

# THE OBSERVER

## ENTERTAINMENT & DINING

### FOOD FOR THOUGHT

By Mark R. Vogel  
foodforthoughtonline.net



### The Angel's Share

The Black Death, or bubonic plague began somewhere in Asia in the 1340's. By 1347 it reached the southern shores of Europe. By the turn of the decade 75 million people worldwide had perished, 25-50 million of which came from Europe, roughly 30-60% of that continent's population. Yersinia pestis is the strain of bacteria responsible for the pandemic. Fleas become infected with the bacillus who in turn take refuge on rats, which are then a catalyst for spreading the disease\*. Bubonic plague is named after the buboes, i.e., pus-oozing sores of inflamed lymphatic tissue, which erupt around the neck, armpits and groin of inflicted individuals. Accompanied by flu-like symptoms and internal bleeding, and without the aid of modern antibiotics, most victims died within two weeks.

The death toll was astounding. Densely populated cities like Bordeaux were littered with rotting corpses. It is almost inconceivable the dread and panic the general populace must have felt. Naturally, true to their 14th century understanding of the world, all sorts of irrational beliefs about the causes and cures of the disease arose. Vinegar was one substance that was considered to have both prophylactic and curative properties. Individuals would rub vinegar on their skin to safeguard against becoming infected. Likewise, many elixirs of the day included vinegar as one of its ingredients.

Vinegar, while not a treatment for Bubonic plague, has one very important aspect in common with it: they are both created by bacteria. Vinegar results when bacteria paint the town red via the alcohol in a fermented beverage thus converting it to a weak acetic acid solution.....(I love the parallels).....much like people who imbibe excessively can act caustically as well. Vinegar can be made from a

## Russia in America

### Gypsy Dancing at the Jewish Community Center

Photos by Murray Head



**By Celeste Regal**  
Observer Editor

I first saw Julia Kulakova dance at Joe's Pub NY Gypsy Festival at the Delacorte Theater in Central Park West last September (See the October 3 issue of The Observer entertainment section). When she emailed to invite me to a tusofka – that's party in Russian – at the Jewish Community Center in Manhattan I jumped at the chance.

The Center located on 335 Amsterdam Ave. has a number of summer soirees for their Gen R group on the splendid rooftop of the building including theater, holiday get together and other events.

The Aug. 8 tusofka featured the superb gypsy music band "Romashka" along with Kulakova performing her impressive Russian-style gypsy dancing. There was much audience participation with a few lessons thrown in. The catered

affair was a great success with a variety of delicacies to eat and drink – even plenty of Zyr, Russia's luxury sipping vodka.

Gen R (The R is reversed is a pronoun meaning I or me) is a three-year-old program developed through a grant from the United Jewish Appeal at the center for Russian speakers in their 20's to 40's. Anyone in our coverage area from that category should definitely check out the program. There are many programs throughout the year for both adults and families and many fine and interesting people to meet.

#### The music

Romashka provided the spirited music for the evening. The band which includes Inna Barmash (vocals), Jake Shulman-Ment (violin), Jeff Perlman (clarinet and saxophone), Ben Holmes (trumpet), Stevhen Ianu (accordion), Joey Weisenberg (guitar), Ron Caswell (tuba), Timothy Quigley (drums and percussion) should be fol-

lowed for anyone into Romanian and Russian gypsy music. Their intoxicating blend includes hints from Spain, Turkey and other passionate and musically potent locales.

Barmash's voice is part Edith Piaf mixed with the woe-fulness of Fado expressed the heart of Russian fire. With Kulakova swirling and simultaneously tugging at the emotions of the audience, the night was one to be remembered until my next excursioning into the soul of Roma.

#### More than a gypsy dancer

Julia Kulakova was born in a town called Ryazan, about 120 miles southeast of Moscow.

She first came to America in 1997 to fulfill a dancing contract in a Brighton Beach night-club. She also attended college to become an English teacher.

"Since I studied British English for my college degree, people were always looking at me in a funny way when I spoke surprisingly," she said.

But that did not stop Kulakova from forming an attachment to the cultural mecca that is New York. Manhattan offered her the best of all possible worlds for enjoyment and advancement as an artist.

"I have been thinking why I am staying for so long in New York and not traveling any farther – I'm thinking that it actually does live up to its reputation as a melting pot of cultures and I am able to satisfy my curiosity with all the different, interesting traditions in dance, philosophies and cultures of the world," Kulakova said.

She studied at the school for musical theater in Ryazan, a place that is serious about their cultural traditions in all the arts. The strenuous requirements of the program require proficiency in traditional Russian ballet but Kulakova also studied the freer dance forms of modern dance

# ENTERTAINMENT & DINING

## Gypsy

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and jazz. The dancing dynamo also studied folk and ballroom as well.

"That's why I do have a strict structure to show all the moves on the big picture but I also have the looseness of the jazz dancer and the freedom of the modern dancer," she said.

While her interest in gypsy dancing began in her homeland but the New York dance scene provided a variety of unusual dance contracts, which "put another spin on it." In Russia, performances were primarily conducted on a stage. Now Kulakova performs in many of the city's nightclubs and special parties where the people watching are not separated by a platform but a close in on the act.

"Dancing on the stage doesn't require that much audience interaction. It happens but it's not as paramount from a street performer perspective, which is very much like gypsy dancing," she said.

At first it was just another way to earn money while pursuing her dancing career and she did not regard it as high art, like the other dance forms she practiced. But as time went on, her passion increased for gypsy dancing.

"I grew to like it because

it presents a constant challenge for me. I have to prove to my audience right there that I'm worthy to watch. I also have a very powerful tool because then I could tell them my story and take them on a journey," she said. "I could make them experience some different moves of my dance. It gives me much more options than performing on a distant stage."

Gypsy dance originated in India in the 10th century and spread throughout Eastern Europe and the rest of the world. One of the many attractions of the form is its ability to evoke the emotions of the dancer improvised through moves of the body and transmission of the spirit through the mind.

"This is the most ancient recorded system of dance. In its treatises it describes the relationship between the dancer and audience—they look at it as dance drama," Kulakova said. "It's always storytelling that you would be able to perceive and experience as well."

In classical Indian dancing a state of Rasa (mood or flavor) that the dancer experiences is the joy of performing that is then transferred to those watching the performance. So the aesthetics of the combination of moves and the personality of the dancer affects the audience profoundly. It



**SOUNDS OF ROMA** – Russian lead singer Inna Barmash, center, of Romashka became friends with Kulakova and they both performed at the Gen R party at the Jewish Community Center in Manhattan.

becomes an interwoven human experience that words or music alone cannot express.

Kulakova is unique as a dancer because she considers the fact that by the time a dancer perfects their art their body is about to give out—it has become damaged through time, the discipline, and constant physical exertion necessary to excel. To counteract the inevitable she searched for and developed a healthy lifestyle and regimen that would extend her time as a performer.

"I was not going to take this for granted so I started searching for information about holistic beliefs –

started a lot of yoga and other practices from eastern marshal arts," she said. "I became interested in natural eating habits and with all that I saw the results."

While Kulakova teaches a class called belly dance workout at the JCC, she said it is not just for women.

The workout involves both physical and mental

framework. The body is grounded by working core muscles to provide fitness and sensuality for both sexes.

Classes are held at the Center on 335 Amsterdam Ave. on Saturday afternoons from 2:15 to 3:30 p.m.

JCC Drop In Fitness Classes are Free to JCC Health Club Members. To

take a tour or inquire about membership, call 646.505.5700 or visit the Web site <http://www.jcc-manhattan.org/>.

The Center is open to all people. The beautiful and spacious building was erected in 2002. It is a fantastic place to meet new and interesting people.



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# PIC-NIC

## Restaurant & Bar

For almost 20 years, Owners Manny and Rui of Pic-Nic Restaurant, have been serving up the freshest and tastiest Spanish/Portuguese dishes around. These pioneers of BBQ have recently gone through a total remodel and have created a warm, family friendly atmosphere that is a pleasure to dine in. Try some of their specialty dishes such as Filet Mignon with Beer Sauce, their very special Skirt Steak or a wonderful Veal with Banana dish. Pic-Nic's full bar serves delicious specialty cocktails, select Portuguese and Spanish wines, and bottled beers from some of the world's finest breweries.

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**AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION** – Gypsy dancing engages the audience as the dance transmits the joy of performing. Julia Kulakova, forefront, embodies that spirit.