

EAT OUT

Serving up the city's best restaurants, bars and culinary riches

7 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 Ilana Harlow, 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."

40th St (Lowery St)

Transylvania

43-46 42nd St at Queens Blvd (718-786-

9401). Sun noon-1am, Tue-Thu noon-10pm, Fri 2pm-2am, Sat noon-3am.

A portrait of a mustachioed Vlad the Impaler, otherwise known as Count Dracula—whom 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. Premiati (\$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 *mititei* (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 skintight dresses whirl to the beat while their leopard-print bedecked daughters play the slots near the bathroom downstairs.

46th St (Bliss St)

McGinn's

43-20 Greenpoint 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 (\$8.95), which the waitress claims is "good for a hangover, gets you back on track," consists of a mound of eggs over smoky Irish bacon, accompanied by fries, fried and breaded sausage and big black rounds of crispy, nutty blood sausage. At press time, things weren't looking too bright for McGinn's (a bartender down the street heard that it had just closed down) but there are plenty of other Irish options at the Bliss Street subway stop; try Sidetracks (45-12 Queens Blvd, 718-786-3570).

74th St-Broadway

Anand Bhavan

35-66 73rd St between 35th and 37th Aves (718-507-1600). 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 avid carnivore like myself. Savor the crunchy, cashew-studded *pakora* rings (\$3.25), or dip the soft, yellow rounds of *kanchipurum iddy* (\$3.50), a steamed-rice-and-lentil patty, in the lentil-based *sambar*. Other southern specialties include big flat *uthappam* (\$5.25), a thick, soft pancake riddled with onions and peas, or the classic masala *dosai* (\$5.25), 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 batiks of horses and elephants, only enhances the joy of the meal.

82nd St-Jackson Hts

Chibcha

79-05 Roosevelt Ave between 79th and 80th Sts (718-429-9033). 5pm-4 am.

"Are you coming for the game or for dinner?" the hostess asked when I called for a reservation. It seems that Colombia is playing Mexico tonight, and a crowd of young soccer fans in baseball caps are planning to watch the game in Technicolor on Chibcha's seven large-screen TVs. But one bite of the restaurant's meaty little empanadas (\$4.95) dunked in spicy green chili sauce will make you forget any racket from the television sets.

Chibcha's manager, Ernesto, explained that the restaurant was named after an Indian tribe in southeastern Colombia. The main dining room also gives a nod to the spot's Latin roots: It's set up to resemble the patio of a colonial Spanish house, with a sloping faux red-tile roof. Although my favorite dish, the *lomo de cerdo* (\$12.95), chewy pork chops with caramelized onions and port, is not on the menu, you can ask Ernesto to make it for you. And don't miss the light, creamy flan (\$3.25) before you hit the dance floor in the next room. There's no rush, though—the disco won't kick into high gear until well after the game's over.

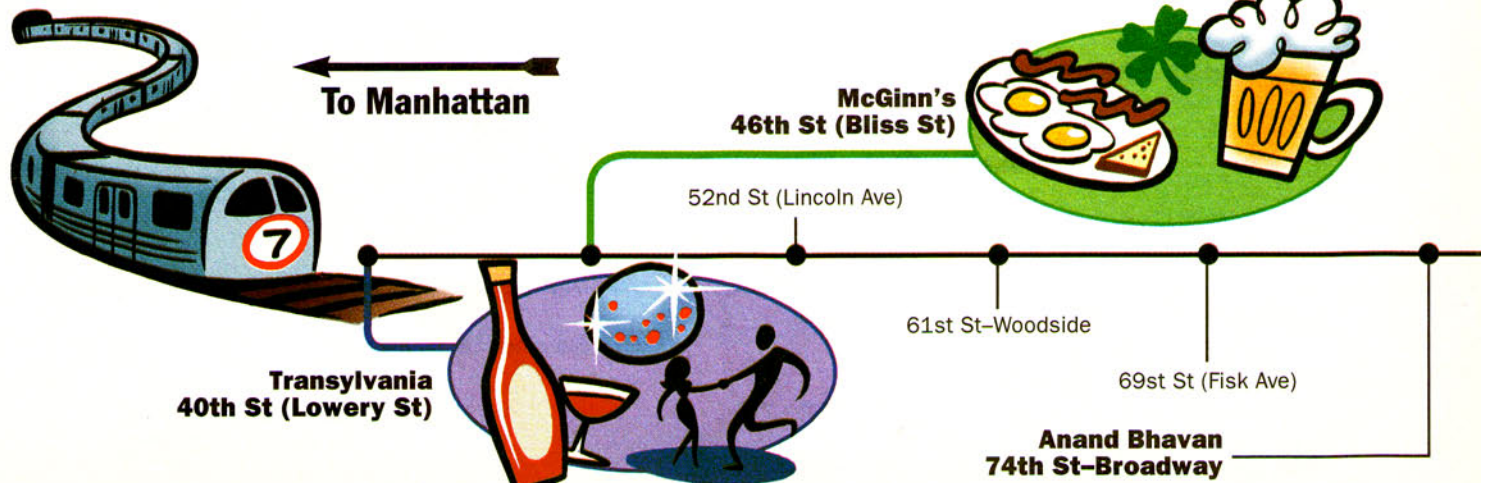
Junction Blvd

La Cabaña Argentina

95-51 Roosevelt Ave between Junction Blvd and Warren St (718-429-4388).

1pm-11pm.

Contrary to its name, Cabaña is no hut. Hunkering down to dinner in this cozy wood-paneled establishment feels more like taking a ride on a pirate ship. Flasks of wine and earthenware kegs hang from ropes on the ceiling, and maps of Argentina cover the walls of the narrow room. But buccaneers never had it so good: It's doubtful their cook could prepare meat



EAT OUT

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 tripe (\$14.95 for one, \$24.95 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 shell steak (\$18.95), accompanied by plantains or fries.

103rd St-Corona Plaza

Il Tumi

101-02 42nd Ave at National St (718-426-8686). Sun, Mon, Wed-Fri noon-10pm; Sat noon-1am.

The sign outside may read INTERNATIONAL CUISINE, but the scene 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'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—one of the regulars asked me to dance. And by the time I had polished off my *picante de mariscos* (\$10.50), a stew of squid, octopus and shrimp in a rich, milk-based hot sauce, I had so many offers that my dance card was looking pretty full.

Main St-Flushing

Pho

38-02 Prince St between 38th and 39th Sts (718-461-8686). 10am-11:30pm. Mirrors lining the walls lead back to a tank of live striped bass, which can be prepared to order. But the restaurant specializes in *pho*, the Northern Vietnamese soup, and the menu has an entire page describing 19 varieties. I recommend the noodle-packed *pho xe lua* (\$4.75), which has six different types of beef in it. In hot weather, the bouncy shrimp-and-pork summer rolls (\$3) are also perfect starters, and *chao tom* (\$6.95), tender, grilled shrimp paste wrapped around a rod of sugarcane and tucked in a lettuce leaf, has just the right balance of crunch and squish. Inspired by the couple next to me, I ordered a *lau do bien thap cam* (\$9.95), a seafood stew with chewy hunks of shrimp and crab that comes in a brown metal pot. For another unusual taste combination, try *xi muoi* (\$1.75), a salty plum soda; use the long spoon it's served with to crack open the little wrinkled plums on the bottom and stir them into the soda.

Choopan Kabab House

43-27 Main St between Dahlia and Elder Aves (718-539-3180). Noon-11pm.

The neon map of Afghanistan in the window will identify this place, which is in the outer reaches of Flushing. Trees and climbing plants cover this warm space, decorated with surreal color photos of Afghan women baking bread.

I dug into a plate of *badunjan burani* (\$3), tender eggplant rounds drenched in yogurt, and *ashak* (\$4), minty, leek-filled dumplings smothered in a ground-meat-and-chickpea sauce. I also ordered a combination of sumac-dusted skewers of chicken, chunks of beef *kofta* and tender nuggets of lamb (\$11). But when I went to consume the beer I'd brought, the waitress swooped down on me. "They are Muslim," she warned of the clientele, handing me a styrofoam cup. "They can't even look at it." As one of the few unveiled female faces in the room, I acquiesced and hid my beer in the styrofoam. But I'm sure the *ashak* and the kebabs would have been just as wonderful washed down with anything. ■

JUST OPENED

Alexandre

123 E 54th St between Park and Lexington Aves (688-6888). Subway: 6 to 51st St. Noon-3pm, 5:45-11pm.

We were tempted 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 intercepted 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. *Wheu.*

But this treatment didn't appear to be an anomaly: We worked our way through half a dozen sets of cutlery in just three courses. And there was never an empty water or wine glass in sight. Sure, it was a slow night at this two-week-old place, but these people kept busy doing whatever they could to make us happy. And there was clearly someone in the kitchen with the same resolve.

The food at Alexandre is a pleasant mix of fresh and seasonal tastes. The menu is refreshingly brief and, thankfully, the staff forgoes the traditional rattling off of daily specials. An *agnolotti* appetizer (\$10) consists of dumplings stuffed with creamy artichokes and piled with wild mushrooms and black truffles in a fragrant broth. And the seared sea scallops (\$10) had dumplings of their own (decorated with fresh, leafy pea shoots and stuffed with mashed celeriac) that tasted of early summer. Sampling the grilled salmon (\$18), we wondered at the odd side dish: In what culture, we asked ourselves, would one find a goat-cheese pierogi? But it worked. Also a success, the thick steak (\$26) was a succulent strip loin served on crispy potato *galettes* with bordelaise sauce. By the end of the meal, we had grown to love the mod burnished-steel walls and chairs, the corporate-looking mahogany-veneered woodwork and the oh-so-attentive service.—*Martha Thomas*

Gertrude's

33 E 61st St between Park and Madison Aves (888-9127). Subway: 4, 5, 6 to 59th St. 11am-3pm, 6-11pm.

Though named for Gertrude Stein, Gertrude's cannot be classified as a theme restaurant. Other than the stylized profile of the expatriate writer hid-

den in the restaurant's logo and a few paintings on the wall, the place has about as much to do with Gertrude Himmelfarb as it does with Gertrude Stein. The menu has no recipes from the Alice B. Toklas cookbook, no pot brownies for dessert and no Spanish rice dishes called "arroz is arroz is arroz."

Fortunately, the menu is in the able hands of Laurent Manrique, a chef from Gascogne, who's recently of the Waldorf-Astoria's Peacock Alley. An appetizer of foie gras ravioli (\$13), served in a garlicky broth with mushrooms and asparagus, was especially good. The veal chop (\$29) came with a seemingly modernist accompaniment of peeled grapes and chorizo—but the tastes blended together classically. Alas, the quail-and-fennel "salad" (\$12) was no pigeons on the grass: Instead it was a warm, delicate plate, with the bird carefully arranged in quadrants. For dessert, try the poached figs with gingerbread cookies, licorice ice cream and peeled grapes (\$8). (My heart goes out to the poor prep cook faced with peeling all those grapes.)

The only jarring note 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 Eskin*

Osteria Laguna

209 E 42nd St, between Second and Third Aves (557-0001). Subway: S, 4, 5, 6, 7 to 42nd St-Grand Central. Mon-Fri 11:30am-11pm, Sat 4pm-11pm.

Ever since seeing *Big Night* I've been craving risotto. I'd stayed away from it, though, fearing the gluey disappointment 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. But 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-foie-gras variety (\$17). Although not quite a death-wish-on-a-plate, it was rich and its texture was perfect. The lobster risotto (\$17), filled with tender chunks of meat, was much more delicate.

