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WTC's gastronomic empire: from business lunch to chef's fancy dinner

Today, the World Trade Centre (WTC) restaurant complex in Moscow is the perfect embodiment of a large-scale gastronomic ecosystem that serves business forums with the participation of top government officials as well as guests of the largest five-star hotel in the capital city and Muscovites looking for an intriguing gastronomic experience. Dmitry Motorin, Director of the WTC Restaurant Complex, spoke to BM Moscow about corporate banquets and chef's dinners complementing each other at WTC, import substitution as a driver of sustainable development and also highlighting the main competitive edge of the Complex's restaurants.

- WTC is focused on business audiences, but not exclusively. What portfolio of brands and catering concepts manifest themselves today in the WTC restaurant area? Do you have plans to expand the spectrum?

We have a wide range of restaurant activity. Our catering service is mainly focused on the business people audience, which assembles during all the events held in our Congress Center. Often these are large-scale forums and conferences with the number of participants usually ranging from one to three thousand people, often with the participation of top government officials, like it happens during VTB Investment Forum "Russia Calling", International Housing Congress, major IT and medical conferences. This is truly a business function so we organize coffee breaks, dinners, gala banquets, and gala dinners. Probably, this segment of corporate catering for employees and tenants of WTC amounts to preparing and serving about 2,000 meals per weekday.

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The other dimension of our services remains outside business format: breakfasts for guests of the hotel, the largest five-star hotel) in Moscow (720 rooms); restaurants of different concepts, including our flagship lava-grilled healthy food restaurant *RFR Grill* and the modern bistro *Plaza Garden Café* with chef's fusion menu. Our own large confectionery, which, in addition to modern desserts, prepares, using preserved old GOST recipes, pastries and cakes (e.g. Leningradsky, Lily of the Valley, Gift, Prague, Abrikotin – my favourites, since they preserve the original recipes), without using a gram of dyes, flavours and preservatives, but using 100% natural ingredients. We also do a lot of small private events (catering for 10 or up to 150 people). Among our projects is the well-known wedding concept "WTC Wedding" in Moscow. Over the past year, for example, we have held-about 270 wedding ceremonies and received very high ratings from customers.

So WTC is not only about "business," but also, in many respects, it is about "distraction and savouring an interesting gastronomic experience and pleasure."

It is a priority for us to make consumers enjoy the taste, feel emotionally warmed up and cosy.

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- What new food event formats is becoming popular?

In addition to traditional events, gastronomic collaborations with brands from other industries, hybrid, and virtual, immersive formats appear. A healthy lifestyle penetrates the menu and gastro events. All this is created to generate unusual impressions, memories and good reasons for lively talk in social networks.

For example, we have been organizing the cultural and gastronomic club "The Art of Food" at the site of the WTC Restaurant Complex for the third year in a row. This is an author's program developed in partnership with the information agency of the Union of Architects "Architect." Club meetings embrace thematic presentations on the world of art and architecture, gastronomic research on famous *haut couture* recipes, as well as exclusive dinners offered by the WTC brand chef Mikhail Kuznetsov. Events are held in the format of a discussion club in an atmosphere of lively friendly interaction during the meal.

- One of the main problems of Russian business is the lack of qualified personnel. Do WTC restaurants face a shortage of chefs, sommeliers, and managers?

We have an established motivated strong team of chefs and managers. Yet, the situation is rather tense in respect of frontline personnel. We've been struggling for two years now. It is difficult to find and keep professionals who genuinely want to work, and are ready to learn, and to observe discipline. People often come to fill in vacancies; yet, they do not know what they actually want but demand to earn a lot at once, without being ready for dedication at the job. We wait and hope that the situation will change, and the employer's market will come back again, as it once did. So far, unfortunately, the opposite is the case.

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- How prominent today is the topic of sustainable development (reduction of food waste, use of environmentally friendly packaging) among WTC restaurants and their guests? Is the issue still on the agenda or has the pendulum swung the other way? How acute is the issue of import substitution in premium restaurants today?

Development is not entirely sustainable now, unfortunately. For political and economic reasons, as you understand. Nevertheless, there was a significant movement forward on the issue of local and farm products, when the fashion trend transformed into necessity. Previously, the use of farm products was a marketing ploy and a way to attract a "progressive" audience; this was the "special feature" of some restaurants.

Today, it is a conscious manifestation of strategic necessity. Forced import substitution helped make local producers and farmers the main partners of restaurants and encouraged the use of more environmentally friendly products that do not need processing for preservation, conservation and long-range transportation. The statement that cheese was brought from a farm from the Kaluga region, Michurinsky apples, and vegetables were collected this very morning in the Moscow region, now sound more convincing than "delivered right away from Europe."

Premium beef in Russia is now grown of certified high quality. Although we once had no alternative to meat products made in the USA and Argentine, now, we are doing no worse.

Moreover, many domestic brands of wine have come to the market! Winemaking in the south of the Russian Federation is now developing in a vibrant manner. We expect vineyard areas and production volumes to reach a certain level when our prices will become more competitive against the New World wines. Already today, in many restaurants a significant share of wine lists is filled with wines *Made in Russia*.

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- When solving import substitution issues, you automatically fall in line with the trend of sustainable development, which implies the use of local farm products. And how about reducing food waste, using environmentally friendly packaging?

As for reducing food waste, we always observe this rule, because this is a direct issue of the economy: the lesser waste, the lower the losses, and higher the margin. We use vegetable peelings for broths (do not be alarmed – they are thoroughly washed), fish trimmings for sauces, and bread unclaimed on the buffet after breakfast – for breadcrumbs and breading. Even when we bake thousands of cakes by Easter, if we don't sell something, we cut it into slices, dry it, and we get great side crackers for the same breakfast buffet.

As for environmentally friendly packaging, we do use it, like many others, for take-away and delivery, although craft bags and food boxes, if you immerse yourself in the topic, could hardly be called completely environmentally friendly.

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- WTC is positioned as a premium business platform. What do you think is the main competitive advantage of the restaurant zone of your Complex over other gastronomic entities of the city, in addition to your unique location?

In addition to the fact that our food is of premium taste, it is also absolutely safe. Taking into account that we regularly organize meals for large groups as part of events under the patronage of government agencies (recent example: children and youth from the Movement of the First, participants in the Intervision 2025 competition), we are regularly and extremely carefully checked by Rospotrebnadzor for compliance with Sanitary rules and regulations (Russian legislation) and HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points). We always pass their checks with flying colours. It means that we manage control and provision of cleanliness, freshness and sanitary safety of products – from the supply chain of raw materials to the finished dish – at a very high level. Accordingly, you can come to us for food experience without worrying about possible unpleasant consequences.

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