sofas.

Matryoshka avoids the temptation to lump Ukrainian recipes together with Russian ones, concentrating on standards like blini, pirozhki, fish, meat and poultry dishes — though curiously there’s no place for delicacies such as venison or bear.

The menu aims at reinterpreting traditional (i.e. pre-Soviet) Russian cuisine, but don’t take the presence of modern favorite Olivier salad (950 rubles, \$16.50) as a deception, because here it has been returned to its original bourgeois glory — think quail and caviar instead of pink “sausage” and sickly mayonnaise.

A highlight of the starter menu is selyanka with roast duck (650 rubles), a balanced medley of aromatic sauerkraut, turnip, juicy slices of plum and caraway seed — a nod toward the historic influence of Baltic German cuisine on Russian food.

The mains offer a chance to try more complex Russian dishes such as stuffed pike (690 rubles), served up just as it should be: melt-in-the-mouth fish blended with herbs and vegetables then reshaped into discs and wrapped in skin. It comes with mashed pumpkin and horseradish.

From the traditional meat dishes, Moscow-style beef with mash and rye malt sauce (740 rubles) is a slow-cooked, punchy goulash — real Russian soul food.

Matryoshka offers a comprehensive wine list, with prices for a glass starting at around 450 rubles.

Now the caveat — there are a few crumples to iron out before Matryoshka finds its feet. This concerns the service, which falls very much into the tiresome category of bother-the-customer-to-death-until-they’re-ready-to-order, with a rotating cast of wait staff adjusting your chair, pushing menus at you then asking for your drinks order immediately before hovering awkwardly in the background while you pore over the menu. At times there

were two or three staff around the table simultaneously — no joke.

The restaurant opened its doors on Feb. 11 but is currently in test mode

so this might

simply be the result of over-eagerness rather than genuine incompetence. Hopefully some of these minor grumbles will be resolved by the time customers start passing through the doors in larger numbers.

Ultimately, the one aspect of Matryoshka that sticks out is its name, which in light of the bold steps taken in terms of the menu and interior design seems somewhat kitschy and incongruous. And after all, the thing about a nesting doll is that there are no surprises in store.

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