

Moscow Waiters, Don't Snatch My Plate!

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Save for price, Muscovites should be proud of their developing restaurant scene. But there is one inescapable thing from an expat perspective that drives me crazy about Moscow restaurants: Plate Snatching by Moscow waiters.

Plate Snatching is the senseless criminal act of a waiter prematurely snatching a customer's plate during the dining experience. Moscow waiters have an enshrined compulsive obsessive need to snatch away your plate the very nano second after you complete your final bite of a course, and in some cases, well in advance of this point. My good friend, Justin, once had his plate snatched as he was cutting into his steak about to take a bite.

Why is this infuriating? Part of enjoying great food is doing so at a leisurely pace, savoring each bite, not feeling rushed. Too often we eat at our desks, shoveling food down with unnecessary haste so we can get to that next e-mail or phone call. The restaurant experience is meant to be different. The Plate Snatcher rudely disrupts the dining process and in doing so destroys the eating experience, brings an unnecessary abrupt end to what should be a slowly enjoyed experience and physiologically and psychologically disrupts the customer's

digestion, the net effect of which is to drive me nuts. I can only imagine that French and Italian expats come close to having heart attacks upon their first assault of Plate Snatching.

The one moment in the dining experience you want the waiter to be slow, Moscow waiters are bullet-speed quick. Comparatively, trying to get a waiter to take another drink order can take a universe of time. Having lived in Moscow for three years, I have probably thought about Plate Snatching too much. But it is so, so annoying and counterproductive to repeat business. And Plate Snatching is absolutely pervasive in the Moscow restaurant scene, from high-end to low-end establishments.

Why does it happen? One reason that I've heard is that restaurants lack an adequate supply of plates and cutlery. If that applies to your restaurant, invest the money and buy a larger inventory of plates and cutlery.

Another reason put forward is the Soviet-enshrined need for cleanliness. On the whole, this need for cleanliness demonstrated by Muscovites is an admirable trait and has led me to lift my standards in this area. But for the prime importance of not disrupting the dining experience, Moscow waiters should temporarily check this cleanliness compulsion and let the customer leisurely savor the efforts of the great chefs of Moscow.

A third reason for Plate Snatching might appear to be a desire to increase table turnover. But this reason can be discarded given the time it takes to receive the bill.

On the whole, the Moscow restaurant scene is decent and continuing to improve. The food is typically very good, and the restaurants are generally very well appointed and furnished. Uilliams, I Love Cake, Cafe Conversation, Ragout, Dodo, Beef Bar, Sky Bar (at the Swissotel) and Mr. Lees are all great places with terrific food. In fact, Moscow's elite restaurants, such as Not Far East, White Rabbit and Vatrushka, are better than anything I have come across in the U.S., Europe or Australia. Additionally, some Moscow restaurants host a DJ playing house music, which adds a nice touch to the dining experience.

But the Plate Snatcher kills the dining experience. One thing I can promise Moscow waiters: There is an inverse relationship between the speed of snatching plates and the size of the tip. Plate snatchers, your days are numbered. Kill the obsession, and watch your tips increase!

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