

BIRCH & RYE

Modern Russian

Birch and Rye reinvents our thinking about traditional Russian cooking by infusing the elan of contemporary California cuisine into indulgent, sophisticated dishes not to mention exceptional caviar and champagne pairings by Polina Steier

BIRCH & RYE REINVENTS OUR THINKING ABOUT TRADITIONAL RUSSIAN COOKING BY INFUSING THE ELAN OF CONTEMPORARY CALIFORNIA CUISINE INTO INDULGENT, SOPHISTICATED DISHES NOT TO MENTION EXCEPTIONAL CAVIAR AND CHAMPAGNE PAIRINGS.

The buzz for San Francisco's Birch & Rye started early, long before one could actually go there and experience their reimagining of Russian cuisine through a California lens. Though this genuinely unique restaurant draws on the traditions of foraging and fermenting shared across both cultures, Birch & Rye set out to reinvent our perception of Russian dishes and bring an elite perspective to food not typically viewed in a sophisticated context. Such reinvention was not the easiest proposition for owner and chef, Anya El-Wattar, but surprisingly and to the delight of those that live for Russian staples from Caviar to Borscht, she pulled it off, earning a spot among San Francisco's finest in the 2022 Michelin Guide. Banishing the unsavory aspects of what we usually see as typical Russian dishes, she creates a fresh, modern image for food that's rooted in the austerity of the Soviet bloc. Naturally, the first thing I wanted to try was the Borscht, how could they possibly re-invent this classic I wondered. Well, it was worth the wondering. You could call this "deconstructed" borscht post-modern in its artful conception, skillfully decorated with perfectly placed brassicas and kisses of smetana (a Russian combo of creme fraiche and sour cream) as pretty as meringue. The magenta beet coulis so exquisitely poured at the table was deliciously light, a pleasant interlude before we progressed to a tasting of hearty flavors.

The elegant stroganoff seduces with einkorn noodles, and mushroom coulis. the black cod dosh is inspired by traditional russian fish soup, the recipe is newly pared-down revealing black cod that was pure silky smooth, pan-seared and served with consommé and baby root vegetables, roasted and juicy. the house baked rye bread with smetana is otherworldly. as is the authentic, het modern pierogis.

A nod to the delicate artistry of Fabergé is the stunning fabergé egg cloud presentation composed of golden oscietra caviar, cauliflower cloud, and white rye.

Though the menu at Birch & Rye professes deconstruction, to take something down you have to build it first. And so in "building" the restaurant, it's apparent that with an eye towards simplified yet elegantly presented cooking there's an abundance of flavor as well



OPPOSITE PAGE Top: San Francisco's Birch & Rye is an understated yet natural space that acknowledges the landscape and aesthetic of Russia as the cuisine draws on the traditions of foraging and fermenting; Bottom left: the Caviar Centric Chef's Tasting Menu presents only the best, responsibly sourced, Malossol style caviar; Bottom right: Wood-fired potatoes and mushrooms, delectable Russian comfort food, duck fat and almond smoke take this dish out of the realm of the expected and into the sublime.

as style. El-Wattar and her team invite you to dine in a harmonious environment, surrounded by a forest of birch trees. The interior is understated, painted in creamy shades accented with warm woods and dusky blue banquets. Yet before tranquility takes over, your first encounter is jar upon jar of vodka infusions. Talented Maria Agostinelli oversees the beverage program. Try the horseradish vodka, a natural choice for this modern spin on Russian cuisine or go with a California-centric combination of orange, pine essence and apricot. Your choice to sip the flavored liquor solo or enjoy cocktails blended with a base of hazelnut and chocolate vodka.

The Caviar Centric menu in an uniquely indulgent multi-course caviar immersive experience option. Serving only the best, responsibly sourced, Malossol style caviar, and with selections likely to include golden Ossetra, Siberian sturgeon, and Kaluga, each course came with an array of house-made accompaniments enhancing each caviar choice. Champagne and caviar are always a sublime combination and a glance at the wine list offered wines of Champagne, the Republic of Georgia, California, and beyond. Can't wait to come back and try this flight of fancy.

El-Wattar, was born in Moscow and her grandparents are Ukrainian. A dedicated supporter of Ukraine, her allegiance is exceptionally public. Within the restaurant, she is sure to place a vase on each table filled with sunflowers, Ukraine's national flower, and decorated in blue and yellow ribbon, the colors of the Ukrainian flag, the national flower of Ukraine. A few months ago, Birch & Rye held a dinner to benefit Ukraine which raised \$108,000 for nonprofit World Central Kitchen's work in this war-torn country. Turning to Russia's past, El-Wattar and Chef Voloshyna are finding inspiration in pre-Communist Ukrainian and Russian dishes for an upcoming fundraising pop-up at Birch & Rye. Expanding their contribution further, they plan to add one special dish to the menu where a portion of the proceeds will be dedicated to helping Ukraine. El-Wattar sees Birch & Rye as a community where dialog about the Russia of the past is deconstructed to make way for a future you could call post-modern in the sense that the current stark, unrelenting circumstances will, one day, give way to hope and peace, the very feelings her restaurant exudes.

For reservations and more information, birchandryesf.com ☀



PHOTOS©PETR SUKONIK

