

Borscht, Please, With a Side of Sushi; Ethnic Chefs Borrow and Blend, But Spaghetti and Sake? Never

The New York Times

December 31, 2001 Monday, Late Edition - Final

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Section: Section F; Column 2; Metropolitan Desk; Pg. 1

Length: 1381 words

Byline: By SARAH KERSHAW

Body

Hankering for Russian sushi? Yemeni fried chicken? Taiwanese fish and chips, Japanese spaghetti or Jamaican jerk chicken with chop suey?

If not, you could always get the roast beef sub at a new Blimpie in Manhattan, and a side of shrimp pad Thai, or a turkey and Swiss with banana sticky rice.

But if you really must sink your teeth into authentic ethnic-ethnic fusion, forget the Blimpie, a k a Joey Thai.

There are two new Indian-Chinese restaurants in Queens. There is Pakistani-Italian and Norwegian-Cantonese in Brooklyn and Korean soul food in Harlem. There is Irish-Dominican, Greek-Irish and Dominican-Italian food, and a Greek-owned Italian pizzeria in a Chinese section of Flushing that is popular among Indian Sikhs.

Immigrant magnet that it is, New York City has long been the scene of some cross-cultural cuisine, including Cuban-Chinese restaurants, Albanian pizza parlors and a Chinese-owned Mexican taco chain.

But in a culinary phenomenon sweeping through the city's immigrant neighborhoods, dozens of rare and unusual ethnic combinations and eateries have emerged over the past few years, some of them opening just in the past few months. And immigrant restaurateurs say that in the highly competitive world of New York City ethnic food, it pays to branch out, mix, borrow and blend.

Mostly undetected by critics and guidebooks -- and all but the most adventurous food lovers -- the restaurants cater largely to immigrants, advertising in ethnic-language newspapers and relying on word of mouth to build their business.

In Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, Russian cafes have been serving sushi for several years. But last year, a Ukrainian restaurateur opened the Riviera Sushi Grill, where most customers are Russian immigrants and there is a Russian-style menu offering borscht and pickled herring, with a separate menu for the sushi bar.

"We are not a restaurant where you can have the traditional California roll," said the owner, Alex Podolnyy, 29.

As Russian-speaking customers nibbled from large wooden sushi boats on a recent evening, Mr. Podolnyy said that the sushi, made by a Taiwanese chef who adds Russian twists to the food -- like black caviar -- is selling like mad.

But Toshi Suzuki, a Japanese immigrant in the restaurant business, scoffed at the notion of Russian -- or Taiwanese-made -- sushi. "Everyone knows a real sushi chef must be Japanese," he said.

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No matter that Mr. Suzuki runs an Italian restaurant, Basta Pasta, on West 17th Street in Manhattan, or that his chefs are either Japanese or Ecuadorian. "Most of the Italian chefs in this town are Spanish or Chinese," he said. "So, we are Japanese. This is New York."

His food is Italian, with Japanese influences, which are obvious in dishes like spaghetti with flying fish roe and Japanese basil. However, he draws the line at drinks, selling fine Italian wines.

"I will not be serving spaghetti and sake," Mr. Suzuki said.

There are perhaps dozens of upscale fusion restaurants in the city that, like Basta Pasta, combine the flavors of two or more countries. But there are many other off-the-radar neighborhood restaurants that cook less common combinations.

Among them is Nakisaki International Restaurant, which has been serving Jamaican and Chinese food, and Chinese dishes with a Jamaican twist, for 15 years on a quiet street in Rosedale, Queens. The owner, Earl R. Lyn, an ethnic Chinese from Jamaica who also runs a 250-seat Nakisaki restaurant on Long Island, said he was an acrobat in Jamaica and was nicknamed Nakisaki.

Similar to the Cuban-Chinese restaurants that first opened in Manhattan decades ago, Jamaican-Chinese -- along with a growing number of Guyanese-Chinese restaurants in Queens -- reflect a type of food that is native to the home countries of the immigrants who cook it.

In the past century, the Chinese have immigrated to or gone as indentured servants to countries all over the world, including Cuba, Guyana, Jamaica, Pakistan and India. And the style of Chinese food that is cooked there -- and influenced by the tastes and flavors of those countries -- was brought here. Lately, the Chinese food from those countries is cropping up all over Queens, a borough known for its large immigrant population and its many ethnic restaurants.

With the market saturated by the cuisine of some ethnic groups, such as Indian food, new restaurateurs from well-established immigrant groups here are likely to cook a more specific or narrower style of food than most of those already in business, said Jim Leff, an expert on ethnic food and author who started the Web site Chowhound.com.

"The first American restaurant in Nepal will not make spoon bread from South Carolina," he said. "But the 30th might."

The owners of the two new Indian-Chinese restaurants in Elmhurst, Queens, said they felt that there were already too many Indian restaurants in the city. The owners -- both of them Chinese-Indians -- said their best chance of surviving in this economic downturn was to offer something Indian immigrants were yearning for and that few others were serving -- home-cooked Chinese.

At one of them, Chopstick, on Grand Avenue, which opened three months ago, the shiny new menu lists Chinese dishes that could be found at any Chinese restaurant, like wonton soup and hot and sour shrimp. But others, like fried chili chicken and vegetable special Bombay style, are made with Indian spices and ingredients.

Akhil Bisaria, an Indian immigrant from Bombay who lives in New Rochelle, N.Y., and recently discovered Chopstick, said he had not found Indian-Chinese in New York before. "This is the Chinese food I ate growing up," Mr. Bisaria, who works for a computer company, said the other night, while he was sipping egg corn soup, an Indian variation of egg-drop soup.

"I could really see this in the Village," said his wife, Alex, who had brought her sister along to try the food. "It would be such a hit."

While some immigrant restaurateurs are serving mixed ethnic cuisine native to their homelands, others are serving the food of other ethnic groups for a variety of reasons, profit foremost among them.

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In the case of the Russian sushi, Japanese food is a craze now in Moscow and establishments here are catering to the tastes of customers who no doubt know about sushi's popularity back home.

The Russians are joining Koreans, and more recently Chinese, in opening sushi establishments in New York City, according to Robert Sietsama, the restaurant critic for The Village Voice and the author of several books on ethnic food.

"Koreans have claimed rights to sushi for a long, long time," Mr. Sietsama said. "What is newer is Chinese restaurants serving sushi, that's astonishing. And the Russians like sushi very much. I guess it was a quick step from pickled herring to raw fish."

It is unclear how the new Blimpie, a k a Joey Thai, on East 31st Street in Manhattan, fits into all this.

But in the two months since the owner, Sanoh Yunprayong, known as Joey Thai, began serving Thai fast food along with "America's best-dressed sandwich," it has drawn a small but loyal following.

Like several customers, Mr. Leff, who writes a regular column for Chowhound.com called "What Jim had for Dinner Last Night," discovered the fast-food restaurant by accident. He described it as "an oasis set in a highly commercial yellow plastic Blimpie," but wrote in his column that he felt Joey Thai did not have all the ingredients and equipment that he would need to make exceptional Thai food.

"It was the sort of meal you'd expect to eat if you'd met a Thai chef cooking spaghetti and steaks in a Peruvian railroad dining car," Mr. Leff wrote.

Joey Thai, 52, an immigrant from Bangkok who ran a Thai restaurant in his native country, does the Thai cooking and makes the submarine sandwiches, as do his wife and three sons. There are two menus; Blimpie breakfast is served starting at 7 a.m., and the Thai food starts at 11 a.m.

Ultimately, Joey Thai said, his goal is to open a French restaurant with "a Thai touch." But for now, he said, he will continue serving subs and Thai, and probably add one other type of food to his menu.

"We would like to survive in New York City," he said. "And I can't count on Blimpie alone. Next time you come, I may be serving Spanish. You know, rice and beans."

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Graphic

Photos: Diners at the Riviera Sushi Grill, Alex Podolny's Russian sushi restaurant in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn. (Ting-Li Wang/The New York Times)(pg. F3); Joseph Liu owns Chopstick, an Indian-style Chinese restaurant in Elmhurst, Queens. Mr. Liu is Chinese, but was born in India. At right, Davina Bisaria, 4, tries the noodles. Alex Podolny, right, opened a Russian restaurant and sushi bar last year in Brooklyn. (Photographs by Ting-Li Wang/The New York Times)(pg. F1)

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Borscht, Please, With a Side of Sushi; Ethnic Chefs Borrow and Blend, But Spaghetti and Sake? Never

Subject: SIKHS & SIKHISM (54%)

Industry: RESTAURANTS (90%); RESTAURANTS & FOOD SERVICE INDUSTRY (75%)

Person: KERSHAW, SARAH

Geographic: NEW YORK, NY, USA (96%); NEW YORK, USA (88%); UKRAINE (58%); NEW YORK CITY

Load-Date: December 31, 2001

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