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Old Friends and New Beginnings at Moscow's 12 Wine Bar

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Tucked amid brick buildings, the 12 Wine Bar has turned a former beer factory into a buzzing social spot. Chef Yevgeny Dobrovolsky's motto is that "life should be as simple and tasty as Italian cuisine." The cozy establishment reflects that, and it proved a fitting setting for the Moscow Times' first Dining Club event.

The dinner brought together around 50 guests for food, wine, and conversation.

The restaurant – exposed brick, atmospheric, eclectic décor – was a welcome refuge from the cold. A string group strummed away in the background, just loud enough to help wine work into cold bones.

As the guests got acquainted, they were treated to appetizers paired with Lefkadia Likuria

wine from Krasnodar. The chardonnay, atypically light and mildly oaky, scored highly on guests' review cards.

A salty component came in bruschetta with anchovy mousse and caviar, delicious though lacking a bit in texture. Vegetarians got vibrant strawberry tartar, balsamic cream, and tomatoes. Both came in tiny portions, leaving the guests hungry for more.

Next was either seabass with sauce or veal tartare with truffle and cream sauce. One guest called the latter a "proper tartare," but bland. The seabass received more positive reviews, tender and delicious, but Lilliputian in size. The guests were still unsated, but there was plenty to discuss, with music filling in the blanks if conversation faltered.

As we waited for our third course, the bread basket, squat in the center of the table and too far for graceful advances, became more tempting. The guests got friendlier as they reached between stemware to grab that Borodinsky bread.

The third courses were brought and civility was regained. White switched to red (Cabernet Franc, rich and dry), served with ricotta and spinach-stuffed cannelloni. Confusion aside (an Italian restaurant doing meat before pasta?), it was creamy but not cloying, bright with olive oil and basil. Guests not opposed to spinach were pleased but, again, wanted a bit more.

Dessert was a final creative burst – gorgonzola mousse spheres with fruit and wine. Unexpected, inspired, and decadent.

The evening began with Derk Sauer's reflection on his paper's first quarter century. An old friend of sorts, it has provided perspectives, voices, and community — uncommon privileges in a foreign city.

The Club event followed suit: an array of nationalities and languages, ages and professions, but little barrier to entry. There was presumed comfort in our united interest to explore, learn, and share. That much hasn't changed. Here's to another 25.

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