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IN BOSTON, CULINARY ARTS

By JANICE HARAYDA

The first art object that meets the eye of a visitor to Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art isn't one of the 20th-century prints, paintings or photographs that people usually come to the museum to see. It is a huge, tent-like structure suspended from the ceiling of the Hermitage restaurant, situated just inside the main entrance to the city's leading showcase for contemporary art. Attached to the canvas-and-nylon structure are colorful pennants and a rope trapeze, evoking the mood of a circus. Robert Riley, an artist who worked on the piece, calls it a "cloth sculpture" intended to define the boundaries of the museum and the restaurant. By lowering the ceiling of the restaurant, the structure also fosters an intimacy rarely found in a museum dining room.

Unlike the Hermitage, most museum restaurants make scant effort to combine art and food. The majority consist either of small, members' dining rooms, off limits to the general public, or noisy cafeterias designed to accommodate busloads of schoolchildren.

Boston, therefore, is unusual in having two restaurants that aim to raise museum dining to a high art. The Hermitage, a seven-year-old Russian restaurant, shares space in a converted police station with the institute; the second restaurant, the Fine Arts Restaurant, was opened last July as the most formal dining room in the new West Wing of the Museum of Fine Arts. Both establishments soothe the eye as well as the palate with inventive menus, well-stocked bars, tables topped with linen and fresh flowers and art selected or approved by museum staff members.

The institute and the Hermitage occupy a 107-year-old brown sandstone building, on upper Boylston Street, which reflects the

influence of H.H. Richardson's Trinity Church in nearby Copley Square. Formerly the Back Bay police station, the building is still owned by the city, which leased it to the institute in the mid-1970's.

The trustees of the institute hired the architect Graham Gund to gut most of the interior of the station, creating spaces for exhibition galleries, a small theater and a bilevel, 70-seat restaurant. Today, the former identity of the building is apparent primarily in a basement cellblock, which houses the liquor supply for the Hermitage behind padlocked bars.

Museum officials sublease the restaurant to Rafael Pons and John Miele, who are not permitted to make any major changes in operation without approval of the institute's trustees. The officials must approve everything from the kind of food served to the art on the walls - a condition that sometimes rankles, according to Mr. Pons. But the inevitable differences of esthetic opinion are in no way reflected in the harmonious decor of the Hermitage, one of the most architecturally impressive restaurants in the city. Its matte eggplant-colored walls are arrayed with contemporary signed lithographs, mostly in shades of gray and black; tables are topped with heavy white linen. Fresh flowers always adorn the tables - in winter, delicate Peruvian lilies or vivid gerbera; in spring, daffodils or tulips. (On Easter Sunday, when the restaurant annually serves a Russian Easter banquet, the dining rooms bloom with pussy willows.) The overall effect is one of quiet sophistication, almost minimalist in its restraint.

The Cuban-born Mr. Pons serves as head chef at the Hermitage, where about 40 percent of the offerings are adaptations of classic Russian dishes and where the rest reflect his own somewhat eclectic tastes. The Russian staples include borscht, the traditional beet soup; zakuski, an antipasto; beliachi, meat-filled dumplings in a horseradish and cream sauce; tabaka, boned Cornish hen in tkemali sauce, made with Japanese salted plums instead of the usual Russian sour plums, and mazurka, a hazelnut torte. Russian or otherwise, the offerings are prepared according to the techniques of nouvelle cuisine. Sauces are made without flour; vegetables are julienne cut and lightly cooked, and the dessert menu always includes delicate, fresh-fruit sorbets.

"We do not try to serve authentic Russian cuisine, in the sense of food created for Soviet palates," says Mr. Pons. "We serve Russian food as it has been interpreted for the rest of the world by French chefs who have studied there. A typically Russian beef Stroganoff would have sour cream as its dominant ingredient. Our beef Stroganoff is made using a veal reduction sauce with white wine, onions and mustard. It is laced with a small amount of sour cream at the very end."

The most popular drink at the Hermitage is "frozen" vodka flavored with lemon rind or black pepper, usually drunk with an appetizer. At lunch, entrees are served a la carte and range in price from \$6 to \$13. At dinner, there is a \$15 minimum charge, which brings a soup, appetizer, entree, dessert and coffee. Specialties can be ordered at extra cost, and reservations are accepted at both meals.

The Hermitage offers a more formal and subdued atmosphere than the Fine Arts Restaurant, the most expensive and ambitious of the three dining areas in the Museum of Fine Arts' \$22-million West Wing, designed by I. M. Pei. The 300-seat restaurant replaces one of the same name in the Beaux Arts main building, designed by Guy Lowell, which adjoins Pei's newer addition.

The three-story West Wing consists of a stark white granite exterior and a dramatic, 225-foot-long interior topped by a soaring, 53-foot-high glass barrel vault. On the first floor of the wing is an inexpensive cafeteria; on the second is the Galleria Cafe, a scattering of round tables and chrome-plated chairs beside a row of tall ficus trees. The Fine Arts Restaurant occupies an airy, sun-drenched space on the top floor.

Dominating the restaurant are two glass walls, one facing an indoor pedestrian concourse and the other looking down on an outdoor courtyard punctuated by sturdy birches and a cheery yellow metal sculpture. The widely spaced tables, topped by potted pink geraniums, sport paper place mats during the day and tablecloths at night.

The German-born head chef, Albert Georgs, arrived at his post after serving in many of the best known kitchens in Europe, including

those at the Palace Hotel in St. Moritz and the Hotel Meurice in Paris. Mr. Georgs likes to link items on the Fine Arts Restaurant menu to museum exhibits - an endeavor that has the blessing of the museum management. Moussaka and an omelette Olympia (with crabmeat, peppers, scallions and dill) were served during the immensely popular "Search for Alexander" show. For last summer's "Great Bronze Age of China" exhibit, Mr. Georgs introduced his version of wusha yingwu, meaning "five-colored parrot" (stir-fried spinach and tofu in pancakes topped with a Cantonese sauce).

But not all of the items have the flavor of recent exhibitions. At lunch, a generous salad bar is offered, and the dinner entrees invariably include Boston scrod and other seafood. An a la carte lunch can be had for under \$5; a la carte dinner entrees range from \$6 to \$10. Lunch reservations are accepted only from those willing to arrive at the improbable hour of 11:30 A.M. Dinner reservations are accepted from 5:30 until about 8:30 P.M. A visitor without a reservation can expect to wait 15 or 20 minutes on weekdays, longer on weekends or during especially popular exhibits. Even the wait might not seem inappropriate for a chance to eat in a room appointed with works by Josef Albers, Peter Blume and Charles Prendergast.

Like the Hermitage, the Fine Arts Restaurant was designed with an eye toward sociability as well as gastronomy. Hermitage patrons may visit the restaurant after viewing a film in the Institute of Contemporary Art theater; visitors to the Fine Arts Restaurant may be able to attend, without leaving the museum, a lecture on Dutch painting or a chamber music concert. Those extras are among the fringe benefits of museum meals.

"We want this to be a place where you can meet for a lecture, a drink or a sandwich, even if you aren't interested in an exhibit," says Ross Farrar, associate director of the Museum of Fine Arts. "We're trying to make the M.F.A. a social place - not just a dusty old museum." What to expect besides food Exhibitions Both the Institute of Contemporary Art and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston offer activities that can be sampled along with the food. The I.C.A. has no permanent collection; exhibits change every month or two. They include "Boston Now: Figuration," until June 27; "Robert Morris Drawing Retrospective," July 6 to Aug. 29, and "Collaboration:

Artists and Architects," Sept. 7 to Oct. 31. The M.F.A. has superb permanent collections in many areas, particularly in American decorative arts and architecture and in Asiatic art. Special exhibitions include "New England Begins: The Seventeenth Century," until Aug. 22; "Hawaii: The Royal Isles," until Aug. 8; "Bernini Drawings," Aug. 19 to Oct. 10, and "Thomas Eakins," Sept. 23 to Nov. 28. Hours The I.C.A. (955 Boylston Street; 617-266-5151) is open from 11 A.M. to 7 P.M. Tuesday to Friday, 11 A.M. to 6 P.M. on Saturday, noon to 6 P.M. on Sunday and until 8 P.M. on Wednesday. Admission is \$2 for adults, \$1 for students and elderly patrons and 50 cents for children. The Hermitage restaurant is open from noon to 2:30 P.M. and from 6 to 9 P.M. daily except Monday and to 11 P.M. on Saturday. To make reservations call 617-267-3652. Restaurant patrons do not need to pay a museum admission charge. The entire M.F.A. (465 Huntington Avenue; 617-267-9377) is open from 10 A.M. to 5 P.M. on Tuesday, from 10 A.M. to 10 P.M. on Wednesday and from 10 A.M. to 5 P.M. Thursday to Sunday. The West Wing only, including the Fine Arts Restaurant, is open during the additional hours of 5 to 10 P.M. on Thursday and Friday. Admission is \$3 during the hours the entire museum is open, \$2 when only the West Wing is open, \$2 for elderly patrons, free to children 16 and under. To make reservations at the Fine Arts Restaurant call 617-267-9300, ext. 474. Restaurant patrons do not need to pay an admission charge. Parking Only street parking is available at the I.C.A. Parking is \$1.25 for nonmembers (75 cents for members) at the M.F.A. lot on Museum Road. Transportation To reach the I.C.A., take any branch of the Green Line except the Arborway line to the Auditorium stop. To reach the M.F.A., take the Arborway line to the Ruggles/Museum stop. A taxi from the Prudential Center to the I.C.A. costs about \$1.50, but you can walk it in under five minutes. A taxi from the Pru to the M.F.A. costs about \$3. Hermitage Frozen Vodka Rafael Pons, the Hermitage chef, says that Russians commonly drink "frozen" vodka with an appetizer such as zakuski, an antipasto. The drink can also be served after a meal instead of a liqueur. The Hermitage serves frozen vodka - so called because it is stored in the freezer, even though the alcohol does not actually freeze - in chilled cordial glasses. The recipe: Remove the rind, in one piece, from one large lemon (or two small ones). Remove as much of the white part of the rind as possible to avoid drinks with a bitter taste. Insert the rind or rinds into a one-liter

bottle of very good vodka and replace the cap. Let the bottle stand for three days in a warm, dark place. After that, strain the vodka into a separate container. Remove the lemon rind from the vodka bottle - a trick requiring patience, manual dexterity and, often as not, a sharp shish-ke-bab skewer. After the rind has been removed, pour the vodka back into the original bottle and replace the cap. Store in the freezer until moments before serving; it will keep indefinitely. The vodka will have a thick, rich, velvety texture when poured. At the Hermitage, the bottle comes to the table with a frosty crust.J.H.

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