St.Petersburg Times ONLINE TAMPA BAY

Russian restaurant draws a multicultural clientele

Patrons of St. Petersburg Nights find familiar food, drink and music.

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Published August 27, 2006

ST. PETE BEACH - After making their own adjustment to American culture, a Ukranian mother and daughter decided to open a restaurant to give all their friends, new and old, a place to gather.

"There are so many refugees from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe," said Ilona Sakovich, who, with her mother, Faina, last year opened St. Petersburg Nights, a Russian restaurant in St. Pete Beach. "It is still difficult for them to acculturate."

"At the same time, we're trying to introduce Russian culture to Americans," said Faina, a former teacher who is now a social worker like her daughter. "We hope it will be a very good bridge."

The restaurant occupies space in the Gulf Winds Condominiums at 6800 Sunset Way, a block from Upham Beach.

While far from the atmosphere of St. Petersburg, Russia, the Sakovich's business has tapped into a considerable immigrant crowd that shares cultural sensibilities, and also adventurous Americans and tourists from all over.

"About 60 percent of our customers are European, but we still get a lot of Americans," said Ilona, 33.

The women were religious refugees themselves, emigrating with Faina's husband, George, from Ukraine in 1987 when it was still a Soviet republic. They came to meet family in the Floridian St. Petersburg, but eventually became a welcoming force for waves of former Soviets and Eastern Europeans that followed.

Over the years they organized gatherings for others before deciding to make a perpetual party in the form of their Euro-style entertainment venue.

With customers from different parts of the former Yugoslavia, or from competing Soviet regions, the ethnicities might sometimes seem incompatible, but Ilona said everyone embraces the best of the old country in a festive mood.

"When you are here, you have to be in peace," she said. "That's the social worker in me."

The women bring a little bit of everything to the table. They hail from Ismail, a port city on the Danube delta in the extreme southwest of Ukraine near the Black Sea. Guarded by a 14th-century fortress, Ismail has been populated and run by Turks, Romanians, Moldavians and, of course, Russians. Everyone brought something different to eat, so the Sakovich family cookbook is as multicultural as it gets.

American guests like the beef stroganoff, the women said, as well as the chicken cosmopolitan salad or the obvious chicken kiev. They rarely venture into the borscht or herring, much less the red caviar or the beef tongue, but for their more Slavic brethren, such dishes are a touch of home.

"Some of our food is an acquired taste," Ilona said.

Entertainment can range from Russian pop music videos on the widescreen TV to Boris Tsatsakian, the jazz saxophonist, to belly dancers or a Euro DJ. Weekdays can be a bit thin, they said, but on weekends the women said they regularly fill the 150-seat restaurant.

"There's dancing always," Ilona said. "Russians love to dance."

The bar includes a dozen different vodkas but also beers from Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine. There is also Moldovan wine and Khvanchkara, the semisweet Georgian wine that was a favorite of that country's most famous son, Josef Stalin.

Though the wee hours usually see a young crowd, early evening caters more to families. Before the party gets started, the dance floor is open for children to run around, play with toys the restaurant supplies, or just watch Russian cartoons.

"It's good for young parents because they can't go many places with young children," Ilona said, adding that children will sometimes nap in a room just off the dining area while parents enjoy the food and show. "You can come in at 7 and stay 'til 2."

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