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Coming to America


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Chef Jungmo Ahn at Mad for Garlic prepares the restaurant's signature Garlic Foryou Steak. MAD FOR GARLIC

First known as the melting pot, and then the salad bowl, the U.S. offers a variety of markets and tastes for international dining concepts.

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U.S. chains continue to expand internationally, but innovative international concepts are filling niches and gaining popularity here as well.

Mad For Garlic, a Korean restaurant focused on garlic-centric foods, partnered with Bridging Culture Worldwide, a global consulting firm, to make its transition to the U.S.

“This is much different [than a Korean restaurant], it is an Italian garlic concept that originated in Korea,” says Don Southerton, CEO and president of Bridging Culture Worldwide.

Mad For Garlic, which has signature dishes such as Dracula Killer, Garlic Snowing Pizza, Garlicpeno Pasta, Mushroom Risotto, and Garlic Steak, expanded through Asia and the Philippines, and now is seeking franchisees for U.S. markets.

“Korean brands are highly regarded,” Southerton says. “The reception has been phenomenal.” However, Southerton stresses the importance of researching real estate opportunities in each market. “[Before coming to America] the idea needs to be polished and successful, the most successful in its current market,” Southerton says.

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Already having success in this country is Mari Vanna, a Russian home-style cuisine concept that has opened in Washington, New York, and, most recently, Los Angeles.

Named for the fairytale grandmother of Slavic folklore, Mari Vanna's ambiance is a mixture of grandma's house and garden party, with fairytale design elements that are meant to bring back memories of the diner's childhood.

The Los Angeles eatery marks the sixth location of the international chain, spearheaded by Russian hospitality group Ginza Project.

"You have to learn the flavor of the area. You have to know everything when you open the restaurant [in a new city] in terms of competition, what the customer wants, and how to market," says Tatiana Brunetti, Mari Vanna and Ginza Project partner.


"You learn something new at each location. As we are going forward, we learn as we go."



For instance, she says people in Los Angeles "like more light, the colors of material more bright," so the Los Angeles design boasts brighter colors and a more airy feel than the London location.

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PAGE 2, CONTINUED



Mari Vanna serves traditional Russian fare, including braised veal with homemade noodles and svekolnik, a chilled borscht with sour cream and diced vegetables, as well as desserts like the Napoleon cake and kislitsa, chilled slices of orange-zested cream sprinkled with caramelized nuts.

Unusual house-infused vodkas, such as pepper, cucumber and dill, and sea berry are a hallmark of the Mari Vanna restaurants. In addition to these, the Los Angeles location offers house-infused tequila—with flavors like red pepper, pineapple, and mixed berry.

“Everyone has a memory of going to grandma’s,” Brunetti says, and through the whimsical design, Mari Vanna brings customers back to their childhood, whether they grew up eating Russian fare or not.

Another concept that has come to America intent on expansion arrived when Dario Wolos literally drove his restaurant, Tacombi, up to New York from Mexico. The taqueria restaurant, which has been in the U.S. for four years, expanded from a food truck to a full-service restaurant, and Wolos is looking to open a third location.

Healthy home cooking and unique design set Tacombi apart, and Wolos stayed away from the cliché idea of a Mexican restaurant, instead bringing a true taqueria experience to the U.S.


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“In New York you get boxed into 15-foot locations,” he says. But after a year of searching, he found a large, open space where he could create the Tacombi experience.

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