wonders of the world

All aboard the number 7 subway for a culinary tour of Queens

By Liza B. Zimmerman Illustration by Glen Hanson

It’s a New York take on manifest destiny: the image of the IRT 7 train, spreading out across the wilds of Queens, like a wagon trail rolling west across the Great Plains. A quarter of a million immigrants—who hail from 166 countries and who speak over one hundred languages—have settled in Queens since 1990. Much of that cultural diversity is concentrated along the 7 line, which, since April 21, 1917, has given the city’s newest citizens an opportunity to build communities with easy access to downtown Manhattan.

The resulting ethnic mix is best reflected in the flavor of the foods found in the shadow of the elevated tracks of the 7 train and on the surrounding streets. On its brief 21-stop tour, you can taste the varied flavors of the globe, from the crunch of Vietnamese summer rolls to the spice of Colombian empanadas. “A lot of these places are much more than restaurants,” notes Irena Lasko, of the Queens Council on the Arts, who wrote the brochure, “The International Express: A Guide to Ethnic Communities Along the 7 Train.” “They are social clubs,” she says. “I think of these places as the living rooms of the community.”

Transylvania
43–46 42nd St at Queens Blvd (718-786-9401). Sun noon–1am, Tue–Thurs noon–10pm, Fri 2pm–2am, Sat noon–3am. A portrait of a mustached Vlad the Impaler, otherwise known as Count Dracula—who Transylvania’s owner, Lina Raiburg, calls “our son”—hangs prominently on one of the club’s blood-red walls. But this is nothing like a scene from Interview with the Vampire. You come here to boogie the night away under a disco ball! (A mix of Top 10 songs and traditional Romanian music makes you feel like you’re at a Jewish wedding. Premint ($14.95 a bottle), the classic Romanian wine, flows freely, and the food is served with good old-fashioned Eastern Bloc hospitality. The heavy fare, like an oversize pork chop with fries ($15.95) and a plate of mici (the ground beef sausages that are such a pillar of Romanian cuisine, $12.50), will make you glad you can take a spin on the dance floor afterwards. Big-haired women in slavetight dresses waltz to the beat while their leopard-print bedecked daughters play the slots near the bathroom downstairs.

46th St (Bliss St)
McGinn’s
43–20 Greenwood Ave between 43rd and 44th Sts (718-392-3686). Mon–Fri 4–4am; Sat, Sun noon–4am. A narrow, dimly lit bar leads into the cozy tchotchke-covered dining room, where brass pots and pans hang from the ceiling beams. The menu, however, is slightly less eclectic. The Irish breakfast—coddled eggs over smoky Irish bacon, accompanied by fried and breaded sausage and big black bread of crispy, nutty blood sausage. At press time, things weren’t looking too bright for McGinn’s (a bartender down the street said that it had just closed down) but there are plenty of other Irish options at the Blisss Street subway stop: try Sidetracks (45–12 Queens Blvd, 718-786-3570).

74th St–Broadway
Anand Bhavan
56–66 73rd St between 35th and 37th Aves (718-757-1000). Noon–9:30pm. Indian restaurants in Jackson Heights are no rarity, but this one is special: It features the lesser-known dishes of southern India. And Anand Bhavan bills itself as “A Truly Vegetarian Experience”—one good enough to satisfy even an avowed carnivore like myself. Savor the crunchy, cashew-studded pakora rings ($3.25), or dip the soft, yellow rounds of kachipara uttapam ($3.25), a steamed rice and lentil patty, in the lentil-based sambhar. Other southern specialties include big flat uttapam ($2.50), a thick, soft pancake riddled with onions and peas, or the classic masala dosai ($3.25), a crispy crepe filled with potatoes and onions. It’s so huge that it flops over the edges of the plate. And the room’s decor, with hand-painted yellow-and-brown diamond designs and colorful bats of horses and elephants, only enhances the joy of the meal.

82nd St–Jackson Hts
Chibcha
79–66 Roosevelt Ave between 79th and 80th Sts (718-429-9033). 5pm–4am. “Which waitresses claims is ‘good for a hangover, gets you back on track,’ consists of a mound of eggs over smoky Irish bacon, accompanied by fried and breaded sausage and big black bread of crispy, nutty blood sausage. At press time, things weren’t looking too bright for McGinn’s (a bartender down the street said that it had just closed down) but there are plenty of other Irish options at the Blisss Street subway stop: try Sidetracks (45–12 Queens Blvd, 718-786-3570).

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La Cabana Argentina
55–51 Roosevelt Ave between Junction Blvd and Warren St (718-429-4386). 1pm–11pm. Contrary to its name, Cabana is no lat. Sunbathing down to dinner in this cozy wood-paneled establishment feels more like taking a ride on a pirate ship. Flasks of wine and earthenware jugs hang from ropes on the ceiling, and maps of Argenti na cover the walls of the narrow room. But buccaneers never had it so good: It’s doubtless their cook could prepare meat
TASTER’S CHOICE

It seems that Uma Thurman has something in common with Poison Ivy, the villainess she portrays in Batman & Robin, after all: They both share a love of greens. Thurman, however, expresses her taste more tamely than her on-screen persona. She heads to Il Cantinori (32 E 10th St between Broadway and University Pl, 673-6044) for the combination salad of endive, arugula and radicchio and the pasta with broccoli rabe.

The way the guys at Cabaña do. The parrillada is a smoking mound of pork sausage, blood sausage, short ribs and triple ($14.95 for one, $24.55 for two), it’s brought to your table on a miniature charcoal-fired grill with a little pot of garlic-spiked chimichurri for your dipping pleasure. Meat eaters will also appreciate all 16 ounces of the juicy steel-shelled ($18.50), accompanied by plantains or fries.

Pho
38-02 Prince St between 38th and 39th Sts (718-411-0845). Sun, Mon, Wed-Fri noon-10pm; Sat noon-1am.

The sign outside may read INTERNATIONAL CUISINE, but the sign inside is all Peruvian—from the boisterous crowd of young families to the numerous cans of bright yellow Inca cola ($1.25) that litter the tables. A better match for the restaurant’s seafood specialties might be a glass of chicha morada ($1.25), a dark, sweet concoction made from purple corn and cinnamon.

Il Tumi
101-02 42nd Ave at National St (718-436-5820). Sun, Mon, Wed-Fri noon-10pm; Sat noon-1am.

Il Tumi’s main draw is its floorshow, during which a singer in a red strapless gown crooned a few love tunes in Spanish before she joined some dancers in a high-kicking, skirt-swirling number. As I dug into my choros a la marinera ($6.50)—giant mussels smothered with a refreshing mix of corn, tomatoes and red onions—someone was asking me to dance. And the time I had polished off my plate (pescado marinado [$10.25]), a stew of squid, octopus and shrimp in a rich, milky-based hot sauce, I had so many offers that my dance card was looking pretty full.

JUST OPENED

Alexandre
1235 34th St between Park and Lexington Aves (698-6884). Subway: 6 to 34th St. Noon-3pm, 5-11pm.

We were determined to mock the obsequious greeting we received at Alexandre. A lovely, long-legged woman met us at the door and led us down a curving staircase to the basement level, where we were interrupted by an equally suave, black-clad woman. She then guided us the short distance across the bar to the dining room, where a man in jacket and tie showed us to our table. Where the only companion of the evening was the restaurant’s old-money clientele. Most of the customers appeared to have undergone some sort of cosmetic surgery, and I spent the time between courses wondering how Gertrude Stein would have looked post-facelift.—Blake Esbin

Osteria Laguna
209 E 42nd St, between Second and Third Aves (557-0001). Subway: 4, 5, 6, 7, 42nd St–Grand Central. Mon-Fri 11:30am-11pm, Sat 4-11pm. Every since seeing Big Night I’ve been craving risotto. I stayed away from it, though, fearing the gluttonous indulgence that most restaurants serve. If it wasn’t “so good you want to die”—as Night’s Primo would have it—I wanted no part of it. It’s hard to resist a menu like Osteria Laguna’s, which prominently features risottos, and it’s even harder to turn down the roasted-duck-and-fenugreek variety ($17). Although not quite a death-without-a-plate, it was rich and its texture was perfect. The lobster risotto ($17), filled with tender chunks of meat, was much more delicate.

Chibcha
82nd St–Jackson Hts

La Cabaña Argentina
Junction Blvd

90th St–Elmhurst Ave

Willets Point–Shea Stadium

II Tumi
103rd St–Corona Plaza

Pho
Main St–Flushing

Choopan Kabab House
Main St–Flushing