

Restaurant Life of St.-Petersburg and Moscow in Late Imperial Russia

Irina Khmel'nitskaia, Moscow State University

“Sitting in Moscow, in a huge hall of a restaurant, nobody is familiar, nobody knows you, and at the same time you don't feel yourself a stranger”, - is complaining one of the heroes of Chekhov's play “Three sisters”. These words express a modern identity very exactly. It's not surprisingly – the play was written in 1900, the period when “processes of transition from traditional to modern industrial society reached their zenith”, particularly, in Late Imperial Russia.

Problems of economic growth and industrial development of Late Imperial Russia were always in the focus of Soviet and then Russian historians' attention. But most of them fully ignored the influence of processes of industrialization and urbanization on citizen's everyday life. There are only few books and articles deal with this topic. Urbanization that changed professional structure of society, formed specific urban way of life and fastened social mobility, reflected on all spheres of life of city inhabitants, including leisure activities.

Unsurprisingly that modernization was noticeable mostly in capitals. By the end of the XIX century Russian capitals - St.-Petersburg and Moscow faced with all problems typical for capitalism. Industrialization and urbanization, the rise of bourgeoisie and middle class greatly changed the face of society and relations between different estates. These processes involved changes in everyday life, especially of leisure. Louise McReynolds in her new book “Russia at Play” points out that “leisure-time activities contributed indirectly to increased participation in public life”. Leisure demanded a reconceptualization of traditional ideas of free time and public space. “Free” time or hours not spent at work or doing domestic chores was not new; “leisure” time – time spent in activities at different public spaces – was.¹ Restaurant became one of it.

The majority of places of public catering during this period were cheap and dirty, they called “traktir” in Russian (a little bit similar to tavern). The process of industrialization and urbanization formed new leisure ethic. Restaurant was a form of leisure of the upper classes during the almost XIX century. 1900's were the period when the income increased, and new bourgeoisie was eager to join the values of elite. Members of new social strata, where money was the main criterion of distinction, hoped themselves to rise in society. They were eager to acquire a new standard of living. They wanted new recreational outlets, like fancy restaurants. They no longer had to apply traditional standards to their life.² Growing income allowed them to visit restaurants. All these led to the growth of number of restaurants by the beginning of XX

¹ L. McReynolds, *Russia at Play. Leisure Activities at the End of the Tsarist Era* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 9.

² P. Stearns, H. Chapman, *European Society in Upheaval. Social History since 1750* (USA, 1992), 140.

century. In Moscow we observe the increase by more than 100 % during 10 years, from 1901 to 1911.¹

The fastened rhythm of life influenced on correlation of private and public spheres, especially as far as communication while eating was concerned. One of contemporaries wrote about 1910's: "People gathered in traktirs for drinking and eating free of cooking at home, different restrictions of home. In our time freedom in everyday life made a great step forward and it indisputably was the reason of morals' improving." Now people visit restaurants with family or women alone.²

Pre-revolutionary Petersburg and Moscow offered its citizens the variety of places of public catering. The best restaurants were situated in the center of a city, moving from a center to outskirts – lower-class restaurants. In Petersburg the most part of restaurants was situated in a district between Palace square and Fontanka River. It was an administrative and financial center of a city, and officials and bank's clerks were the usual clients of this category of places of public catering. Moscow center was Kitay-Gorod and Okhotny Riad – districts of Moscow City. That's the reason why Moscow restaurants frequented mainly by merchants. People of intelligent professions – writers, journalists, lawyers, doctors, professors and so on – were the other big category of restaurants' clients.

Restaurants were open at 11 a. m. till 2 or 3 p. m. There were no any night restaurants, but you could go to out-of-town restaurants, situated on the suburbs. "Yar", "Strelna" in Moscow district, "Villa Rode" in Petersburg were very famous among this category. They worked all the night and were open for everybody who wanted to continue the evening. Restaurants on suburbs formed the axis with restaurants located in the center of a city.

If you were rich enough, you could go to first-class restaurant, if not – to third-class restaurant. It doesn't matter that lower classes couldn't find an affordable place for eating and drinking. A city offered them a lot of dining rooms, beer-saloons, tea-rooms, cook-shops, and places only for drinking with cheap alcohol. But the process of reconstruction of old "traktiry" buildings to restaurants, the number of new restaurants and demand for this sort of place indicated the rise of new social strata in late imperial Petersburg and Moscow. These people, not noblemen, had opportunities to join to values of "the leisure class".

One of the main terms of popularity of a restaurant besides the cuisine was mainly the interior design and entertainment program, orchestras, and billiard-rooms. People looked for things they couldn't afford to have at home. Though not rich enough to contribute to formal architectural styles, sometimes too poor to furnish more than a single room with any luxury, the

¹ Restorator, no. 1 (16) (1911): 3.

² OR RGB, f. 436, 11. 10. P. 10.

bulk of the middle class had a bit of money to spend on entertainment and it was beginning to move this interest outside of home. People frequented restaurants with large halls and rooms, with electric light, ventilation, and high ceilings, decorated with beautiful windowpane, palm-trees. Every restaurant-keeper for the reason of competition was seeking of something special. But palm trees and electric light were almost obligatory. It's very interesting that electric light played such a role in a restaurant. Apparently, electricity and bright premises associated with wealth and comfort. N. N. Chebyshev, Moscow prosecutor, wrote in emigration about electric light of Moscow restaurant "Praga": "I still can't forget an electric steel framework in "Praga"...white lamps of wrong form on the ceiling made an impression of taken out teeth hanging on nerves."¹

Different specialized on materials and carpets firms were founded. Restaurant-keepers employed well-known architects for creating reconstruction projects. For example, I. E. Bondarenko, one of the architects of Russian section at World exhibition in Paris in 1900. He was send to Hamburg and London for acquaintance with a restaurant design. It's worth mentioning that European restaurants set an example for entrepreneurs.² So, some restaurants in Berlin amazed the Russian with huge size – more than 700 tables. In this connection I would like to stress that restaurants of St.-Petersburg and Moscow at the beginning of XX century were also intended for more clients. All these novelties required a lot of money, but profits allowed them such reconstruction. According to the law, prices in restaurants were unlimited. In this respect, foreigners were amazed by high prices. If you compare prices in European and Russian restaurants, in Russians they were too high, especially for alcohol. For example, the price of champagne in Germany was 4-5 rubles, in Russia – 15-20 rubles. Also it should be noted that St-Petersburg as an official capital was more expensive city than Moscow. One Englishman wrote in 1912: "The average Englishmen would rather stare at paying from 25 to 30 shillings for each bottle of Champaign and 2 shillings odd for each minute glass of liqueur. However, you have only to look round you to see that the Russian regards that as the usual thing."³

Restaurant workers and waiters were male, because women were forbidden to serve in places with trade of alcohol drinks. Waiters of first-class restaurants (usually these were restaurants with French cuisine) should wear black tail coat. In restaurant with stylization of Russian traktir (mostly in Moscow) they put on white shirts with crimson belt. From Karl Baedeker's point of view one of a "striking characteristic" was "the enormous number of

¹ N. N. Chebyshev, *Blizkaya dal'* (The closest far away), (Paris, 1933), 53.

² See memoirs of Bondarenko I. E. in book "Moskva v nachale XX veka" (Moscow at the beginning of XX century) (Moscow, 1997), 78-79.

³ H. M. Grove, *Moscow* (London, 1912), 125. K. Baedeker, *Russia with Teheran, Port Arthur and Peking. Handbook for Travelers* (London, 1914), xxvii.

waiters”. A famous author of guide-books was right. It is known that Moscow restaurant “Ampir” had 104 waiters for 100 tables.¹

The task of a waiter was to make service unnoticeable for a client. A waiter wasn't permitted sitting, loudly speaking, knocking, laughing, smoking, drinking and eating in the presence of a client; waiters couldn't talk with client, only asking his questions. It's not surprisingly that all occupations among restaurant workers exhibited a greater than normal relative decline after age of 30; for example, there were 500 fewer waiters aged 20-24 than aged 15-19.²

In spite of the fact that waiters were discontented with their position and founded professional organizations both St.-Petersburg and Moscow, their earnings in first-class restaurants were nearby 100 rubles.³ Waiters didn't have fixed wages, but only tips. So earnings depended on service. Nevertheless, earnings were so high, that tips allowed them to establish communities for opening their own restaurants. For example, there were 40 Waiters' Unions only in St.-Petersburg. In this connection mention should be made of the fact that some famous first class restaurant-keepers started their career as a restaurant worker, for instance, Sudakov, owner of “Yar” in Moscow and fashionable “Medved' ” in Petersburg.

The most popular hours in restaurants were lunch, from 12 till 3 a.m., and dinner, from 5 till 12 p. m. People frequented restaurants also after theater. In this respect, Grove wrote: “...From 12 to 1:30 you will generally find it hard to secure a table.”⁴ Some clients had even their own favorite tables in restaurants. One of the actors of Maliy Theater in Moscow had a table in restaurant “Hermitage” in Moscow, which nobody could occupy, when he was absent.

If your purse gave you the opportunity to go to first-class restaurant, sometimes it wasn't enough. Some of restaurants, for example luxurious “Cuba” in Petersburg, had their constant clients: “Tatars waiters unwillingly and with distrust seated new people”.⁵

Some restaurants were trying to create a special menu. Petersburg was known for French and Italian cuisine, Moscow for Russian cuisine. Sometimes this process became only imitation, especially in second-class restaurants. That was the reason of funny mistakes; restorators used French names even without understanding what they mean. That became the object for humor.⁶

Large and decorated premises of a restaurant gave the opportunity to celebrate holidays and organize banquets to those citizens who hadn't mansion or wasn't reach enough to organize

¹ K. Baedeker, *Russia with Teheran, Port Arthur and Peking. Handbook for Travelers* (London, 1914), xxvii. Restorator, no 16 (1912): 4.

² TsIAM, f. 46, op. 14, d. 1453. 15. J. Bradley, Muzhik and Muscovite. *Urbanization in Late Imperial Russia* (London, 1985), 164.

³ Restorannoe delo, no 11 (1914): 10

⁴ H. M. Grove, *Moscow* (London, 1912), 122.

⁵ A. A. Plesheev, *Moye vremia (My time)*, (Paris, 1939), 164.

⁶ See humorist magazine “Razvlechenie” (“Enterntainment”), no 4 (1909): 2, no 19: 3, no 5 (1910): 2.

a celebration for 200-300 person at home. Banquets became a very popular form to celebrate an official dates in a restaurant. For example, there were 4 banquets during one month in 1900 in “Hermitage” in Moscow – 2 celebrations of benefit performances, 35-anniversary of justice of peace and so on.¹

Dining out in public demanded the knowledge of manners how to negotiate in new public spaces. That became a real obstacle, for instance, for the elder generations of merchants or for some aristocratic families. Countess Kamarovskaya, a tutor of Grand Duchess Irina, a future wife of Felix Yusupoff, wrote about her mother, who considered that respectable gentlewomen can't eat in public in a restaurant.² It's appropriate to say that restaurant was a form of leisure of aristocracy during almost the whole XIX century, and also men's leisure rather than women's. Banquet and holiday's celebration (especially New Year) was such a form which united both men and women. It didn't exclude the prostitution and women of so-called “demimonde” in the restaurants. But all this was closed for curious eyes in the special rooms in a few restaurants.

The growth of restaurants was a reason of emergence of dishonest, so called, clients “on credit”. A great quantity of restaurants gave this people the opportunity to visit restaurants for free without punishment. An appearance of handsome and fashionable man was deceiving. Usually they ordered the most expensive dishes and wine, took a cockroach with them, put it into food in the end and didn't pay or simply running away.³ “Non-payment became a real epidemic, - one of the Moscow merchant pointed out, - they broke out in such a size that government had to raise a question of publication of a special law which will allow imprisonment of not-paying clients”.⁴ It will not be an exaggeration to say that in every fourth no. of the specialized magazines “Restorannoye delo”, “Restorannaya zhizn'”, “Restorator” you can read a story about theft in a restaurant – stealing of fur collars, telephone receivers and so on. Some companies ordered a cabinet, asked for girl from a choir or woman selling flowers, gave her a sleeping pill and took all her jewelers.⁵ It was a real disease for restaurant-keepers, but one of the expenses of a flourishing business.

People of different estates could gather under the roof of a restaurant. Interior design let people forget that they were not at home: “We felt ourselves at home in Moscow restaurants like a sailor on his ship.”⁶ But the space of a restaurant gave them opportunity to create in public place private spaces. They could organize private party in a special room – cabinet, close for

¹ XX vek. Khronika moskovskoy zhizni. 1901-1910 (XX century. The chronicle of Moscow life. 1901-1910), (Moscow, 2001), 30, 32, 35, 36.

² E. L. Kamarovskaya, *Vospominaniya (Reminiscences)*, (Moscow, 2003), 77.

³ *Restorator*, no 15 (1912): 4.

⁴ I. A. Slonov, *Is zhizni torgovoi Moskvy (From Life of Moscow of Trade)*, (Moskva, 1914), 99.

⁵ See for example: *Restorannaya zhizn'*, no 6, 7 (1913): 5, 4. *Restorator*, no 5 (1912): 6.

⁶ N. N. Chebyshev, *ibid.*, 52-53.

unfamiliar eyes. People could organize not only a party but a suicide that appeared a real disaster for restaurant-keepers.¹

Leisure always means freedom, personal freedom, and freedom of choice. That is the reason why authorities of tsarist Russia paid so much attention to this sphere. Restaurants were similar to clubs. People could discuss here everything they want and alcohol gave them special freedom. They were also free of an eye of a supervisor. Unsurprisingly, that in 1911 visiting of some restaurants was forbidden for some categories of military serviceman. Contemporaries wrote even about spies in the uniform of a waiter in restaurants, who were listening for conversations.²

According to Habermas and his study of the development of public sphere, the growth of literary and cultural forums of opinion was an essential prerequisite for the development of bourgeois public opinion. Restaurants played a key part in making that relatively autonomous sphere of opinion.³ This process took its beginning in Late Imperial Russia, but it couldn't be finished. However, "the natural act of eating became the social act of dining, eclipsing several important distinctions between public and private interaction."⁴

¹ TsIAM, f. 46, op. 19, d. 16. 6, 24, 24; f. 475, op. 17, d. 843. 19. *Restorannaya zhizn'*, no 7 (1913): 5, no 14: 4.

² TsIAM, f. 46, op. 14 t. 2, d. 2037. 1, 8, 10, 19. A. A. Kizzeveter, *Na rubege dvukh stoletiy. 1881-1914. (On the border of two centuries)*, (Moscow, 1997), 259-260. M. Godeev, *Polveka unizheniy i bor'by (Half of the century of humiliation and fight)*, (Moscow, 1925), 44.

³ See: S. Mennell, *All Manners of Food* (Oxford, 1985), 142.

⁴ L. McReynolds, *ibid.*, 12