

RESTAURANT

Among The Worst of The Worst

A FRAUD OF A RUSSIAN RESTAURANT:



When Dr Anton Pavlovich Chekov (1860-1904), the great Russian writer of the short story as well as being an accomplished playwright, visited the Russian island of Sakhalin in the late 19th Century, one can imagine the type of food that confronted him.

Because the entire Island of Sakhalin, prior to the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905, was one of Russia's penal colonies and was ruled under the aegis of Czar Alexander III, who believed, very much, in the Gorgias idiom: Might is right.

Dr Chekov, known as one of the 19th Century's great objective writers, devoid as he was of pontification and moralism, visited Sakhalin Island as a journalist, not a doctor, and there witnessed the stark truth as to how the poor peasants and Russian felons were treated.

His reports on the quality of the food, given to the inmates to keep them from expiring, were such that the Russian Government of the day had to take note of the excesses, metered out by those in charge of the penal colony in the Sea of Okhotsk.

TARGET's food reviewer was reminded of Dr Chekov's reports on Sakhalin when he visited the Kowloon restaurant, claiming to be Russian, named '*Balalaika*'.

The food at Balalaika, on the day that TARGET, completely unannounced, dropped in, was, in the main, inedible, unappetising, lukewarm ... and a complete fraud.

It was the type of meal that Dr Chekov might have described as being meat, having been carved from between the horns of an ox.

This was what TARGET ordered on the evening of our visit:

Kolbasa (Pan-fried Russian Sausage)
\$HK50

Sup is Gribov S. Kartoshkoi (Mushroom and Potato Broth)
\$HK48

Golubtsy (Cabbage Roll with Pork and Beef in a Sour Cream)
\$HK120

Baranina Tushenaya S. Ovoshami V. Gorshochke (Lamb Stew with Vegetables in Broth)
\$HK120

Piroshkies (Homemade Stuffed Bread)
\$HK15 per bun

The First Two Dishes

To dimmed lights and waitresses, occasionally clapping their hands as hard as they could, which happens every few minutes on most busy evenings as the Filipina waitresses serve Balaika's version of shashlyk, complete with the flames of burning Vodka, poured over chunks of meat (it could have been the flames of mentholated spirits: Who can tell one flame from another?), TARGET was served, first the Sup and then the Kolbasa.

The soup, lukewarm by the way, was a thin broth, loaded with diced mushrooms, diced potatoes, pieces of carrots, some other finely sliced vegetables, and some traces of sour cream, all of which appeared to have half dissolved in the broth, which appeared to have a base of chicken.

TARGET had thought that the presence of diced potatoes would have made the soup thick, but that was not the case: It was very thin.

This must have indicated that the broth and its ingredients had not been boiled for too long a period of time, thus preventing the potatoes and carrots from dissolving in it.

Alternatively, the broth had been prepared separately, and then the potatoes and other ingredients, added at a later stage.

Regardless, the soup was tasty and deserved at least 6 points out of 10 points.

As for the Russian Sausage, the Kolbasa, even Dr Chekov would have had trouble with this hard, solid-state fuel cell (he was reputed to have had very poor teeth).

TARGET assumes that some Russians like their sausages, almost rock solid, and, therefore, this reviewer cannot comment on that aspect of the dish.

On the assumption that the sausage had been made by the restaurant's cooks, TARGET suggests that they take it, immediately, to Sakhalin Island since it is unlikely, ever, to ferment – because the meat is so tightly packed in its outer casing.

Having said that, the 2 slices of sausage that TARGET tested were very tasty.

Also, there was not a hint of any fat: It appeared to be pure, ground, lean beef, stuffed under a great deal of pressure into a casing, and then pan-fried.

One could not eat too much of this sausage because it is so heavy.

It merited 6 points out of 10 points, with one point, having been deducted for it being served lukewarm (even the felons on Sakhalin Island had hot food on occasions).

The Main Courses

At this point in the meal, this reviewer was favourably impressed with Balalaika, even though it was clear that it would take a far stretch of the imagination to conceive of this restaurant, anywhere near resembling an eatery of any note in any major city of Russia.

When the 2 main courses were placed on the table, there was a little confusion as to what they were, with one Filippina, claiming this, while another one, claimed that.

Whatever, when TARGET explained what was supposed to be placed on the table, they all, all 3 serving people, agreed that that was what the dishes represented.

Well, God help the inmates of Sakhalin of the late 19th Century if that is what they had to eat!

The Cabbage Rolls (Golubtsy) were cold and hard, having clearly seen their better days, some time prior to TARGET, viewing them.

They could well have been in the jacket pocket of Dr Chekov when he was roaming the low hills of Sakhalin Island, so old and hard they were or appeared to be.

Put into a skin and rolled around, one could have confused the cabbage rolls for sausages.

They were completely inedible due to a number of reasons.

What Balalaika, clearly, had done was to freeze, or place into a refrigerator, on the coldest top shelf, most likely, the cabbage-wrapped '*things*' and, then, when some unsuspecting customer asked for them, they were whisked out of the freezer/refrigerator, placed into the microwave, and 'Yoicks!' There you have it.

The trouble was that nobody checked to discover whether or not the '*things*' had been fully defrosted/heated sufficiently. Even the Filipina waitresses could not distinguish them from half-baked bread.

They were dry, cold, insipid, and hard.

No points here.

The Lamb Stew (Gorshochke) was on a par with the '*things*'.

This was a small pot of a reddish liquid, into which 3 pieces of lamb meat, resplendent in at least one quarter of an inch of fat, had been added.

It did not take a Sherlock Holmes to ascertain how this dish had been prepared.

It was, in fact, the base of a Borshch (Chinese style, mind you), minus the beets and the beef, which had been replaced with tomatoes and bell peppers.

It was not a lamb stew, but a soup base into which some pieces of fatty lamb had been added.

One may surmise that this is the way that the owner(s) of the restaurant can make a little extra money: Make a soup and sell what can be sold within a few days; and, then, the watered-down leftovers, for the next few days, can be a base for a stew.

Worst of all, the '*stew*' was lukewarm and insipid – while the lamb was only partially cooked.

Further, it had been watered down to such an extent that one was not very sure what one was eating.

No points here.

The best part of the meal was the Piropshkies, the homemade breads.

These could best be described as being buns, freshly made to order, into which different fillings had been added.

TARGET ordered 2 of them, one filled with mushrooms and one filled with pumpkin and some other vegetables.

Each bite of these buns, TARGET calculated, cost about \$HK5, because each bun costs \$HK15.

However, they were a real treat and deserved a high 9 points out of 10 points.

Finally, TARGET would like to warn its subscribers not to consider ordering any wine at this eatery because the one sheet of selections are among the worst that TARGET has ever seen on offer in any restaurant.

Even the 19th Century Russian peasantry and the gentry knew sufficient to order wine from France, with Champagne, being among the best sparkling wines.

The Ambiance

While the food is noteworthy for its poverty of produce and preparation, the ambiance of Balalaika is excellent, especially for a restaurant, which wants to be considered Russian, and which is out to try to capture the atmosphere of a small, Russian hamlet.

The owner(s) of the restaurant have found all kinds of Eastern European, peasant-looking things to hang, here and there, even down to some old Russian (assumed) boots that adorn the floor, near the lift of Number 10, Knutsford Terrace, Tsimshatsui, Kowloon.

The restaurant accommodates about 120 people and nearly all of the customers, who were present on the Saturday evening that TARGET's team popped in, appeared to be local Chinese (who else can be easily fooled about Russian Cuisine?).

It is a noisy place so one should never take a paramour in order to negotiate terms, or one's lover, because it is hardly the place to try to hold hands.

Though sparse in its furnishings, it is an architect's dream of form, following function: The form, following poor function.

From the name card of Balalaika, it appears that the owners of Balalaika are, also, the owners of the following 4 restaurants:

- | | |
|---------------------|----------------|
| 1. Island Seafood | 3. El Cid |
| 2. A Touch of Spice | 4. Club Havana |

TARGET wonders whether or not the other 4 restaurants would be as bad as Balalaika.

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