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Food Special Issue

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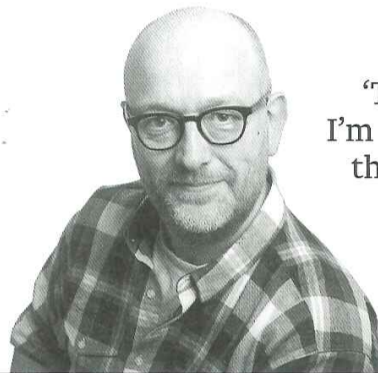
FT Weekend Magazine

Spring feasts

Mary McCartney's
great green recipes



Tim Hayward



'This is, I think I'm safe in saying, the world's first "maximalist" restaurant'

From Knightsbridge with love

Mari Vanna, London

One of the first grown-up restaurants I ever visited in London was the Hard Rock Cafe. It was the first time I'd encountered American food and American culture. Yes, it was as ersatz as hell, but it was thrilling. The food was new, executed better than my Spam-fuelled imagination could then encompass and the people who served it were from another planet – friendly, helpful, accommodating. Those were innocent times. Then, last week I had a very similar experience in Mari Vanna, a restaurant themed around the next country that seems likely to exert a root-and-branch cultural influence over us – Russia.

Mari Vanna is already a success in St Petersburg, Moscow and New York. It is, we are told, Roman Abramovich's favourite place to eat. It offers "authentic home cooking" at prices entirely concomitant with its Knightsbridge address – but that isn't going to be a problem here. There's a ready market of people desperate for a taste of home and unfazed by the finances.

We have all experienced "minimalist" restaurants. Mari Vanna is, I think I'm safe in saying, the world's first "maximalist" restaurant. The website tells us it is decorated in the style of a Russian home, with *tchotchkes*. In translation this means that every available surface is hosed with a thick layer of doo-dads, knick-knackery and kitsch. They've clearly brought in an expert to tear the wallpaper a little and another to ensure that the stuff underneath is even more authentic. Yet after a decade of agonisingly tasteful temples to food, the clutter isn't solely disorientating – it's also homely and welcoming.

We started with the salt herring and potatoes. Let's get out of the way, at the very beginning, any jokes about Russian cuisine and



Mari Vanna: an antidote to "agonisingly tasteful temples to food"

boiled potatoes. It may well be true that their national diet runs heavy to the esculent, but if that's so, familiarity has bred extreme competence. Steamed, buttered and sprinkled with fresh chopped dill, I'd have cheerfully crawled a mile to eat them. The salt herring, gorgeous though it was, appeared to be almost a garnish. My date, against my better advice, went the conservative route of salmon and blinis. Anyone expecting, as I did, the dispiriting little canapés of decadent western dinner parties would have been astonished by the plate-sized, lacey, near-transparent buckwheat pancakes, the delicately salted salmon with a garnish of sour cream, chopped egg and micro-diced red onion.

The starters were big, which made the moderate size of the mains well judged. I went for the *pelmeni* – something like a Siberian version of a Singapore soup dumpling. A half-dozen lurk in a rustic tureen, each looking like

a downhearted raviolo but fragmenting in the mouth in a shower of ground pork and rich stock. Once again, my date went the safe route and opted for beef Stroganoff.

Stroganoff can go one of two ways. There is the elegant; expensive steak, flash-seared and dressed in the creamy sauce, or the home-cooked; gobbets of rough but flavourful cow protein, long stewed until they surrender name, rank, serial number and sublime flavour. Sadly, this Stroganoff fell between the two – a homely, immaculately authentic long-cooking with top-quality steak. This may be the only time you'll hear me suggesting a restaurant buy cheaper meat.

But, in a way, that sums up the Mari Vanna experience. The "home-cooked" food is of extremely high quality. The service is cheerfully informal yet blisteringly professional. Waiters in the smallish dining room seem to have a couple of tables each, two plain-clothes maître d's scan the room, just in case anyone drops a fork or god forbid, needs anything. Meanwhile the sommelier prowls and a woman in a dirndl and an embroidered smock patrols. It's home comforts with Disney levels of control – and I mean that only in a very good way.

Just before you pay your healthy bill there's a small ritual. I don't want to spoil it for you by telling you about it, that wouldn't be in the spirit of the thing, but it's an odd, sweet, friendly little gesture designed to make you feel more welcome the next time you come. The Englishman in me would probably find this a little awkward, perhaps even embarrassing. Perhaps the best thing about Mari Vanna is that by the end of dinner, I didn't feel quite so damned English. **FT**

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