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St Petersburg Restaurants by Rowena Carr-Allinson

Not so long ago when mentioning a visit to Russia, the general reaction would be turned up noses and a precipitation of jokes about the upcoming cabbage and potato diet. No longer.

Indeed, where once upon a time restaurants were monopolised by government-run 'Intourist' displaying a 'foreigners only' sign, things have changed dramatically and today St Petersburg's gastronomic scene is set to rival any other large European city. The only trick is knowing where to go.

The beautiful city of St Petersburg, better known for its pastel palaces, golden domes and romantic canals has embraced the post-Soviet free enterprise boom and has been transformed. With a dramatic 1.5\$bn facelift in 2003 the city that was once the heart of the Russian Empire has found a new sense of identity, reviving the Russian's love of luxury, food and sumptuous interiors. Cue an explosion of gourmet restaurants and Starbucks-style 'Coffee House' outlets popping up on every frozen street corner. Even sushi bars and the dreaded American fast food chains are available.

There's an obvious gap between old world chic and contemporary style dining: traditional Russian versus the more popular, hip fusion cuisine. But in every case opulence is key and on your plate, more is more.

To sample Russian classics within a truly sophisticated atmosphere, the city's historical hotels are the place to head to. The grandiose hotels where the ghosts of the Tsar's contemporaries are still present today, have oversized rooms, over the top décor and caviar bars as standard.

At the [Grand Hotel Europe](#), silver service and operatic entertainment come with the marble decor. We skip the Bear Stew, wondering if it really is bear but without the linguistic ability to pose the vital question. We order the 'Zastolye' for two. A smorgasbord of traditional local dishes, there is enough to feed half the Red Army: home-smoked sturgeon, vodka marinated salmon, baltic sea herring, Stolichnaya salad, smoked venison loin, pickles, marinated mushrooms and of course, caviar...

Needless to say, I'm totally incapable of finishing my Salmon Koulebyaka (rolled in pastry). The entire meal is washed down with vodka, and although I'm dubious at first, the grapefruit vodka is zingy, fresh and delicious. A million miles away from what I knew vodka to be.

The city's newest Caviar bar at the [Hotel Angleterre](#) has pride of place, with perfect views onto St Isaac's cathedral. The hotel has come a long way since hosting Trotsky, shootouts during the Revolution and moonlighting as a WWII hospital.

Far from being fuddy-duddy, the brand new **Caviar Bar** is bang on trend with its sleek rich black and red leather interiors. Its designer style oozes luxury with the caviar theme omnipresent, right down to the bar covered in thousands of tiny glistening black beads. A caviar bar. Literally.

The menu features light dishes including Kamshatka crab salad, but the star attraction is of course, the eye-wateringly expensive fish egg. After all, when in Russia, eat caviar. If you can afford it.

The Angleterre's charismatic British chef, Colin Flood, recommends the Oscietra caviar, with fresh blini and Smetana, the Russian equivalent to sour cream. Its acidic tang makes it the perfect accompaniment to caviar. "Caviar without Smetana is hot dog without the sausage. Or maybe the roll," he jokes.

In case you're wondering, more expensive doesn't necessarily mean better. Choosing from the Beluga, Sevruka and Oscietra is all a question of taste and texture.

Next door, at one of the city's favourite Italian eateries, **Borsalino's**, businessmen and locals prop up the bar to the soundtrack of a jazz singer flown in direct from New Orleans. An institution, Borsalino's has that 1950s gangster's layer feel to it. Nothing to do with the fact that these days, it's not unusual to spot local Tony Sopranos with bulky body guards in all the finest establishments.

To sample traditional Russian fare in the high street try the '**Elki Palki**' chain, technically Ukrainian, but very similar. Aside from the odd 'forest' décor, the food is good and plentiful. Try the Siberian Pelmeni (dim sum meets tortellini), a real treat at the fraction of the price of the fancy restaurants.

For Pelmeni with a view, the **Belle Vue** brasserie at the Kempinski Moika 22 is an affordable choice in a fairytale setting. Candlelit tables set close to the slanted windows give a Parisian 'bateau-mouche' feeling – without the motion. The varied menu has everything from game dishes to seafood. We try the fantastically creamy Stroganoff topped with shredded gherkins, oversized crab raviolis and 'Borsch'. This Russian staple was once a peasant beetroot broth but has since been jazzed up with decadent foie gras toasts. Anton, our waiter is charming and gives great recommendations, a much appreciated rarity in a city where service still hasn't quite caught on yet.

More upmarket is the **Old Custom's House**, dubbed 'the home of haute cuisine', it's a must on any gourmet's tour. The cosy red brick cellars with vaulted ceilings and elegant décor is as well-known for its excellent Tzarskaya oysters (Tsar's choice) as for its celebrity clientele. It boasts 44 presidents, including Putin, on its guest list, as well as fashionistas Valentino and Gwyneth Paltrow.

Another stylish must is the 2006 Night Life Award winner: **Tiffany's**. Owned by high society restaurateur Vadim Lapin it's all plush interiors, gleaming red chandeliers and European fusion food. Alongside risotto and pasta dishes you'll find more inspired Duck's breast with apple strudel or sushi. Viktoria Petrova, a regular, says "Tiffany's is a really hot place now! It's the perfect mix of trendy interiors, a light atmosphere and very delicious food!" In Paris and New York serving staff may look straight off the catwalk, here they go one further. Rumour has it the staff has its own stylist!

St Petersburg's glamorous crowd are always hungry for the next big thing. The hottest table in town now is the city's latest ultra chic **Lumiere**. French chef Patrick Moren's exclusive dining room on the Grand Palace shopping mall's upper floor is as much about the exquisite interior design, with its ceiling of Swarovski crystal pendants, as it is about the menu and the skyline views. The elaborate dishes are both complex and eclectic. Try celeriac nougat with lobster and smoked salmon with oyster mousse, black caviar and cucumber jelly or wild mushroom and foie gras ravioli with mushroom & truffle oil. The place is breathtaking. Definitely so hip it hurts. A bit like the prices.

Next door, the **SevenSky Bar** attracts a younger crowd. The equivalent of St Petersburg's Beverly Hills kids lounge around looking good and ordering cocktails from the seven meter black granite-bar. The menu offers everything from pizzas to Japanese soba seafood noodle salad or Moroccan chicken. But although the food is decent, it's about seeing, being seen and partying. Hyped as the hottest nightspot in town after MTV hosted their party here, the volume on the impressive sound system is cranked up nightly turning the place into a kicking club.

These hot restaurants don't believe in advertising. You won't find Lumiere in the guide books. It's reserved for those in the know: the city's crème de la crème. Dig a little and there's a whole world of cutting edge gourmet experiences to be had. Hardly cabbage and potatoes.

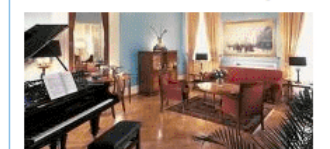
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