

Riga is famed more for its stag parties than its food, but for those in the know it packs a punch on the palate, too.

Fiona Sims checks out its restaurants, delicacies and a rather special fish farm

TRUST IN YOUR STURGEON

If Sergei Trachook gets his way, most of us will be able to afford caviar one day. The Russian has huge plans for his fish farm near the Latvian capital, Riga, and huge plans for the roe that comes out of the sturgeon he has swimming about in dozens of cement tanks. "One day our rivers will be teeming again," he declares, with a grin.

We're talking caviar with a conscience. You see, Trachook doesn't kill his sturgeon like other caviar producers. Instead, he "milks" them for their roe using ultrasound technology and a special massage technique, before swiftly returning them unharmed into their temperature-controlled tanks. He's putting them back into the Daugava river, too, in the hope that they will start breeding again.

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species has given his fish farm,

Mottra, the thumbs up – viewing it as a way forward in preserving sturgeon, which is close to extinction. The signs are good, then, for sampling some over my weekend in Riga.

Prices are significantly lower in Latvia, so eating out in restaurants – even with caviar – is much kinder on the wallet than elsewhere. But is the food any good? I certainly thought so – you just have to ignore the clunky English menu descriptions, littered with hilarious spelling mistakes and low on detail.

It's tempting to lump Latvian cooking in with that of its neighbour, Russia, which ruled the nation on and off up until its independence in 1991. My initial scant research summed it up as bland and fatty – but then there's not much call for Latvian cookery books written in English.

Yet the garlic-drenched, toasted rye bread I'm nibbling on now is a delight, and the

dill scattered over my boiled potatoes is the pungent mainstay of Latvian cooking, elevating even the most humble root. Add the caraway seeds, which crop up everywhere alongside dozens of different mustards, and Latvian food is all taste sensations.

It's my first night and I've managed to find a traditional restaurant in the old town that isn't swarming with tourists, Jana Seta (9 Kaleju Iela, tel: +371 6708 7531). Here, old boys on a night out shovel down Latvian staples such as whole baked herrings served with cottage cheese and boiled potatoes (it works, honest), and black sausage – a tame version of the UK's black pudding, served with lingonberry sauce and caramelised onions – while knocking back half-litre glasses of local Tervetes beer.

I follow suit and am offered a glass of Black Balsam afterwards as a digestive. It's the ▶



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Making a splash

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IT'S THE BEST HANGOVER CURE... IT TASTES LIKE THE DREGS OF A PICKLE JAR

dessert, which turns out to be a heavenly mix of dark rye and dried fruits – a sort of liquid Christmas pudding.

Unable to recover my appetite in time for dinner, I go for cocktails with a view. One of Riga's most iconic landmarks is the clock tower at the Central Station. A hangover from Riga's Soviet days in the 1960s, it also houses one of the world's smallest cocktail bars, Neo (tel: +371 6707 3073), spread over three tiny floors connected by a hazardous wrought-iron spiral staircase. The views and cocktails are worth the effort though – reaching far across the city to the slate-grey Baltic Sea beyond.

Keen to get more of a handle on Latvian ingredients, the following morning I visit the *Centraltirgus* (Central Market). Had I arrived in the capital on the second or fourth Saturday

of the month, I would have also visited the organic farmers' market at Bergs Bazaar. Founded by Latvia's most celebrated chef, Martins Ritins, it showcases the best local producers, located in a picturesque renovated 19th-century arcade (13 Marijas Street).

Aside from the dizzying array of produce, the Central Market has an interesting history. The five vast buildings were once abandoned Zeppelin hangars, which dominate the skyline and support Riga's boast of having the biggest market in Europe after Istanbul.

Feeling peckish, I stop by doughnut stand Krial's Virtuli, and eat warm, freshly made buns filled with *bruklenu* (sour berry jam), *kabatinas* (cottage cheese-stuffed pockets) and *piradzins* (ubiquitous, tiny, crescent-shaped pies filled with smoked bacon), then quench my thirst at a nearby café with *kvass*, a mildly alcoholic and surprisingly refreshing dark rye bread drink, popular in this part of the world.

At another stall I also try sauerkraut juice. At 0.15 lats (€0.21) per cup, it's the best hangover cure in the world, according to the grinning stallholder. And he's right, although it tastes like the dregs of a pickle jar. Next, I almost try the lamprey in the fish market, another revered delicacy here. But discovering it's packed in aspic and seasoned with coffee, I reconsider.

national drink and can be used in cocktails, added to coffee, and even mixed in with fruit juice. It's thick and black, smells like treacle and tastes like cough mixture. You'll either love it or hate it, but it does clear the senses.

Clearing the senses is my aim the following day, visiting one of the many pretty lakes surrounding Riga. After a walk, lunch is at a no-frills village restaurant in Baltezers, Vanaga Ligzda (tel: +371 6799 0792), and I tuck into national favourite garlic soup – a clear, punchy broth with a soft-poached egg flecked with parsley. Moving on, I try potato pancakes *rösti*-style, served with cubes of marinated salmon and sour cream, followed by bread soup for

By the time I reach the overpoweringly smokey meat market next door (smoked meat is huge in Riga), I call time on tradition. Now the search is on for lighter, more contemporary fare. Thanks to the current economic crisis the modern Latvian dining scene hasn't moved as fast as might be hoped for a foodie like me, but there are a few hot spots such as Ostas Skati (15 Matrozū Iela, tel: +371 6750 8657, www.ostasskati.lv), Riga's latest opening on the left bank of the sprawling Daugava river.

With views back towards the old town, the place is occupied by wealthy Latvians, who moor their luxury cruisers at the pontoon to munch on chef Ingmars Ladīgs's simple but smart cooking, which uses a mix of Latvian and European produce. Get there by boat picked up from the Bastejs Kalns jetty on the canal in the city centre.

Home-smoked salmon, fresh from Ladīgs's own smoker – which puffs away on the terrace – is worth the trip alone. And his organic char-grilled beef and dill-speckled potatoes, along with a fresh-tasting dessert of local cottage cheese and strawberries, also hits the spot.

Leading the way in contemporary Latvian dining is undoubtedly Martins Ritins, whose restaurant Vincents (19 Elizabetes Iela, tel: +371 6733 2830, www.vincents.lv) is universally declared Riga's best. Adorned with portraits of the affable chef hobnobbing with

various heads of state, it brings the best of the country into Ritins' clean, innovative cooking, which includes Mottra caviar. Ritins likes to use this in a number of dishes, including a generous serving of the eggs alongside a ceviche of scallops with poached langoustine tails, dressed in herb, chilli and lobster oils.

After Vincents I take things down a notch at Istaba (31a Kr. Barona Iela, tel: +371 6728 1141), where art and food collide. It's owned by chef Martins Sirmāis, and there's no menu – just meat or fish and dessert. There are no prices either, as he asks what you would like to spend at his shabby-chic café-cum-art gallery. Don't miss the fresh blackcurrant juice, hand-picked by Sirmāis, then steamed gently before serving.

I end the day with coffee and pancakes with "sugar-knead berries" at stylish Meta-Kafe (Block 12, 1 Maskavas Iela, tel: +371 6720 4993, www.metakafe.lv) in the Spikeri district – an area of 18th-century warehouses presently being given a makeover, where Latvia's new Museum of Contemporary Art will soon reside. My conclusions, you ask? Latvian food, bland and fatty? Not in the Riga I saw. 



Meet the man

Sergei Trachook has always loved fish, and he's always wanted an aquarium. Well now he's got a huge one, at his fish farm, Mottra.

We're talking sturgeon, both osetra and sterlet – 50 tonnes of them, each weighing 6–20kg. Trachook bred each one from an egg, and now they give up their delicious eggs every 18 months or so, when we can enjoy them spread simply on buttered bread, or licked off the side of the hand, Russian style.

The sturgeon are grown in large tanks that mimic their natural habitat, with ultrasound equipment detecting when eggs are ready. After being pulled gently out of the water, a 2mm slit is made in its belly and the massaging begins using long strokes. A black liquid jet shoots into a plastic bowl as the massaging continues for a couple of minutes. Then the fish is returned unharmed to the pool to live on for many more years. The liquid is strained and the stash of eggs collected.

1 BUY MOTTRA AT WWW.MOTTRA.CO.UK, HARVEY NICHOLS AND SELFRIDGES. PRICES START AT ABOUT £35 (€39) FOR 30G.

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A taste of heaven

- ➊ A nice dollop of Latvian caviar
- ➋ The view from Neo

