

GEORGIA ON THEIR MINDS

Moscow's elite pack the Tatler Club for a taste of the neighboring country.

The exotic foods of Georgia are as beloved in Moscow as Indian curry is in London. The following springtime recipe for a simple grilled chicken *tabaka* comes from the Tatler Club, a Moscow hotspot notable for its high-flying clientele.

Chicken Tabaka

Ingredients:

- 1 Cornish hen, deboned (Ask your butcher to do this.)
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 tsp. finely chopped fresh rosemary, plus 2 sprigs for pan
- 2 Tbsp. olive oil

Lettuce leaves and homemade *adjika* sauce (recipe follows) for serving

Rub hen with garlic and rosemary and lightly salt. Heat olive oil over medium-high heat in a grill pan until it shimmers. Add rosemary sprigs. Fry hen under press until it is cooked through and develops a brown crust, 5-7 minutes per side. Serve atop lettuce leaves with *adjika* sauce spooned generously over hen.

Adjika sauce

Ingredients:

- 3 tomatoes, blanched and peeled
- 1 bell pepper, chopped
- Pinch of finely chopped fresh horseradish, garlic and chili pepper

Chop peeled tomatoes and press with the back of a spoon, reserving juices. Add chopped bell pepper and spices, plus salt to taste. Mix well.

—JAY CHESHES



Barbarians at the Plate

Moscow's rebel chef Anatoly Komm defies the notion that Russian food lacks sophistication. **BY JAY CHESHES**

MOSCOW CHEF Anatoly Komm is best known for transforming peasant fare into avant-garde cuisine that no self-respecting *babushka* would recognize. At his flagship restaurant, Varvary, he's served capsules of borscht, deconstructed *pelmeni* and black bread that's so dehydrated it's got the appearance and texture of dirt. It's exactly the fare one might expect from a former Soviet geophysicist using cosmonaut cooking equipment. And the tourists who dine there—90 percent of his customers—eat it up. And yet, many of Moscow's wealthiest local diners don't quite get what he's doing. "Russians understand what it means to have a big boat, jewelry, a good car," he says. "But to understand art, you need more than just money."

The 43-year-old enjoys being the bad boy of the Moscow dining scene. (He's turned away a cigar-chomping oligarch and his bodyguards for being too...oligarchish.) The name of his three-year-old restaurant means "barbarian," and it's a cheeky acknowledgement, he says, of the way much of the world still views Russian food. To help change those perceptions he's been hitting the road, his luggage stuffed with Russian ingredients like black bread, sunflower oil, smoked fish and pickled herring. In the last year he's been to Cannes for a three-day chef conference and done guest chef stints in Switzerland, Austria and New Zealand.

Eventually some of the diners he serves make it to Moscow, where Komm conjures his reservation-only all-night "gastronomy show"—10, 12 or 14 courses of intricately plated

KOMM HITHER
Above, a Varvary take on black bread; inset, Anatoly Komm.

new Russian cooking. Though his techniques were first inspired by a visit to El Bulli in Spain—birthplace of so-called molecular gastronomy—his ingredients dogmatically put the motherland first, eschewing imported luxuries favored by the country's moneyed class. "I know the map of Russian products," he says. He sources the crawfish in his "Russian carpet" dish from the Don River on the outskirts of Moscow. The crustaceans are served on a bed of smoked salmon and celery gelée with lemon foam and bright green and red "caviar." "It's my gastronomic joke," he says. The bubbles are artificially conceived by adding droplets of pureed herbs and Tabasco to a chemical bath, a process known as spherification, once used by Soviet food scientists to transform liquefied fish heads into fake sturgeon caviar.

In fact, many of the high-tech gizmos now deployed around the world in cutting-edge restaurants had industrial uses back in the U.S.S.R. Komm's freeze-drying machine is the same sort once used by the cosmonaut program to prepare foods for outer space. It's just another quirk of the chef whose geophysics career ended when he became a Versace importer at the suggestion of his girlfriend. The career shift opened him to international travel. In 1991, on a visit to Hong Kong, he decided on a whim to learn Chinese cuisine, convincing a cook with a stall near the seafood market to take him on as an unpaid apprentice. That monthlong stint led to others in Germany, Spain, the Caribbean, Italy—vacations spent slaving in restaurant kitchens for fun.

Eventually a friend convinced him to put all that food knowledge to use, bankrolling Komm's first Moscow restaurant, the Palazzo di Spaghetti. That led to a grill-house called Green, which finally gave way to Varvary, often described as the first truly Russian haute cuisine restaurant.

"In Moscow, people are beginning to understand the difference between the good products and the bad," he says. "But it's changing slowly. And so I push it."

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