

The Man Who Ate The World

Excerpts from a book by Jay Rayner. Published 2008.

MOSCOW

One thing is now clear to me: In Moscow, nobody cares about chefs. There are no superstar cooks, no masters of the stove, no Gordon Ramsays or Wolfgang Pucks or Joël Robuchons. “In Moscow it’s all about the restaurateurs,” says Guillaume Rochette, a french-born, London base recruitment consultant, who makes a nice living supplying Moscow – and many other cities on my global haute cuisine trail – with Western European chefs and maître d’s they all need.

The biggest of the Moscow restaurateurs, he says, is Arkady Novikov. “You have to meet Arkady,” says Rochette, who is a large, soft-cheeked man, with big hands and tidy hair. Rochette is in Moscow drumming up business and is keen for me to interview his star client. Novikov trained as a chef in the soviet era, at the romantically named Culinary College No.174. He was turned down for a job at the first branch of McDonald’s in Moscow, and so moved into the business side of restaurants.

The week I am in Moscow he has forty-six of them, but he was dues to open eight more before the end of the year (and it was already October). Rochette tells me that people go to a new Novikov place simply because he’s involved; that they love his arugula salad with shrimp and Parmesan, which is available in most of his restaurants, or the indecently young burrata, a fresh, milky-tasting cheese much like mozzarella that he has flown in every day from Italy.

For the first time on this trip, I feel a surge of optimism. My experience at Pushkin had made me fear that Moscow would be an awful eating city, that there was nothing here for a man in search of the perfect meal, but the burrata thing has excited me. This Arkady Novikov really might be my kind of guy. He goes to huge efforts to score good cheese. Rochette tells me he even does some of the catering for the Kremlin, and he’s very well connected, though he doesn’t like to talk about it. I love the image of Vladamir Putin eating soft milky cheese and arugula salad while he wages war on the oligarchs. At the moment, I’m told, Novikov is somewhere in his car, roaming the city, overseeing his new restaurants, working the phones, working the Moscow traffic.

While I wait to meet the man himself I decide to try the first restaurant he opened back in 1992. In a very Moscow fashion Sirena is famous not so much because of the fish and seafood it serves but because of the floor: IT is made of glass, and beneath it, in a tank, swim sturgeon and carp. From what Rochette has told me, I am expecting something sleek and chic, a shiny joint for shiny people, but I have forgotten about the Russian taste for sentimentality.