

At Home in Little Russia on the Hudson

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Russian culture, but this spring, the roster is filling up with more contemporary offerings.

The choreographer Boris Eifman returns to City Center on March 27 with the Eifman Ballet of St. Petersburg, which will be presenting two New York premieres, "Don Quixote" and "Pinocchio." The St. Petersburg Philharmonic, conducted by Yuri Temirkanov, will perform at Carnegie Hall tonight and tomorrow night at 8 (related article, Page 3).

From March 14 to 31 the Actors' Playhouse Theater in Manhattan will stage "An Absolutely Happy Village," a folksy tale of love, war and peace (what else?) based on a novel by Boris Vakhtin, with sets by Alexander Solodukho, performed in English with folk songs arranged in the Russian choral manner by the Russian composer Sergei Dreznin.

For old times' sake, the Millennium Theater on Brighton Beach Avenue in Brooklyn is presenting Red Star, an ensemble made up of members of the old Red Army Chorus for an evening of song and dance, on March 22, at 8.

Aquarium, the Russian rock band that rode the wave of perestroika in the late 1980's to international fame, is back in town on June 5, playing at the Elbow Room in Greenwich Village; on April 18 the club will feature the Red Elvives, a Russian rock-and-surf band from Los Angeles.

For art lovers, there are just as many offerings. The Museum of Modern Art will have an exhibition of illustrated books of the Russian avant-garde from March 28 to May 21. The Russian-American Cultural Center, which has held exhibitions in the waterfront district near Brooklyn Heights known as Dumbo and elsewhere, is back in its own downtown space in Lower Manhattan. This month, it will have a show of works by Daria Deshuk and Aimee Koch. The Mimi Ferz Gallery in SoHo has a show of small works by contemporary Russian artists from March 21 to April 7.

A Demand for Russian Art

At the A.B.A. Gallery on East 19th Street, Anatol Bekkerman, who welcomes visitors by appointment only, has a room full of paintings and drawings by top Russian artists from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, including Natalia Goncharova, David Burliuk and Boris Ainsfeld. Their works have enjoyed a huge boom in price and demand in recent years, driven largely by a new class of Russian collectors.

The newly relocated Grant Gallery, which now occupies a light, airy space in SoHo, has a show of Russian postwar avant-garde artists. On March 11 Mikhail S. Gorbachev, the former Soviet president, is to attend a preview of an auction of Russian and Russian-American art to benefit families of victims of Sept. 11. "We thought it was our turn to offer some help, in return for all the help we have received over the years," said Tatyana Grant, owner and founder of the gallery.

For a Russian weekend in New York, you can have your pick of experiences, particularly culinary experiences. You can try a bowl of spicy lagman, a meat soup with noodles from Central Asia; a plateful of pickled tomatoes, cucumbers and mushrooms; and a wide choice of shish kebabs and lula kebabs at the Registan, a downtown neighborhood restaurant in Rego Park, in an area that is home to Queens's booming community of Bukharan Jews from the former Soviet republics of Central Asia.

Or you can stroll down Brighton Beach Avenue in Brooklyn, beneath the El, pushing your way through the dense crowd of Russian-speaking shoppers, past elderly couples dressed in their weekend best, avoiding the clusters of broad-backed men in black leather jackets. Here the store signs come in two languages and two alphabets, and the store windows have not lost that musty Soviet look, with last season's holiday lights, frilly dresses and the occasional plastic plant.

Russians love to go food shopping here, in particular at M & I International Food on Brighton Beach Avenue in Brooklyn, where you can buy smetana, thick Russian sour cream ladled out of vats, or various calibers of tvorog, Russian cottage cheese, or kefir, the yogurtlike drink, powerful Russian mustards and horseradish. Or you can sample offerings from an ample selection of ready-made Russian foods, from blini to dumplings to stuffed cabbage. (And if all this doesn't make the shoppers think of the old country, then the ladies behind the counter, in their doctors' coats and paper hats, certainly will.)

La Brioche is the misleading name of a very Russian bakery that, like other bakeries on the avenue, sells brown bread, ginger-breads and the full and varied array of cookies, cakes and piroshkis much loved by Russians. But what makes this shop special



At the Metropolitan Opera: Samuel Ramey, center, in Prokofiev's "War and Peace," a co-production with the Kirov Opera.

is its old-fashioned wooden shelves, its tablecloths and a brilliant display of candy bins, each stuffed with a seemingly infinite variety of brightly wrapped candies, which turn the place into a child's fantasy.

On a recent trip to Brighton Beach, after a stroll down the boardwalk, and then onto the wide sandy beach, a group of us — including friends and children — walked past the big restaurants that face the sea. Instead, we ended up at a little cafe on Brighton Beach Avenue that goes by the name Kafe Shishlychnaya in Russian and Cafe Shish Kebab in English. The soups and shish kebabs were good, the salads fresh and excellent, the prices very right (22 varieties of shish kebab, including quail, sturgeon and chicken liver, priced from \$3.50 to \$5.50).

There are of course, bigger, fancier, pricier, certainly noisier restaurants in and near Brighton Beach. Rasputin on Coney Island Avenue is now said to be the best for an old-fashioned evening of high-pitched drinking and dancing.

Moscow in Midtown

But for a new generation of Russians, the place to be is not the old ethnically dense neighborhoods of Brighton Beach, or Rego Park. It is Manhattan, which in the last 10 years has accumulated its own critical mass of Russian hangouts, now clustered in Midtown at the upper end of the theater district.

Of these, the Russian Samovar is the most famous, run by Roman Kaplan, who has made the establishment on West 52nd Street a gathering place for the Russian literary and artistic elite, both those who live here and those who make a habit of passing through. The food is good, the piano-playing lively, and on certain evenings, Mr. Kaplan organizes poetry readings on the second floor, which gives the restaurant its salon quality.

Literally across the street is the Russian Vodka Room, founded several years ago by former waiters at the Samovar, who turned a long, dark room into a hip, smoke-filled, jam-packed watering hole for young Russians and Americans, offering all kinds of vodka, food like blini and caviar, but also, in a distinctly Russian touch, sunflower and pumpkin seeds in lieu of pretzels.

Two blocks north, on West 54th Street, is Uncle Vanya, a small restaurant, open for lunch and dinner, founded by Marina Troshina, a former Moscow actress with an equally loyal clientele, who fill the place up on weekends for some very Russian karaoke singing. Here the atmosphere, true to the name, is very homey, like the living room of an older relative, complete with prints and posters, collections of Russian china, a table lamp in the window and some leftover New Year's lights.

The Tea Room? So Klukva

There have always been Russians in Manhattan — certainly since 1917, the year of the Bolshevik Revolution. Think of La Vieille Russie on Fifth Avenue, with its fabulous jewels, or the Russian Tea Room, founded in 1926 and frequented by émigré



Charlotte Rampling, left, in Michael Cacoyannis's film "The Cherry Orchard."



A bowl of shurpa, please: Spicy soup at the Registan restaurant in Rego Park, Queens.

musicians and ballet teachers looking for a cozy place to have tea with jam. The vodka came later, after Prohibition. Later still came the over-the-top restaurant of today that may be Russian in name but in the view of most Russians is a prime example of what they call klukva: literally cranberry but also a word used to sum up fake and cloying clichés of Russianness. The Firebird restaurant on West 46th Street is also described by most Russians as a place that may serve Russian cuisine, but is somehow not, you know, Russian.

Russians have continued to come to New York in waves. Following the first in the late teens, the second wave arrived here after World War II and the third in the 1970's, with the immigration of Russian Jews, most of whom gravitated to Brighton Beach, which continues to thrive as a center of another kind of Russian experience.

What is new in the last four or five years is yet one more immigration, of young professionals, artists and musicians, but also lawyers, computer programmers and business school graduates. Some are the bilingual children of recent immigrants; some are here for the same reason that people from France, Italy, Israel and other places are in New York: because this is a good place to be when you are young, smart, ambitious and curious. It can also help to be cool.

These young Russians — their numbers are uncountable — have different backgrounds. Katya Varlamova, 26, and Michael

Zaitsev, 30, both from St. Petersburg, are working in finance after finishing American universities. Their friend Marina Neustadt, who came from Los Angeles and is the child of Russian Jewish immigrants, runs a French boutique downtown on West Broadway.

But when they get together, they consider themselves Russian, and every once in a while they feel like doing Russian things. They go to the opera — "War and Peace" is at the top of their list this season — and to the ballet. Every fall, they attend the Russian-American Film Festival, usually at the Ziegfeld Theater. Downtown, they hang out at the Grant Gallery, where Ms. Grant has plans to open her space for small theatrical productions and other performances.

Sightseeing and Shopping

This crowd rarely goes to Brighton Beach, they tend to view it as claustrophobic and a little bit menacing. But if they do, it is either to take visitors from Russia on a sightseeing trip or to go shopping — for books, videos and CD's at the sprawling St. Petersburg bookstore on Brighton Beach Avenue, or for the dairy products and other Russian delicacies that are difficult (although not impossible) to find in Manhattan.

But mostly, they like to hang out together in the great tradition of the Russian tusovka, which means more or less a group of friends who get together regularly. This group, no doubt one of many, even went so

Beyond Borscht

Events and places in the article on a Russian weekend in New York City

Performances and Film

"AN ABSOLUTELY HAPPY VILLAGE." Thursday through March 31. Thursdays through Saturdays at 8 p.m.; Sundays at 2 p.m. Actors' Playhouse Theater, 412 Eighth Avenue, at 30th Street, Manhattan. (212) 567-3356 or www.ahappyvillage.com. Tickets: \$15.

AQUARIUM, Russian rock. June 5, the Elbow Room, 144 Bleecker Street, Greenwich Village. (212) 979-8434.

"THE CHERRY ORCHARD," a film by Michael Cacoyannis, starring Charlotte Rampling and Alan Bates. Quad Cinema, 34 West 13th Street, West Village. (212) 255-8800; daily screenings, times: 2:40, 5:20 and 9:40 p.m. through Thursday. Tickets: \$9; \$6 for children and 65+.

EIFMAN BALLET OF ST. PETERSBURG. Opens March 27. "Don Quixote," March 29 at 8 p.m., March 30 at 2 and 8 p.m., March 31 at 2 and 7 p.m. "Pinocchio," April 12 at 8 p.m., April 13 at 2 and 8 p.m., April 14 at 2 and 7 p.m. City Center, 131 West 55th Street, Manhattan. Tickets: \$40 to \$60.

"FORTUNE'S FOOL," in previews through April 1; opening April 2. Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays at 8 p.m.; Wednesdays and Saturdays at 2 and 8 p.m.; Sundays at 3 p.m. Music Box Theater, 239 West 45th Street, Manhattan. (212) 239-6200. Tickets: \$20 to \$75.

THE RED ELVIVES, Russian rock-and-surf music from Los Angeles, April 18. The Elbow Room, 144 Bleecker Street, Greenwich Village. (212) 979-8434.

RED STAR, members of the old Red Army Chorus in an evening of song and dance, March 22 at 8. Millennium Theater, 1029 Brighton Beach Avenue, at 11th Street, Brighton Beach, Brooklyn. (718) 615-1500. Tickets: \$20 to \$50.

ST. PETERSBURG PHILHARMONIC, conducted by Yuri Temirkanov, in Shostakovich's "Leningrad" Symphony and Rachmaninoff's First Piano Concerto, with Leif Ove Andnes as soloist tonight at 8. Dmitri Alexeev is the soloist in Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto tomorrow at 8 p.m. Carnegie Hall, (212) 247-7800. www.carnegiehall.org. Tickets: \$23 to \$101.

"WAR AND PEACE," Metropolitan Opera. Remaining performances: tomorrow at 8 p.m., Tuesday, March 15 and March 19 at 7:30 p.m. Metropolitan Opera House, Lincoln Center. (212) 362-6900. Tickets, sold out, but returns may be available.

Museums and Galleries

A.B.A. GALLERY, 47 East 19th Street, Manhattan. (212) 677-2367. Open by appointment only.

LA VIEILLE RUSSIE, 781 Fifth Avenue, at 59th Street. (212) 752-1727.

MIMI FERZ GALLERY, 114 Prince Street, SoHo. (212) 343-9377. "Small Works: Group Exhibition Featuring Contemporary Russian Artists," March 21 to April 7. "Nikolai Markov: New Works," April 25 to May 13. Hours: Mondays through Saturdays, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.; Sundays, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.

GRANT GALLERY, 7 Mercer Street, SoHo. (212) 343-2919 or www.grantgallery.com. "Russian Postwar Avant-Garde," through today.

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, 11 West 53rd Street, Manhattan. (212) 708-9400. "The Russian Avant-Garde Book: 1910-1934," March 28 to May 21. Hours: Thursdays through Tuesdays, 10:30 a.m. to 5:45 p.m.; Fridays, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Hours: Tuesdays through Sundays, 2 to 5 p.m. Donations accepted.

NICHOLAS ROERICHS MUSEUM, 319 West 107th Street, Morningside Heights. (212) 864-7752. With works by the artist. Also concerts most Sundays at 5 p.m. This Sunday, a violin and piano recital; March 17, piano and cello; March 24, viola, violin and piano; April 5, violin (7:30 p.m.); April 7, piano, violin, clarinet and soprano. Hours: Tuesdays through Sundays, 2 to 5 p.m. Donations accepted.

RUSSIAN-AMERICAN CULTURAL CENTER, 14th floor, 55 John Street, at Broadway, Lower Manhattan. (212) 744-5168.

Restaurants and Food Store

"LA BRIOCHE" CAFE, 1073 Brighton Beach Avenue, at 12th Street, Brighton Beach, Brooklyn. (718) 934-7709.

CAFE SHISH KEBAB, 414 Brighton Beach Avenue, near Fourth Street, Brighton Beach, Brooklyn. (718) 368-6966.

FIREBIRD, 365 West 46th Street, Manhattan. (212) 586-0244.

M & I INTERNATIONAL FOOD, 249 Brighton Beach Avenue, at Second Street, Brighton Beach, Brooklyn. (718) 615-1011.

RASPUTIN, 2670 Coney Island Avenue, at Avenue X, Coney Island, Brooklyn. (718) 332-8111.

REGISTAN, 65-37 99th Street, Rego Park, Queens. (718) 459-1638.

RUSSIAN SAMOVAR, 256 West 52nd Street, Manhattan. (212) 757-0168.

RUSSIAN TEA ROOM, 150 West 57th Street, Manhattan. (212) 974-2111.

RUSSIAN VODKA ROOM, 265 West 52nd Street, Manhattan. (212) 307-5835.

UNCLE VANYA, 315 West 54th Street, Manhattan. (212) 262-0542.

Books and Videos

PUBLISHING HOUSE ST. PETERSBURG, 230 Brighton Beach Avenue, near First Street, Brighton Beach, Brooklyn. (718) 368-4128.

far as to give their tusovka a name — nash krug, or our circle — and to organize regular parties every three months or so for their closest friends, or roughly 150 people.

The numbers are too great for the Midtown venues, so the leaders of nash krug are on perpetual lookout for new places to hang out. Once upon a time, they went to Club Moscow on the East Side, which has since closed. Another time, they strayed and went to a Brazilian restaurant. Most recently, they took over Ms. Neustadt's store and ordered in prepared food from International Food in Brighton Beach.

"Russians are like lounge lizards," Ms. Neustadt said. "They are always looking for a place where you can go hang out, talk and drink. Right now, we are down to just a few places in Manhattan, and they are packed all the time."

But there is another place where some young Russians like to go, not to hang out but to find peace and quiet in the middle of the city. It is the Nicholas Roerich Museum on West 107th Street near Riverside Drive, dedicated to a Russian painter and archaeologist famous for his exploration of Tibet and Eastern religions (and for his designs for Nijinsky's 1913 ballet to music by Stravinsky, "The Sacre du Printemps"). Chamber music concerts are often held at the museum on Sunday afternoons.

"Sometimes I go there if I need a rest for my soul," said Ms. Varlamova, a graduate of Fordham University. "There is something about the atmosphere which is almost spiritual. I find myself keeping coming back because it is one place in this city that gives you a quiet moment."



Meats and pickled everything at M & I International Food on Brighton Beach Avenue.