

The exploding restaurant scene - in Moscow

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This week sees the opening of Turandot, the most extraordinary restaurant I have ever seen anywhere and one for which figures paint only a limited picture of what has taken place and what still lies in store.

Over \$50 million dollars has been spent on the project which began as an idea in the restaurateur's mind six and a half years ago. Over 450 men and women have been working simultaneously on the site, including more than 100 talented young artists to fully decorate two floors in the late 18th century style of chinoiserie, a space which will seat over 500 and generate employment for more than 600. Even its eventual opening date has been something of a long running saga after a river was unexpectedly discovered flowing underneath its kitchens.

Equally unexpected is Turandot's location. It is not to be found in New York or London, currently the world's most exciting restaurant cities. Nor does it mark the re-emergence of Paris, where restaurants first originated. Only in Las Vegas would there be the capital and sense of scale to even contemplate such an opening, but there they would never allow such a project so much time either to be built or to produce a financial return, if there is to be one.

Turandot is, and could only be, opening in Moscow, a city that has witnessed the most remarkable renaissance in its restaurants since the fall of the Soviet regime. Many Moscow restaurants now serve French and Italian food that are the equivalent of any in the West thanks not just to imported, top quality produce but also thanks to numerous, imported chefs (there are said to be over 50 European chefs in Moscow with many more to follow). Their wine lists boast all the top names and because so many of the restaurants are brand new they come equipped with the wine accoutrements European restaurateurs would dream of: stacks of top glassware; decanters and walk in, temperature controlled, wine display units.

Their interiors are evolving too, from the initial folkloric layouts which saw settings of idyllic farmyard scenes complete with live horses and watermills to give the restaurant's customers the temporary illusion that they were eating in the gentle Russian countryside to multi million dollar state of the art restaurants with bars to match. Noa, a Mediterranean fish restaurant named after the Polynesian god of pearls and built from scratch on a corner site at a cost of over US\$5 million, would not look out of place on Fifth Avenue or Bond Street.

There have been diverse reasons for this remarkable turn of events. The most deep rooted has been the universal desire to wipe out the memory of the Soviet regime's system of institutionalised restaurants which over 70 years almost extinguished the Russian passion for good food and good times. Under this system, it was pointed out to me more than once, restaurant directors as they were entitled were referred to as 'thieves', guilty by association of stealing the national treasure, the produce of its soil. Time and again as I talked to the city's new breed of restaurateurs I found myself being drawn into conversations for which, even as a former history student and restaurateur, I felt that I was simply not qualified. I should have had a psychologist by my side as these restaurateurs expressed their angst at what their country has been through.

The role that restaurants can play in the changing not just how Moscow is perceived but also Russians in general was encapsulated by Andrey Dellos, Turandot's creator. "What I now realise is that my training under the Soviet regime as an artist, art restorer, engineer and linguist – and the only benefit of that era was the free education – seems to have conspired to prepare me for a career as a restaurateur. Restaurants I find fascinating because they are a microcosm of the real world in which all human emotions are contained within their four walls. Despite the fact that they are from different centuries what I hope I have achieved using the medium of an aged patina on the interiors of both Café Pushkin and Turandot is an atmosphere that will make my customers relax and feel special. Nobody feels comfortable where everything is new – that's why people find the Kremlin so strange. No-one could live there."

In the process Dellos also hopes that his and other Moscow restaurants will change how Russians interact with the rest of the world. "Russians are not seen as friendly because many of us have a hard smile, a consequence of our very heavy inheritance. When we start training our staff here we begin by working on the muscles of their face, to look at their people in a friendly fashion to learn to please their customers, to love them."



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Dellos is one of a phalanx of strong individuals involved in this transformation, many moving from a position of strength bequeathed by the previous system, who have harnessed contacts, particularly valuable for securing the right property in the right location at the right terms, the prerequisite for success in a city where title to property may not be all it appears to be, alongside the seemingly numerous sources of finance to a rapidly growing awareness of what their increasingly demanding customers, both the growing band of cosmopolitan Russians and the city's expatriates, want to eat and drink.

Arkady Novikov is considered to be the leader of this pack. A former chef, he now has associations with over 60 successful restaurants as he skilfully takes shares in such restaurants as the hugely fashionable Vogue Café and Gallerea as well as Cantinetta Antinori, a restaurant with as aesthetically authentic an interior as any to be found in Milan or Florence. Novikov has reached the position where he is seen as the restaurateur with the magic touch, someone to be brought in when things do not go so well as after the recent troubled opening of Hediard, the luxury French food store, but also as the one who constantly attracts the best staff and locations. One competitor described him, entirely respectfully, as 'the bone in our throats.' The numerous branches of his far less expensive chain of Yolki-Palki restaurants generate a vital cash flow stream for his continual expansion.

Others who have followed in Novikov's footsteps are the baby-faced financier Mikhail Zelman, 27, who has interests in over 20 restaurants. His two branches of Goodman Steak Houses (motto: Good Steaks for Good Men) have brick walls, comfortable leather interiors as well as the steaks on offer would not look of place in any American city centre from San Francisco to New York. Stepan Mikalkov, 34, son of Oscar winning film director Nikita and actress Anastasia (the Catherine Deneuve of Russian cinema) has put the privileged time he spent with his parents in the café of the Union of Filmmakers, Writers and Actors to good use by opening three restaurants, including Vertinsky where I ate the most authentic Russian food I have ever tasted. Mikalkov will be opening a new restaurant, Indus, with the highly renowned London based Indian chef Vineet Bhatia in early 2006.

Over tea in Café Pushkin, which he opened six years ago, Dellos confessed to me that the many years he has spent conceiving and ultimately opening the extraordinary Turandot nearby have been "the happiest of my life even though I only now appreciate the size of the risk I am taking. It may be that no-one will like it." That is a possibility and certainly Turandot, the first of three 'restaurant palaces' Dellos has planned for this 26,500 sq metre site in the heart of Moscow is undoubtedly the world's biggest restaurant gamble. Customers may not return but judging from what I saw as the first journalist to be taken round the site, no-one will leave unmoved.

The entrance off the street leads into an impressive Italian courtyard with columns around a central area in which food and drink will eventually be served. Turandot, serving predominantly Chinese and Japanese food but taking in other Asian influences too, is off to the left while the second phase, a Venetian palazzo serving Italian food currently Muscovites' favourite, will be off to the right and will open in a year, finance willing. After that, at the instruction of someone on high Dellos intimated to me, he will open a Russian palace.

The shock and scale of the interior of Turandot took some time to sink in. Guillaume Rochette of Eureka Executive Search, who has placed many European chefs in Moscow kitchens, described Dellos to me as 'a neo-classic Walt Disney, a man of distinguished taste but one who was born two hundred years too late – he should have been born in the late 18th century'. And this is the epoch Dellos has been working to recreate as he explained while we circumnavigated builders, painters, electricians and Dellos's artistic team continually seeking his final approval for an installation. "The late 18th century was when Chinese art, objets and decorations first came to the attention of the European and Russian nobility and courts and they were astonished by their distinctive approach to the applied arts. Chinoiserie became hugely fashionable in all its many aspects while China itself was seen as paradise, as a kind of Utopia. Russians are tired of ideology and my goal is to give people somewhere to which they can come, enjoy themselves and dream."

Even at this early stage, it is hard to underestimate the scale of Dellos's achievements. The main large circular dining room incorporates another set of columns set in a circle in the middle in the centre of which musicians wearing wigs will play classical music under a gold tree on a mechanised, revolving stage complete with peacock. The walls are covered with hugely detailed paintings of country scenes that would not look out of place in any well maintained English stately home and above all this on the second floor is a bright blue cupola ceiling from which will be suspended a large rock crystal candelabra which Dellos has designed.



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Under the ceiling is an array of blue papier mâché vases and golden monkeys created by the set designers at the Bolshoi whose lighting director has also contributed his particular skills to the restaurant. Running round both floors are a series of twelve private dining rooms each of a different size and with a different hand painted interior – the one most conspicuously being worked on during our visit incorporated detailed reproductions of Fragonard's drawings to accompany the stories of La Fontaine. Still some way from completion but of an impressive size was what Dellos referred to as 'the porcelain room' which will be decorated only in gold, white and blue and will incorporate under the ceiling 100 blue and white porcelain plates which Dellos has commissioned from a small factory in China.

Dellos's determination to create something not only very special but also something that will endure has been enhanced by his decision to enlist Alan Yau, the London restaurateur who created the wagamama brand, then Hakkasan, yautacha and busaba eathai, as the man to design the kitchens and to create the menu. Over two million dollars has been spent on a kitchen that, if Turandot is to succeed, must never to be idle and while Yau and his project co-ordinator Rocky Chu were examining the banks of bright, shiny dim sum steamers and rows of woks along with some of the Chinese chefs who will man them I took in one of the most incongruous aspects of this whole enterprise. Standing behind these professionals were three babushkas, plump middle aged Russian women, washing cloths in their hands cleaning down equipment that they had never seen before in their life but which, if this enterprise is successful, will generate lucrative jobs for the next generation of Muscovites – and waiters in busy restaurants currently earn five times the average monthly wage..

Turandot obviously has to seen in the context of a city overflowing with money, much of it looking to be recycled into a booming restaurant industry both within Russia and outside, but its gradual emergence and its unquestionable integrity owe as much to the symbolic role Café Pushkin has come to play in the city and Dellos's previous career as a painter and in art restoration in Paris.

Café Pushkin, a strikingly realistic recreation of a nobleman's home and dining rooms from the late 19th century, has generated an extraordinary following among visitors – it has become Moscow's second most popular attraction after the Kremlin – and Muscovites, particularly those who come on to eat there in the early hours of the morning once the night clubs have closed. Operating 24 hours a day 365 days a year, Café Pushkin repaid its capital cost of over \$5 million within 18 months but most importantly its popularity has allowed Dellos to convince the powerful mayor of Moscow that restaurants can play a significant role in the city's future economic prosperity – a factor which has obviously been hugely important in securing such a valuable piece of property for Turandot.

But in opening such an enormous new restaurant next door but one to one that is already so visibly successful Dellos is opening himself to commercial risks on two very different fronts. Turandot's particular design may simply not appeal to a wide enough market, leaving it as nothing grander than another restaurant white elephant, albeit the largest ever. It may, however, be just as successful as Café Pushkin has been but in the process it is more than likely to draw customers away from its older sibling. Would, I asked Dellos, Turandot ever be financially successful?

As only a successful businessman can – and he has significant interests in other restaurants and Beauty Embassy, a large beauty and medical salon – Dellos tried to skirt this question, albeit alluding to significant lines of credit at various banks and concentrated instead on what he has always envisaged for Turandot, albeit at a much smaller budget. "My goal is to show that hand made, refined objects and design can be created in an era when brands and minimalism seem to dominate everything. When I built Café Pushkin I trained a team of young artists to decorate the building but as soon as it was finished they were whisked away by the country's nouveaux riches to work on their private houses. We are now training another 100 young art students and I hope that this series of palaces will not only generate work for them for many years but also define a series of buildings that I hope will be around for just as long."