

Omnivore Wrap-Up: Pretty Plates and Ascendant Swedes

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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On Sunday evening, the Omnivore Food Festival came to a boozy close on the just-opened terrace of Strelka Bar, overlooking the shimmering Moscow River, with the oversized-sunglasses-clad mingling breezily with hunters of haute cuisine. All present admired the postcard view of the Christ the Savior Cathedral while cheerily sipping bay-leaf vodka cocktails (courtesy of Beluga vodka); munching carrot sticks (courtesy of factory farmer Belaya Dacha); sampling pre-packed turkey ragout (courtesy of grocery store Azbuka Vkusa); perking up with a cappuccino (courtesy of espresso-machine manufacturer Krups); and — oh yeah — also devouring a few plates of gourmet morsels.

That's probably enough about the corporate-fun-filled finish. More, however, can be said about the festival's other events, which felt less like farces and more like embodiments of the event's slogan: "100 percent creativity; 100 percent freedom; 100 percent Omnivore."

That's a lot of "100 percents," but they certainly tried. Yes, plenty of free creativity

and creative freedom were on display at the festival's cooking demonstrations, which took place over three days at the Gostiny Dvor expo center, in a modest tent within the Restaurant and Hotel World International Culinary Salon 2011 (a commercial village of blender manufacturers, sausage producers and food magazines much larger than the one at Strelka). The festival's little sanctuary within the RHWICS 2011 was also sponsored — by Vittel water and Pago juices, in case you were curious — but the chefs and their dietetic doctrines remained in clearer focus. And with their largely atypical views on food, the participants helped maintain Omnivore's reputation as being fertile ground for unusual cross-pairings and seedlings of striking ideas.

That said, some of what sprouted wasn't new. A number of the principles and themes touted by the chefs were the same that have been present at past Omnivore festivals and have long been blossoming in the food world: strict use of local and seasonal ingredients; use of wild products; creation of pretty pictures on the plate; and deliberate infusing of meaning into food. Much of this is new for Moscow and Russia, however, and their arrival here brought up some intriguing issues unique to this setting.

This painterly locavorism was most extremely and passionately embraced by Swedish chef Petter Nilsson, the goateed ladykiller who runs the kitchen of the Paris bistro La Gazzetta. His restaurant has received high praise for many for its unusual couplings, such as crayfish with watermelon, but also scorn for the same. And one could expect a similar mix of plaudits and guffaws at the conceptual dishes he demonstrated during the festival.

The quintessence of Nilsson's heady approach came at dessert, which he announced would be a dish inspired by last August's wildfires in Russia that seemed to portend the apocalypse. This, for instance, may strike some as an odd source of inspiration for something to eat. What resulted from Nilsson's vision truly did recall fire-bitten earth: black crumbs akin to scorched soil; a liquid reminiscent of blood spilled across it; a grey ovoid, like an egg covered in wet cement, atop it; and a single blade of green jutting up through the middle. Cleverly, these elements were in fact a black-bread crumble, blueberry syrup, smoked hay ice cream — yes, you read that right — and a jaunty leaf of tarragon. Together, they had the aspect of a particularly ambitious and avant-garde entry in one of those grade-school edible art contests.

But to me, it seemed like more than a gimmick. Graham-cracker castles with jello moats are adolescent amusements; but Nilsson's piece seemed deserving of gallery space. Especially upon tasting the ambivalent ice cream — sweet and creamy, but also burnt and bitter — the meditation upon the disaster seemed fully intentioned and truly provocative. In terms of intrigue and sophistication, the dish was to most food what an episode of "The Sopranos" is to "General Hospital;" or an Animal Collective song to one by Miley Cyrus.

And indeed, Nilsson admits giving primacy to conceits in his cooking.

"We think about, 'What is our expression?'" he told me. "And, secondly, it has to be good. [But] the idea comes first."

In addition to the grand artistic vision, Nilsson also espouses a politico-environmental stance that has become commonplace among the captains of kitchens worldwide: strict use of seasonal, and preferably local, products. In parts of the world such as northern Russia, however, this rigidity can force an atavistic austerity. That is, Nilsson basically advocates that

Russians cook exclusively with what northern Russian peoples did from November to April for centuries: root vegetables; hearty greens; an array of pickles; and, thankfully, also eggs and certain meat and fish.

Whether such local products are readily available to Muscovites is arguable and a topic for another time. But is the asceticism really necessary? Yes, Nilsson says, essentially, but that it's really not so bad. And he gave an intriguing example of what he meant. Take the simple celery root: This vegetable first appears in France in July, Nilsson said. But, if stored properly, it can be made available year-round. What makes it interesting to keep cooking them is that, he's noticed, their flavor changes over the course of the year. This means that locally grown celery root in February really is differentiable (to Nilsson, at least) from an imported specimen.

The setting of certain limitations can also, ironically, spur creativity. Another pair of chefs flown in for Omnivore, Sebastian Persson and Ola Rudin, formerly of the restaurant Trio, are compatriots of Nilsson but, unlike Nilsson, work in their native, also polar-reaching country. As a result, in winter, Persson and Rudin — who are as equally fanatical as Nilsson about using seasonal ingredients — conduct a large pickling operation, utilize dried grains and vegetables, and take full advantage of their country's proximity to the sea, cooking barrels' worth of fish. They claim — as, again, Nilsson agreed — that hewing to what's available in winter actually feels less shackling than stimulating, with the season's natural bounty, however beggarly, acting as muse.

The results are fittingly poetic. Persson and Rudin emphasize the creation of a theme for each dish, making for highly organic, but at the same time precise, compositions. In the first dish they assembled, they placed bright pink strips of gravlax (cured salmon) next to a sunburst smudge of egg yolk and below a scattering of piquant accoutrements: translucent pickled ramps; a few herbs the color of kale; pieces of crisp salmon skin; and a dusting of leek ash (leek leaves dried, then ground). The plate summoned a grassy Swedish riverbank, a shimmering salmon flashing by, a blurry early-spring sun. Another of their dishes was aptly likened by Omnivore founder Luc Debanchet to a garden: young herbs; dried carrots and sliced radishes, green and yellow and black; and small mounds of spelt, barley, oats, and buckwheat.

The latter dish was particularly arresting. But, I have to admit, I'm skeptical that it would have been a pleasure to eat. Thus in terms of how satisfying a dish would be to the stomach, if not the mouth, the more classical combinations and preparations proffered by the French, Russian and American chefs seemed to be more successful, though rarely as memorable or fantasy-like. American Carlo Mirarchi prepared calf's brains, quickly pan-frying them to produce a thin, crisp shell and a creamy interior; Ilya Shalyev of the restaurant Ragout made crispy duck with a prune sauce, buttery beets, and a caramel-covered radish; Frenchman Julien Burlat put asparagus with hollandaise sauce, and how can you go wrong with that?

There were exceptions: Frenchman Gilles Choukron's crab under granola-like crumbs with an herb called an oyster leaf; Andrei Ryvkin's beet laksa with crab and lime oil; and others. But for me, the Swedes stole the show. Scandinavia is ascendant currently in the world of fussy dining, and their creations demonstrated why.

And yet, at the closing party, in between a bottle of Evian and a Belaya Dacha apple slice, the only dish I tried and immediately decided to selfishly block from friends' spoons was a stew: curried celery root, onions, fennel and chicken by Shalyev and his co-chef Alexei Zimin. This was a celebration of the traditional and the comforting — not a dab of this and a smear of that — and yet it was the dish that excited my stomach most.

Alas, this is one of the dilemmas of mouth-stomach dualism: Can the two ever be bridged in their sentiments, rather than simply by the gullet? I hope that, even with Omnivore over, such gastro-philosophical questions will still be taken up in Moscow.

Festival founder Debanchet expressed a related hope for the city and his festival's effect on it. He said he hopes that Omnivore would join the start of a movement in Moscow toward more and more diverse, thoughtful and delicious cuisine.

I think that, fortunately, this desire is already being realized.

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