

Time Out

New York

The obsessive guide to impulsive entertainment
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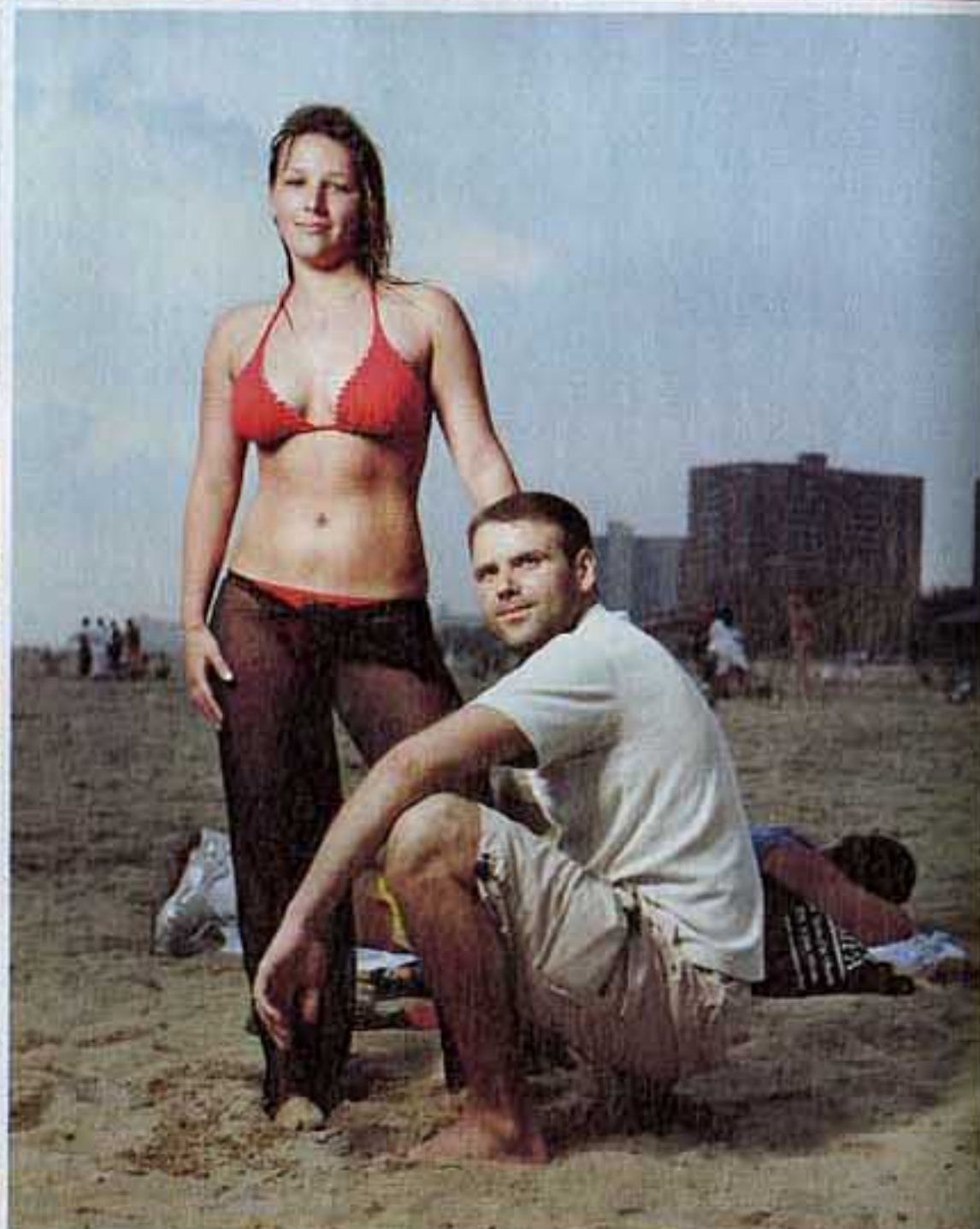
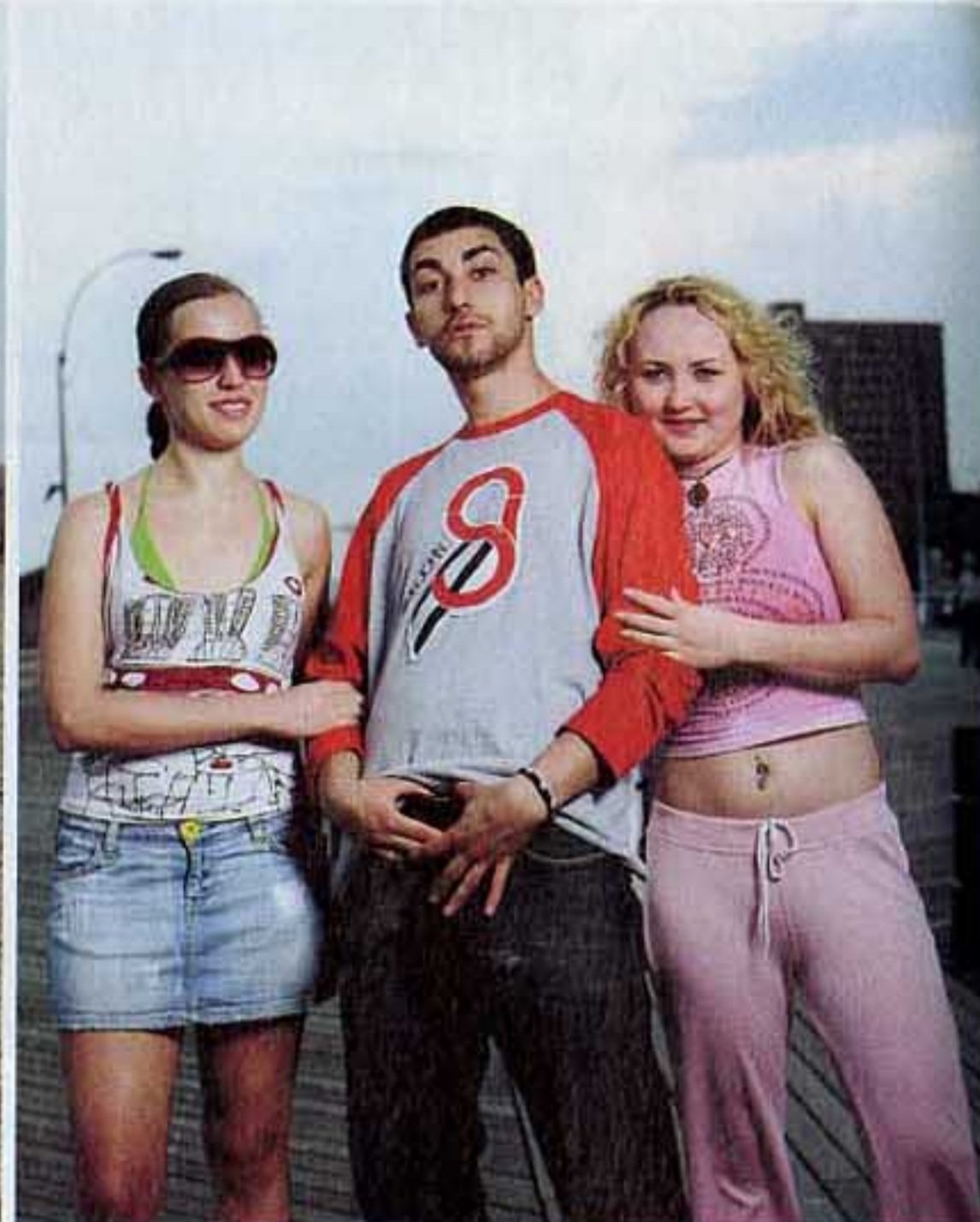
BRIGHTON BEACH

**THE INSIDER'S
GUIDE TO
"LITTLE ODESSA"**

STELLA

**THE COMEDY TROUPE
DRESSES FOR SUCCESS**





Москва у моря

(MOSCOW ON THE BOARDWALK)

In the cultural stew that is New York City, Brighton Beach stands out for being unabashedly Russian. But this local borscht belt welcomes anyone in the mood for unfamiliar flavors, bargain shopping and seriously over-the-top entertainment.

By **Jesse Serwer** Photographs by **Evan Kafka**

It's 11pm on a hot early-summer Saturday, and the Brighton Beach boardwalk is packed. Families with strollers and dogs push past groups of elderly immigrants huddled on benches, while teens dance in a nearby pavilion. The colorful tables at all four of the boardwalk's outdoor cafés are jammed with people and crammed with seafood salads and bottles of Baltika beer from St. Petersburg. "This boardwalk was scary when I first got here, but now the best part of Brighton Beach is how much of a family place it is," says Tatiana Varzar, a Ukrainian émigré who arrived here in 1978 and opened the popular boardwalk eatery and cabaret Tatiana (see "The club tour," page 16) seven years ago.

In the 1970s, an aging population—mainly Jews of Eastern European descent—moved out or died off, leaving a neighborhood marred by vacant storefronts and an abundance of muggings. It was during those years, however, that refugees from the Soviet Union began molding the neighborhood into what soon became known as Little Odessa. "Brighton Beach has always been at its heart a working-class immigrant community, which means that everyone has a real desire to get out of there," says public-relations-guru-turned-documentarian Dan Klores, who returned to his former neighborhood to make 2003's *Boys of 2nd Street Park* (see "Ocean views," page 18). "Still, every time I come back here, it's like, Wow, I can't believe this is New York City. It's another world."

Bordered by the ocean to the south and the Belt Parkway to the north, Brighton Beach is separated from Coney Island by Ocean Parkway to the west and from upscale Manhattan Beach by Corbin Place to the east. Brighton Beach Avenue is the neighborhood's central artery, dividing the multicultural "bungalow district" from the mostly senior-populated prewar elevator apartments closer to the water. "Brighton can still look like a town in the 1950s," says Yelena Makhnin, the Brighton Beach Business Improvement District's executive director, who represents the neighborhood's 300-plus storefront merchants. "We don't have museums or galleries. But what we do have is the ocean—and lots of food."

On Brighton Beach Avenue, predominantly Russian-speaking shopkeepers and signs in Cyrillic lettering hawk glassware, caviar and DVDs from nearly every former Soviet republic. The main drag is also home to St. Petersburg Books (230 Brighton Beach Ave between Brighton 2nd and 3rd Sts, 718-368-4128), which carries the latest in Russian-language DVDs, books and CDs. Kalinka (402 Brighton Beach Ave between Brighton 4th and 5th Sts, 718-743-4546), a standout among the slew of tiny gift shops, sells necklaces, earrings, charms and china made by local craftspeople. "I always tell people to come here for Christmas shopping," says Brighton Neighborhood Association founder Pat Singer. "You'll always find something that's unusual and reasonable."

But Brighton Beach is perhaps best known for its exotic supper

clubs—and it's true that they're the social lifeblood of the community. On weekends, the neighborhood's ten clubs kick into gear around 9pm. Boisterous groups of varying numbers and ages down vodka by the bottle and polish off tray after tray of octopus salad, chicken Kiev and beef Stroganoff. The supper clubs' floor shows typically cross Las Vegas-style cabaret and circus-influenced theatrics with live music performances that place Russian standards and Euro-club hits along-



music producer whose mixed family was among the first black and Latino residents in Brighton Beach in the early '70s. A former gang member now eager to give back to a community that gave him "a second chance in life," Robinson brings old friends, schoolmates and neighbors to Grady High School every August for a day of barbecuing and athletic competitions he calls "Unity Day." Recently, he has begun buying dilapidated housing that he plans to turn into apartments.



side Bananarama and Ricky Martin covers. Bigger venues like the National and Rasputin (see "The club tour," page 16) also host concerts by iconic Russian singers like Boris Moiseev.

Given the strong Russian presence in Brighton Beach, many non-Russian New Yorkers assume that they aren't welcome. Yelena Makhnin disputes that notion. "I hope that people from Manhattan see that what we have is unique, and worth the hour trip," she says. Stories of the Russian mob's influence over local life, as portrayed in movies and elsewhere in the media, are also greatly exaggerated, according to MC Timokha, a house singer and staple of the Brighton Beach nightclub scene. "Maybe early on that was the case," he says, "but not now." Nor is the neighborhood overrun with young thugs, a false impression that still lingers from the dark days of the '70s. "You won't find too many young Russian people out in Brighton Beach," Timokha says. "They see it as more of an old-school place for old-school Russians."

What you *will* find in Brighton Beach, however, is a growing number of non-Russian-speaking locals—recent immigrants from Pakistan, China, the Middle East, India, Mexico and various Central American countries. Many businesses serving these groups can be found on Neptune Avenue, which houses a number of *taquerias*, Chinese take-out joints and Pakistani-owned groceries. The neighborhood also remains home to a handful of elderly holdovers from the preceding wave of European-Jewish immigration, as well as blacks and Latinos who came here in the '70s.

"People always think of Russians, but you can find all kinds of people here," says Dwayne Robinson, a general contractor and former house-

In addition, while the Soviet immigrants lured to Brighton Beach by cheap rents in the '70s and '80s came primarily from Odessa, Kiev and other cities in the Soviet Union's western states, today's Russian-speaking population has a different face. The most recent wave of immigrants, in the 1990s, brought in refugees from mountainous Central Asian nations like Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and Georgia. "In my literature, I never call Brighton Beach Little Odessa," Makhnin says. "It's Little Russia now."

On the corner of Coney Island and Brighton Beach Avenues, where the elevated B and Q tracks begin to head northward, Brighton Beach's past and present come together. On the northeast side, Eastern Feast, an Uzbek kebaberie (see "Top tables," opposite), sits next to the recently shuttered Mrs. Stahl's, the last of the knish shops that typified the neighborhood during its kosher years. Directly south is the Oceana, the condominium complex on the former site of the Brighton Beach Baths (a recreation center and neighborhood institution that operated for nearly 90 years), where penthouses have gone for as much as \$2.7 million.

The speculation about additional upscale development that could follow in the Oceana's wake may herald further changes throughout Brighton Beach—and many locals are concerned about rising rents and parking difficulties. Others, like Pat Singer, don't plan to let the neighborhood become another fading memory of Old New York. "Brighton is one of the few places in the city where you can still see what the past looked like," she says. "When *Brighton Beach Memoirs* was filmed here, they were able to capture the '30s right here on Brighton 4th Street. I'd like to see us preserve that character."

Поход по клубам

(TOP TABLES)

Cafe Glechik The apotheosis of Glechik's Ukrainian cuisine is rabbit stew in a pot (\$13.50), an unjustly dull name for a rabbit leg protruding from an exhilaratingly rich cream sauce. To cut through the richness, sip some *kompot* (\$1.75), a supersweet concoction of stewed dried strawberries and cherries. 1111 Brighton Beach Ave between Brighton 13th and 14th Sts (718-934-2600)

Cafe Kashkar This tiny family-run restaurant serves Uighur food, the Turkic grub of China's Xinjiang region. Start with cold glass-noodle salad with pickled vegetables (\$4.50) and move on to pilaf with lamb, cumy carrots and chickpeas (\$6). Charred lamb-rib kebabs (\$3) come with a sharp tomato-based sauce sprinkled with dill. 1141 Brighton Beach Ave at Brighton 14th St (718-743-3832)

Cafe Shish-Kebab Smoke from grilled kebabs pervades this modest Russian café, though you may not like what's grilling: Lamb's balls (\$1.50 each, or \$5.50 for a kebab with five) are served to the daring. It might be better to stick with nontesticular kebabs (\$2.50 to \$7.50) and simple, garlicky chicken *tabaka* (\$7.50), which for some reason takes 15 minutes or more to make. 414 Brighton Beach Ave between Brighton 4th and 5th Sts (718-368-0966)

Eastern Feast The kebabs browning above smoldering charcoal in the window of Eastern Feast outshine all others in Brighton Beach—they're salty and juicy, with the inimitable taste of smoke. The restaurant impales hunks of sturgeon and lamb chops, but the less expensive chicken and pork are best. Prices range from \$3.50 to \$16.50 (for the sturgeon). 1003 Brighton Beach Ave at Coney Island Ave (718-934-9608)

Mimino Primarily a take-out shop, Mimino serves Georgian cold salads that are ideal for a beach picnic. Get some spicy beet salad (\$4.99 a pound), pleasantly chewy chopped chicken hearts and livers

(\$5.99 a pound), and spinach with walnuts (\$5.99 a pound)—which resembles a tuft of just-cut grass, yet tastes like concentrated creamed spinach. 1111 Brighton Beach Ave between Brighton 13th and 14th Sts (718-934-2600)

Ocean View Cafe Russian food is centered on *zakuski*, hot and cold appetizers, and they are excellent here, especially the vibrant eggplant caviar (\$5.50), meaty pickled oyster mushrooms (\$5) and *vareniki* (\$4.50), little half-moon dumplings filled with potato, meat or cherries that come 20-plus to each vasselike serving dish. 290 Brighton Beach Ave at Brighton 3rd St (718-332-1900)

Pak Nasheman Eating at a run-down Pakistani joint might seem like a desperate attempt to vary the Brighton diet. Yet the food here is excellent, in particular the fiery potatoes and eggplant and a milder mess of lentils with chicken meatballs (two dishes over spiced rice costs \$5 or \$6). The selections change daily, so ignore the standard menu. 3149 Coney Island Ave between Brighton Beach and Oceanview Aves (718-332-8100)

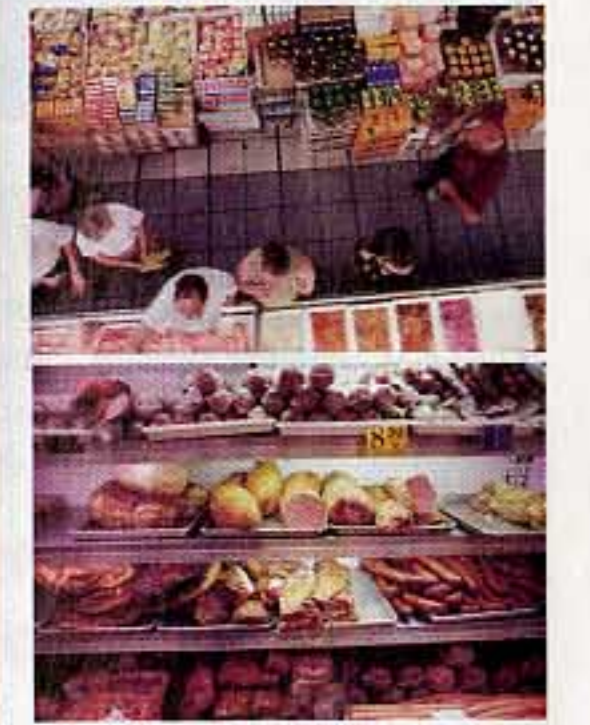
Tatiana Grill Tatiana Grill (adjacent to the older supper club Tatiana; see "The club tour," page 16) serves Americanized Russian food to sun-roasted families and Russian wise-guy types. Try the

house-made kvass (\$5), a malty nonalcoholic beverage made from stale rye bread, and snag an outdoor table. Boardwalk at Brighton 4th St (718-646-7630)

Varenichnaya With so much *lagman*, an Uzbek-style vegetable and noodle soup (\$3.95), in Brighton, don't settle for an inferior version. Here, the flavorful broth is packed with irregular noodles that have just the right bite. Dill-flecked broth with *pelmeni* (\$4.50), little sailor cap-shaped dumplings, is comfortably familiar. Aha, wonton soup! 3086 Brighton 2nd St between Brighton Beach Ave and Bridgewater Court (718-332-9797) —JJ Goode



MARKET VALUE
If you don't speak Russian, just point to your choice at M&I International Foods.



ONE SUPER MARKET

Load up your cart with worldly goods at M&I International Foods

When you first enter **M&I International Foods** and behold the 50-foot-long display of cured meats and sausages, you might think you're in an Italian *salumeria*, at least until a counterwoman addresses you in Russian. Disorientation persists as you ogle the collection of smoked fish—sprats, salmon, sturgeon and catfish, menacing with whiskers stiff and gnarled—and imagine yourself in some Vegas-style version of Russ & Daughters. If you stare at the fish eggs long enough, a severe-looking lady might offer you a taste of salmon caviar, red pearls packed in gallon buckets, or plush *sevruga* (a seasonal product returning in the fall), scooped with folded wax paper from an \$80 tin.

"[Our customers] used to buy this food in Russia," says Sofia Vinokurov, who with her brother and sister opened M&I in 1977, just one year after immigrating

to the States with 17 family members and settling in Brighton Beach. M&I expanded gradually, as the local population changed. Most customers live nearby, but many others make a weekly pilgrimage from as far away as Connecticut to stock up on various kielbasas, Russian breads and beers, several brands of kefir (a popular sour cultured-milk drink) and legendary butter from the Russian city of Vologda. M&I is also cherished for its house-made pickles: red and green tomatoes; and bracing, slightly spicy watermelon. Perhaps the best thing about M&I: The low prices make Fairway seem like Dean & DeLuca.

The store can be dizzying to the uninitiated. Vinokurov suggests that you head upstairs to the café, where you'll find Russian dumplings (*pelmeni* and *vareniki*), beef Stroganoff, herring and onions, beet and cabbage salads, fanciful layer cakes and Russian ice cream. "There you just point," Vinokurov says, "and, bang, you eat." —JJG
249 Brighton Beach Ave between Brighton 2nd and 3rd Sts (718-615-1011)

Топ-еда

(THE CLUB TOUR)

The National The oldest and most famous of the Brighton Beach supper clubs, the National opened in 1980 and was immortalized in 1984's *Moscow on the Hudson*, in which defecting saxophonist Robin Williams ends up in the house band. For a place where men typically arrive in suits and women in heels, the prices are surprisingly reasonable (entrées, including Chilean sea bass and stuffed quail, average \$20). Strangely, Stolli is the only Russian vodka available. 273 Brighton Beach Ave at Brighton 2nd St (718-646-1225, www.come2national.com)

Rasputin For something a little less bar mitzvah-y and a little more clubland, cross the Belt Parkway. Once a month, the opulently decorated Rasputin (whose zip code places it in Sheepshead Bay, technically) drops its floor show in favor of themed techno shindigs; at a recent White Party, a modern-day Tony Manero-kov cut a rug as DJs spun a global mix and a gaggle of beauties looked on. Perhaps the ladies turn out because they know it's a hockey hangout. "Most of the New York Rangers have been here, and all of the New Jersey Devils," manager Jacob Rifkin says. On Friday 24, MC Timokha will host the annual Miss Russian NY contest. 2670 Coney Island Ave at Ave X (718-332-8111, www.rasputincabaret.com)

Tatiana On weekend nights, this popular boardwalk eatery puts on a live show featuring singers like Magdalena, "the Russian Pamela Anderson," and Eddie Ganz, a Cuban from New Jersey who has been working Brighton for nearly 20 years. Before he was a semifinalist on the latest season of *American Idol*, Anthony Fedorov was among the neighborhood's youngest cabaret singers; on a rainy night earlier this month, he brought fellow contestant Anwar Robinson to his old stomping ground for an impromptu performance. 3152 Brighton 6th St at the Boardwalk (718-891-5151). See also "Top tables," page 15.

Papaheyo Russia meets Brazil at this rotisserie steakhouse, formerly known as De Ribas. Owner Alec Bortnikov says he wanted to open a "place with live entertainment, but not too loud so people can't talk." After sampling the spiced meats and European salads on the all-you-can-eat menu (ranging from \$25 to \$40), diners can get drunk on sangria, learn to samba and do the limbo. 706 Brighton Beach Ave between

Brighton 7th and 8th Sts (718-934-5900)

Odessa Opened by reputed *organizatsiya* don Marat Balagula in 1980, Odessa was said to be the site of a mob-run community court, with local gangsters meting out sentences, according to Robert I. Friedman's 2000 book *Red Mafiya* and local legend. Balagula, a former math teacher from Ukraine, was arrested in 1989 and served more

than a decade for credit-card fraud and an \$85 million tax-evasion scam. On a lighter note, "Tell It to My Heart" singer Taylor Dayne got her first gigs at Odessa back in the mid-'80s. These days, the club packs a lengthy menu of seafood and Russian staples, plus an impressive array of Eastern European and American talent. 1113 Brighton Beach Ave between Brighton 14th St and Seacoast Terr (718-332-3223)—JS



AN OCEANA APART
The food and entertainment are ever-changing at the Atlantic Oceana.



ECLECTIC OUTLET

The Atlantic Oceana makes waves with wildly diverse attractions

You might not expect to find boxing, bar mitzvahs, dumpling-eating competitions and a menu full of secret Azerbaijani recipes under the same roof, but over the past several years, the **Atlantic Oceana** has seen them all.

In 1998, Angelika Roytvayn-Rosofov and her husband, Aharon Rosofov, reopened the venue, which occupies the ground floor of a building that had been home to the Oceana Theater, a bustling movie house, from the mid-'30s through the late '60s. The theater was then converted into a multiplex, which closed in the mid-'90s. In the late '90s, other businesses came and went, including one that "booked a concert, sold each seat four times over and then fled the next day," according to Roytvayn-Rosofov, a Ukrainian native. She says Rosofov, who is originally from Azerbaijan, had owned several small restaurants in Israel, then fruit stands and delis in Brooklyn, but he dreamed of "a place where people could come and have an elegant night out."

What brings patrons in, however, isn't necessarily a swank evening and a hearty meal. Since May, the 600-seat Oceana's mermaid-green ballroom has been the site of twice-weekly visits from Anatoly

Kashpirovsky, a self-described healer whose séances were a fixture of Russian television in the 1980s and early '90s. At a session a few weeks ago, a woman named Ala Khabarova proclaimed that the guru had cured her psoriasis. "My grandson used to be allergic to apples," she added. "Now he eats apples." Area boxing promoter Sal Musumeci won over Roytvayn-Rosofov by bringing in Dmitriyi Salita, a much-hyped (and still-undefeated) Orthodox Jewish welterweight from Sheepshead Bay, to fight.

Still, the supper club remains the foundation of the Oceana's business. At the mid-June wedding reception of Edward and Marina Radzinsky, a Boston-based couple who bused their guests to Brooklyn for the festivities, friends and family gorged while four acrobatic dancers quick-changed their way through elaborate costumes and routines.

Other events take place upstairs at the independently owned **Millennium Theater** (718-615-1500), which hosts plays, operas and movies. A while back, one guest shed some light on the building's history for Roytvayn-Rosofov. "A 90-year-old woman who grew up here told us that the building had been a supper club before it was a movie theater," she recalls. "She was so glad to see that we turned it back. She said, 'This is what it is supposed to be.'" —JS
1029 Brighton Beach Ave between Brighton 11th and 12th Sts (718-743-1515)

Сцены на песке

(SAND SCENES)



Asser Levy Park (Surf Ave and W 5th St) The Seaside Summer Concert Series will once again be a fixture on Thursday evenings throughout July and August at this beachfront park. Past lineups have focused on stalwarts like Earth, Wind & Fire and, fittingly, the Beach Boys. For this year's roster, which at press time wasn't finalized, go to www.brooklynconcerts.com.

Brighton 1st Street Fireworks explode over Coney Island every Friday night at 9:30 through the summer. If you want to see the show but avoid the crowds, head for the more sparsely populated Brighton 1st for the perfect view.

Volna Restaurant (on the boardwalk at Brighton 4th St) Duck into the restaurant's café (the entrance is on the side of the building) to buy a paper bag of *semychki* (sunflower seeds) for \$1.50. Spit out the husks onto the boardwalk, as the Russians do. Volna also sells snacks like little sandwiches that are simply bread with caviar and butter (\$3).

The boardwalk between Brighton 4th and 6th Streets Local street musicians jam near the restaurant cluster here on summer evenings. Folkies play homeland favorites like Vladimir Vysotsky ("the Russian Bob Dylan"), and classically trained

musicians from the old country try to make an extra buck.

Brighton 6th Street An older crowd congregates here to unwind. The loudest noise you'll hear is the local beach vendor walking around selling drinks, chanting, "If you don't drink water, you'll die!" Russian is the language, and deep-brown skin is the norm by midsummer.

Brighton 14th Street As the epicenter of the Russian teen scene, this is where immigrant offspring flock to blast the latest Russian pop and techno from bands like TATU on giant boom boxes. The ultimate fashion idols

of this crowd seem to be the Gotti brothers and Paris Hilton.

Rabbi Abraham Abraham Keep an eye out for an icon of the neighborhood, a sun-roasted, wildly mustachioed figure who meets and greets his way up and down the beach. Abraham, who won't divulge his age but admits to being north of 80 and was alive "when there were chickens running around" the streets, was born in Brighton Beach and acts as its unofficial ambassador, though he prefers the term *king*. In the winter, he can be seen braving the waves with the Coney Island Ice-Breakers (a rival to the Polar Bear Club).—*Polina Barsky*

OCEAN VIEWS Brighton Beach's streets and sand have starred in plenty of films

When most people think of celluloid Brighton Beach, they think of *Brighton Beach Memoirs* (1986); director Gene Saks's adaptation of Neil Simon's play is probably the best-known artistic portrait of the neighborhood. Re-creating 1937 Brighton Beach nearly 50 years later proved to be little trouble on bungalow-dotted Brighton 4th Street.

But when it comes to stirring the locals' emotions, it's hard to top 1994's *Little Odessa*. Residents aren't fond of the film, which stars Tim Roth as an *organizatsiya* hit man, thanks to its portrayal of Russian Brighton Beach as a mob-infested crime den. It doesn't help that few of the mostly non-Russian cast have passable accents. Pretty

much everything was shot on location, though—under the el, on the boardwalk and inside apartment buildings.

Moscow on the Hudson (1984), a late-Cold War paean to good ol' American freedom, is mostly remembered for the famous defection scene in Bloomingdale's, but the movie also provides a rare view into the early years of

Brighton Beach's Russian transformation. The National restaurant makes a cameo.

Director Darren Aronofsky grew up in Brighton Beach; his second feature, *Requiem for a Dream* (2000), which follows the degenerating lives of a group of drug addicts, was shot and set here and in neighboring Coney Island.

The latest addition to the

list is *The Boys of 2nd Street Park*, a documentary that premiered on Showtime in 2003. Thirty years after moving away from his boyhood home, superflack Dan Klores returned to make a documentary (with Ron Berger) about his boyhood friends and the basketball courts where they bonded before their lives followed wildly divergent paths.—*JS*