

Russia in here for a pile of decent comfort food

I WENT to Russia the other evening. Well all right, then... more the Chalk Farm end of Regent's Park Road. Da. Where there nestles a restaurant called Trojka, taking its name from a carriage or sleigh pulled by a trilogy of horses – all very romantic, no? Like Dr Zhivago – one of my pitifully few Russian reference points. What else can I think of? Well there's Uncle Joe Stalin – who, like a lot of avuncular souls, turned out to be a beast, cruelly lurking behind his Iron Curtain. This was Churchill's phrase – leading me, as a child, to wonder whether it ran to toning aluminium pelmet and maybe copper tiebacks. Cossacks were fearless cavalrymen in Astrakhan hats – as worn later by Kruschev who banged his shoe on the table whenever he spoke. There's vodka (though not Smirnoff, which I believe is actually made in Hayes) and the Bolshoi Ballet and Tchaikovsky and the Kremlin's onion domes – so bizarre a flourish of Disney frivolity in once so very stern a city. Rosa Klebb of SMERSH ('Death to Spies!') who brought a whole new meaning to winklepickers. Oligarchs. Russian Vine – an untameable weed which strangled my laburnum tree. Tolstoy's long novels and Chekhov's airless plays. God... I'm running out now. Oh yes – Sobranie Black Russian, a very smart black and gold tipped cigarette which I affected in my youth; I tried not to actually light them too often as my income was rather more in tune with a packet of Woodbines. Russian Roulette. Nearest I got to that was the chocolate version – have you seen it? A circular box of chox, and at its centre the cardboard approximation of a roulette wheel – people spin it, and then you scoff the chocolate the arrow points to. The gimmick is that while 23 of the chox are yummy praline, just one is infused with red hot chilli! We played it one Christmas and my young daughter insisted on going first; she spun the wheel, noshed the choc – went green, went crimson. Rushed out of the room and refused to come back for simply hours: drank a lot of water and said "Gah!" a good deal. We didn't trouble with the nonsense

Joseph Connolly experiences the glory of being a tsar and meets a Russian spy, all without leaving Chalk Farm!

of spinning after that: just ate them. None of which has an iota to do with Trojka, of course – which does, from the outside have a rather cosy and cod-Russian look about it: red, basically, with flashes of dullish gold and the glint of candles within. A bit of a poor man's Gay Hussar, it struck me – this Greek Street institution being actually Hungarian... this in turn reminding me where I first met my dinner guest, Adrian Bridge. That's not where I met him – that's his name. This chap is a travel writer on the Daily Telegraph who has appeared in this column once before under the shady monicker 'Trav', because he was too ashamed to be publicly outed as having lunched with me. He has now decided that such rare privilege is indeed an honour, and quite right too. Anyway, he was educated at Highgate and lives in West Hampstead – so naturally we encountered on the Danube Express on its way to Budapest.

Trojka is a large, tile-floored space with a bar along one side of it. The walls are Russian red, with kingfisher pilasters and a motley of mismatched gilt-framed mirrors and spraucy chandeliers. The air is charged with angry opera, beyond identification, while the very large pictures veer between triumphalist and mawkish, but all have horribleness in common. Cut-price rhesche, which over years has acquired the scuffs and fadedness of a fallen empire: I like it a lot. The laminated menus (which are headed Troyka and not

Trojka – couldn't have spelt it the normal way though, could they?) are tacky in both senses of the word, but crammed with endless hearty winter dishes. Such as Bigos, which is hunter's stew of, among other things, sauerkraut. So not all of this is uncut Russian, then, but enough to keep the legend breathing – with such as Pelmeni, which are billed as 'Gogol's favourite dumplings', and who are we to argue? The bloke at the table for six next door warned his fellow diners very loudly to beware of Bigos "because it's massive". I yearned to chip in with a further caveat for a dish of my imagination – Smallos, which is very weeny.

I thought we'd go for a wine from the Ukraine. 'The Crimean area Koktobel,' it says on the list, 'is known for its unique wines rich in minerals and microelements'. Well I like a good big glass of microelements as much as the next man – who was Adrian, of course, so we ordered that. But they didn't have it. Okay then – what about this Moldavian number...? No, sorry. And the wine from Georgia...? Nope. Well I tried: ordered the only claret instead. Which they were out of. So I sought succour in the house reds: French or Spanish, it said. "We'll have a bottle of French, please". No we won't: Spanish only. Right then. Dear Lord – you do wonder if Hugh Johnson has to put up with all this sort of thing.

There's lumpfish or salmon caviar, if you want it – but for the real thing, Sevruga, it says that five days notice is required. Well



look – apart from the (unspecified) expense, we can't sit here for five bloody days, can we, waiting for a starter? (although I've been in restaurants where it seemed as if I had). So, then – borsch for Adrian, which is offered hot or cold, but actually came tepid. He wanted it scalding, so sent it back: it returned a bit warmer. This beetroot soup had Smetana stirred into it. Not the Czech composer, of course – that would be silly. It's sour cream. Think of it – said Czech composer had to go through the whole of his life being called Bedrich Sourcream. Who might be a lascivious niggard out of Dickens.

I had smoked ham and avocado salad – ham dry and good, and half a creamy avocado: no actual salad, though. Then I

was having Pozharsky cutlets – one chicken, one veal, with herbs, Stroganoff sauce and a choice of mash or kasha. And I, in an attempt at authenticity, ordered the kasha – buckwheat and, as we know, entirely inedible: so I didn't eat it. The cutlets weren't actually cutlets at all but breaded burgers, really: the flavours and succulence were very good, though – the sauce first rate. Adrian was intrigued by Coulibiach – an old Russian recipe, it said on the menu, for salmon pie with mushrooms, spinach and rice. "It's really traditional, is it?" he asked the very mournful waitress – who didn't know because she was from Latvia. The other very mournful waitress (I think they were taking turns in trying to outmourn one another) didn't

FACTFILE

- ☐ **TROJKA**, 101 Regent's Park Road, NW1
Tel: 020-7483 3765
- ☐ Open all day from breakfast onwards
- ☐ Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆
- ☐ Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆
- ☐ Cost: Under £50 for three courses for two, with whatever wine they've got left.

know either, being from Poland. Anyway – the pie looked gorgeous: a golden pouting cushion, and promisingly steaming. He thought it terrific, and finished the lot. It's all good comfort food, and extremely reasonably priced – which these days, of course, is a comfort in itself.

The meal got better and better, really: Adrian wolfed his baked cheesecake – and my warm plum crepe with vanilla ice cream was a treat indeed: Shrove Tuesday, with added glam. We really did have a whale of a time, revelling in the just slightly shabby honesty of it all. And then, just before we left... I met a Russian spy. No listen – she must have been: a tightly belted white raincoat, black stockings and atop her platinum hair, a blood red beret (and her lipstick was the identical shade). She said – and her voice was properly throaty and glottal – that I looked exactly like Nicholas II. Just think: I had entered Trojka as no more than Dostoevsky's Idiot – and now I was departing, covered in imperial glory, as Tsar of all of Russia! Well all right, then... more the Chalk Farm end of Regent's Park Road. Da.

☐ All previous restaurant reviews may be seen on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

SO MUCH for suffering in the pursuit of good intentions: you can now drink Fairtrade wine and enjoy it. Of course, that's far too superficial a statement. Decent Fairtrade wine has been around for ages, but you had to pick and choose. You still do, but the better choices are now so much more appealing.

With Fairtrade Fortnight looming – it starts on Monday – it's time to put them to the test. At the latest press tasting of wines whose sale gives back something special to the community which grows the grapes, I found one I'd recommend without hesitation to anyone who enjoys fine sauvignon blanc. I had just tasted Six Hats 2009 and was writing a very flattering note when the announcement came that the wine had carried off the UK trophy for the Best Overall Fairtrade White Wine.

As yet, you can buy it only in the north west, at Booths supermarkets (£7), but wait for spring and it should be in Asda.

Six Hats is one of several Fairtrade ranges from Citrusdal Cellars, owned by respected

Delicious wines that are fairly traded

South African winemaker Charles Back, but as almost always with South African wines I preferred the whites to the reds. Other tempting Citrusdal wines are Hope's Garden

sauvignon blanc, already in Asda (£6.25), and Sainsbury's appealing Fairtrade chenin blanc-vignion blend (£5).

Generally, Fairtrade wine remains remarkably low-priced and often very good value, even though a premium from each case is guaranteed to go to the growers. That indicates, perhaps, just how poor the growing communities are: a little money goes a long way there. For example, in South Africa, Chile and Argentina, the three Fairtrade wine countries, the premium has helped to provide schools, adult education, creches, cleaner

drinking water, clinics, better housing and many more basic improvements.

Talk to those involved, and the enthusiasm is palpable, as is the



optimism for the future. Vernon Henn, general manager of Thandi – the name means love – explains how South Africa's first black empowerment farming project is well on the way to full ownership by its 250 shareholder families, a step beyond all the physical improvements. Star wines include Thandi sauvignon blanc 2009 (£6, The Wine Society) and Thandi chardonnay 2007 (£7-£7.40, Tesco, www.ethicalwine.com)

Over to Stellar Winery's Berty Jones, who has moved up

from cellar hand to assistant winemaker at another of the South African projects: he points out that the ducks which feature on his business card are not mere decoration but essential pest-controllers, munching every snail on what is now a fully organic farm.

Even more innovative is Stellar's brave decision to make several wines without sulphur – the cabernet sauvignon, vibrant with juicy fruit, is £6.75 at Vintage Roots (www.vintageroots.co.uk). There's also a delectable sweet wine, Heaven on Earth (£7.50-£8.90 a half-bottle, www.winedirect.co.uk, www.ethicalwine.com, www.vintageroots.co.uk).

But for years the leader in promoting the Fairtrade ethos has been the Co-op, and its wine selection remains the largest. There are special offers (to March 9) to mark the fortnight, including the very attractive

Cape sparkling rose down to £6, fresh, aromatic Argentine pinot grigio £4.50 and the serious, oak-aged Argentine organic malbec reserve a bargain at £5 rather than £6.50.

To date, the total Co-op contribution to Fairtrade wine projects is an impressive £588,500. In terms of quality of life for those who have benefited, the value is far higher.

A footnote: most Fairtrade wines remain fairly far down in the price table, but at that last tasting there was a growing move towards premium bottles – quite posh malbec, for example, pushing into the £10 bracket. Fine and Fairtrade are looking to become a tempting partnership.

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HOME TIP OF THE WEEK

☐ For proper operation of a thermostatic radiator valve, it is important to ensure that it is not obstructed by curtains or furniture, to allow it to read the room temperature correctly and ensure that it shuts the radiator down if the room has reached the preset temperature to conserve energy and cost.

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