



ROMANIA HAS MORE THAN JUST DRACULA

Dancing with Tripe

By Michael Nagrant

ALL I REALLY KNOW ABOUT ROMANIA I LEARNED FROM NADIA COMANECI, Dracula and those late-eighties/early-nineties commercials depicting squalid orphanages. And I might have kept on thinking that the country

was populated exclusively by agile beauties, blood-sucking monsters and doleful children if my favorite burger spot, Kuma's Corner, didn't have a two-hour back-up last Friday.

Though Kuma's makes a mean patty, it wasn't worth the Outback Steakhouse-like wait, and so my two friends and I ambled up the block and into the Romanian restaurant, Nelly's Saloon. By the Wild West-swinging doors, sarsaparilla and six-gun-shooter standard, Nelly's is not quite a saloon. It does however look like a combination strip club and a Romanian grandmother's living room.

The bar area, lit via neon and stacked with more bottles of Hennessy than a gangster-rap soiree, makes up the strip-club portion, while the dining room, outfitted with shiny silk valances, vertical blinds, giant golden frames filled with paintings of flowers and mirrored walls, makes up the living-room-like area. Tables are outfitted with pint glasses filled with artistically fanned red-and-white linen napkins. If there was a sofa in this dining room, it would be covered in plastic. A red-polyester-panted proprietor with a bouffant hairdo held court in the corner of the bar section chain-smoking throughout our meal.

Friday nights at Nelly's, it turns out, is "Romanian Dancing with the Stars" viewing-party night, or as they call the show, "Dansez Pentru Tine" (I Dance for You). Lubricated by a sweet-cherry-soaked Romanian Murfatlar Pinot Noir ice cold and fresh from the refrigerator, we settled in. With no knowledge of Romanian pop stars, we tried guessing which of the dancing pair was the professional and who was the star. Unlike the American version of the show, where hopeless plodding white dudes like Tucker Carlson and Penn Jillette get dragged around by their lithe beautiful pro counterparts, the Romanian stars have some dance chops, thus making it impossible to really decide who the ringers are. It's also possible we were past the opening rounds, where gangly, Boris Karloff-unibrowed contestants had already been voted off in favor of their more skilled counterparts. The show's rules pretty much seem the same as the American version, though there were some odd scenes in which young boys kept sitting on a couch and talking to silicone-enhanced female contestants.

Watching all that dancing worked up an appetite. Turning to the menus, I realized that thousands of years of oppressive rule, including the fifty years of Nicolae Ceaușescu's feel-good regime, pretty much yielded the same kind of pragmatic meat-and-potatoes-style peasant-fueling cuisine found in other former Eastern European police states. A cuisine based on scraps and bland commodities breeds two things: under-served crowds of hungry, angry people and a few alchemist-style chefs. Settling on a bowl of Ciorba de Burta or Romanian tripe soup, we knew we'd found one of the alchemists. Nelly's version, a warm bowl of creamy broth, cast off a garlicky perfume that would fell any of its mythological resident bloodsuckers. The soup was populated with strips of rich, delicately cooked stomach, so tender you question whether you are really eating tripe. Even in the best Vietnamese Pho or Mexican Menudo, the tripe tends to be chewy.

Salads like Muraturi, or peppers filled with pickled cabbage, did not fare as well. An overt bitterness from the pepper skins overwhelmed the preparation. Salata de Vinete, or eggplant salad, sort of an Eastern European version of baba ghanouj, was slimy. The Tocanita De Porc or Romanian Goulash, though filled with meltingly tender meat, was devoid of the paprika punch usually found in Hungarian-style preparations. Likewise, the mama-liga, a Romanian-style polenta, was gloppy.

There are very few meals which can't be rescued by pork, and the Mititei, pink planks of skinless minced beef and pork sausage stamped with a healthy dose of caramelized grill marks, righted the ship. The sausages were accompanied by thick-cut fries that were rich and redolent with a beefy waft that recalled old-school, beef-tal-low-dipped McDonald's fries.

While finishing up over a flaky Romanian strudel filled with toothsome cinnamon-coated bites of apple, I'd realized I'd expanded my knowledge of Romania beyond Dracula and gymnasts. I know knew that the country was populated by slick dudes fond of zip-up track jackets and shiny silver dupioni silk suits, a slew of bottle blonde silicone-implanted women and that Romanian is a Latin-based romance language and not Slavic like the rest of Eastern Europe. Somehow I know I have miles to go to learn about this fascinating culture, but maybe most importantly, I now know they sure have a way with tripe.

Nelly's is located at 3256 North Elston, (773)588-4494

EVENTS

The Brian Costello Show

Featuring guests Jonathan Messinger, Drew Ferguson, James Kennedy and Automatic Stinging Machines. Empty Bottle, 1035 N. Western, (773)276-3600. Sat 3pm. Free.

Flirting for Nerds

early to bed hosts a workshop for nerds on the art of flirting. Early to Bed, 5232 N. Sheridan, (773)271-1219. Tue 7:30pm.

SPORTS

SAT/26

Chicago White Sox vs. Baltimore Orioles

US Cellular Field, 6:05pm. Tickets: (312)674-1000

SUN/27

Chicago White Sox vs. Baltimore Orioles

US Cellular Field, 1:05pm. Tickets: (312)674-1000

TUE/29

Chicago Cubs vs. Milwaukee Brewers

Wrigley Field, 7:05pm. Tickets: (773)404-CUBS

WED/30

Chicago Cubs vs. Milwaukee Brewers

Wrigley Field, 7:05pm. Tickets: (773)404-CUBS

SLAMS AND OPEN MICS

THU/24

Open Mic with Garrett Lane

Gallery Cabaret, 2020 N. Oakley, (773)489-5471. 9:30pm, Free.

FRI/25

Open Mic Poetry Night

John Starrs hosts poetry readings. Coffee Chicago, 5256 N. Broadway, (773)784-1305. 8pm, \$2 suggested donation for readers.

SUN/27

Ritual Rhythms

Negro League Cafe, 301 E. 43rd, 773-536-7000. 8pm-12am.

Uptown Poetry Slam

Marc Smith hosts the granddaddy of them all. Green Mill, 4802 N. Broadway, (773)878-5552. 7pm, \$6.

TUE/29

Bert Hyman Open Mic

Bert Hyman hosts an open mic. Phyllis' Musical Inn, 1800 W. Division, (773)486-9862. 9:30pm-midnight, free.

Safe Smiles

Polyrhythmic Open Mic. Second floor; 21 and over. Trace, 3714 N. Clark, (773)477-3400. 10pm, \$3 suggested donation.

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Open mic hip hop. Subterranean, 2011 W. North, (773)278-6600. 10pm DJs, 11pm open mic, \$5.

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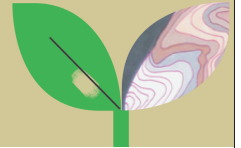


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