The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Sempre: A Heartwarming Feast for the Senses

This cosy green restaurant is a foray into a new kind of dining experience

By Alastair Gill

July 07, 2017



Sempre's natural approach is visible both in its decor and in its presentation of food. **SEMPRE / FACEBOOK**

Sempre caught my attention several days before it opened in late May. Its prominent position on trendy Bolshaya Dmitrovka, in the space previously occupied by the Podium fashion store, makes it difficult to miss. It might also have been something to do with the vast swathe of foliage hanging from the ceiling – there aren't many restaurants in town that look like a botanical garden from the outside.

And as you will find out if you go, Sempre is no ordinary restaurant. It is the first establishment of its kind launched by Belgian entrepreneur Gust Sempre. His company

Sempre Life specializes in international interior design projects that make use of a vast range of household goods manufactured by the company. The focus is on loose, uneven forms and traditional natural materials: glass, metal, wood, stone. Think of it as a kind of up-and-coming, pagan Ikea.

In order to familiarize people with its atmosphere and philosophy, Sempre has now decided to open a restaurant in Moscow, which, as one of the staff explained, is a test run before the company opens new locations in other cities around the world. This, you see, is because the cutthroat world of Moscow's dining scene is seen as the perfect acid test for a restaurant. Still with me?

Before we go any further, lets' get something out of the way: Sempre is that dreaded of beasts, the "concept restaurant." But before your prejudices take over, allow me to reassure you: I also came loaded with apprehensions, most of which were happily discarded at the door.

Sempre is all about sharing, letting go of your inhibitions and the conditioning that dictates how we normally behave in restaurants. The lighting is low and most of the seating is around long tables made from polished stone or wood. This, along with Sempre's policy of not accepting bookings for groups of fewer than five, creates an informal, friendly atmosphere in which table-sharing – and conversations with strangers – come naturally.

Every detail here reflects a devotion to integrating natural elements into a modern setting, from the moss and fantasy washbasins in the toilets (figure out how they work for yourself) to the bottle racks and the 100 plants that hang between wicker baskets over the tables. Imagine a cross between a traditional folk restaurant, a greenhouse, and a slick cocktail bar and you're getting there.

The interior and atmosphere are so involving that the food almost comes as an afterthought, but the people responsible for the kitchen have clearly put in as much care as the designers. Sempre's approach to food is what Jamie Oliver would call "naked": classic dishes made with fresh ingredients, prepared with a minimum of fuss. The PR people have given it the slightly unfortunate moniker of "con-fusion," but we'll forgive them this misstep.

In keeping with the back-to-basics aesthetic, there are no forks provided at Sempre, just a spoon and a sharp knife made of beaten steel (the latter looks more like a murder weapon than a kitchen utensil). This means getting a little neanderthal with your dinner, which is appropriately served on either stone platters or wooden trenchers.

Still, when the food is this good, nobody's complaining. A tangy, textured beef tartare with lime and oyster sauce dressing (570 rubles/$9.60) laid the groundwork, but the "ayayay grilled chicken" with mint sauce (685 rubles) stole the show. In no time at all I was channeling my inner caveman, fingers sticky with chili teriyaki sauce, chicken juice running over my hands as I hacked away with the knife. The grilled vegetables (495 rubles) were simply presented, juicy and perfectly done.

Sempre also gets plus marks for its simple menu, with only four or five appetizers and mains to choose from, plus sandwiches and pizzas. Service is down-to-earth, open and friendly: It's quite clear that this is an enjoyable place to work and the laid-back atmosphere

rubs off on the staff, who are dressed in ⊠gender-neutral linen smocks.

The cynic in you (and me) will say ⊠this all adds up to the use of a restaurant as a PR tool. And it's easy ⊠to make fun of Sempre's affected concept, but when the results are as ⊠enjoyable as this, why bother? Sempre offers a refreshing antidote to ⊠the twin evils that plague Moscow restaurants: the cold snootiness of ⊠the glamor crowd and the too-cool-for-school pose of the "hipster" set. ⊠It's cosy, it's informal, it's a little messy, but most of all, it's ⊠fun.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/07/07/sempre-a-feast-for-the-senses-a58294