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Wine Time: A Real Corker

Russian cheese comes of age at this new restaurant near Trubnaya

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WINE TIME / FACEBOOK

Stocked with over 200 bottles of wine, the best of Russian artisanal cheese and a crack wait staff, Wine Time has arrived for the sunny season — if you can find it, that is. Tucked into a concrete courtyard in the giant Legenda Tsvetnova business center across from Trubnaya Ploshchad, this winery-style gem remains all but invisible to passers-by — but it's well worth the hunt.

Wine Time's menu captures the fragrant essence of a wine and cheese tasting at a vineyard restaurant in the verdant hills of Burgundy or the Napa Valley. Wine Time's young chef Andrei Mamontov, who cut his chops in the kitchens of White Rabbit and Savva, has put together a menu dominated by cheeses and cheese-based appetizers, an invitation to treat Saturday-evening dinner like a tasting menu.

The bar's sommelier, Dmitry Nezhivov, has gathered wines from Germany, Austria, France,

Italy, America, Spain, Portugal, New Zealand, South Africa and Russia for his wine list. Prices range from 2000-25,000 rubles ($35-440) per bottle.

Nezhivov's by-the-glass list proved exquisite. The Vermentino Vigne Basse (490 rubles) by the Italian producer Terenzuola was a light white wine with the crispiness of a prosecco, but none of its astringent sparkle. An oaky chardonnay from Joseph Drouhin Macon-Villages (630 rubles), meanwhile, had a bouquet so complex it needed to be savored without a pairing. The pinot noir by the same winemaker (690 rubles) lacked the unique aroma of the whites, but its studied dryness set off a "Russian Roquefort" perfectly.

Wine Time sources cheese and ice cream from the Maria Koval Dairy, run by an artisanal cheesemaker who has been gaining skill and market share since her humble beginnings in 2012. Koval, the dairy's namesake and owner, adapted Western European cheesemaking techniques to fit her cottage industry in the Yaroslavl region just in time for Russia to impose an embargo on Western food imports in 2014.

Guests can sample eight of Maria Koval's line at Wine Time, including "Roquefort," chevre, brie "Dutch Leeuwalden," and burrata. Surrounded by a ring of fresh tomatoes, the burrata's gentle cream calmed the complexity of the Drouhin chardonnay. The "Russian Roquefort," supposedly made with milk from Yaroslavl cows (renowned for the high fat content of their milk), burst on the tongue with a sharpness welcome after a long Russian winter of plain Poshekhonsky cheese and poor imitations of gouda.

Andrei Mamontov's bruschetta is also a variation on the theme, a mouth-watering medley of soft blue cheese, slices of baked pear and candied walnut (310 rubles).

While the wine list, the artisanal cheese and auteur appetizers glowed, the quality service underlined Wine Time's class. When my dining companion, fresh from a 10-hour work shift, knocked her wine over, our waiter was quick to react. And when we donned our coats, no fewer than six staff lined up to bid us farewell.

While pleasant, this Downton Abbey-style goodbye probably had more to do with the fact that we were practically the only guests. Unfortunately, Wine Time's abundance of flavor and class is undermined by its location and lack of advertising. But if the restaurant manages to survive its first month, it has real potential to establish itself as a popular insider spot among the city's foodies and wine aficionados.

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