

Lithuanian Portraits



Not your močiutės *bulviniai blynai*! These buckwheat cakes served over fresh beans and greens are being served at *Valgomasis*, a trendy new restaurant in Vilnius.

LITHUANIAN HERITAGE

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The Baltimore Lithuanian National Library (Lietuvių Tautiškas Knygynas) incorporated in 1908, is the oldest still functioning Lithuanian ethnic library in the United States. How and why was it started?

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.. is your own. Ruta told herself that she couldn't blame others for not knowing what it was to be Lithuanian, ...and she began her own journey to find out.

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Cover Credits:

FRONT COVER: St. Casimir Fair (Živilė Vaitkienė)

BACK COVER: St. Casimir Fair (Živilė Vaitkienė)

INSIDE FRONT COVER: Buckwheat cakes (Courtesy of Valgomasis)

INSIDE BACK COVER: Lithuanian sailors, 1936 (Lithuanian Sea Museum)



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Lunch at Valgomasis

The Best New Dining Room in Vilnius

by Jennifer Virškus

When I was in Lithuania in September on a family heritage trip, I had the pleasure of dining at a hot new business lunch spot just a block from my old office in Helios City.

The restaurant is as humble as its name, and unless you know it's there, it's hard to find. The only "signage" is a simple stencil on the door. It's called *Valgomasis* – Lithuanian for "dining room." The restaurant is run by Agnė Alenovič and Jurij Radzevič, old friends of mine from the time I was living in Vilnius and writing "Letter from Lithuania" for this magazine. Our four-course lunch started with an *amuse-bouche* of fresh black bread and homemade beetroot hummus.

A couple both in and out of the restaurant, they met a decade ago at

Literatų svetainė, a popular expat restaurant across from the cathedral in Vilnius. Agnė and Jurij say they didn't really plan on starting a restaurant, it just sort of happened naturally.

"We came back from Thailand where we'd been working for five years and were going out a lot and meeting friends. We started, almost by accident, this supper club for friends and family. We called it *Restoranas be Adreso* – it was a sort of secret dinner club and a little bit illegal as well," Agnė laughs.

They created a Facebook page to launch what was basically a pop-up restaurant. They held dinners in friends' apartments and at least one brunch in the forest on the outskirts of Vilnius. They shared

pictures of their dinners on Instagram. Gradually, the events became popular and more frequent, and they began taking catering jobs while they both continued to work full time.

After about a year, their business outgrew their tiny apartment kitchen. "We decided to look for some premises out of which we could operate our catering business, and maybe do some supper club events – we weren't planning to open a restaurant. We went to some places in the Old Town but they were either too small or too expensive, or way too big for us and even more expensive," explains Agnė. When Jurij found what would become the *Valgomasis* space, just off Savanorių prospektas and around the corner from the flower market, there was nothing there. "It was just old walls, an old concrete floor, but I saw a vision there," Agnė recalls.



Agnė and Jurij.

(Gintautas Rapalis photo)



Lunch guests will find their name handwritten on a reservation tag.

With the exception of some electrical and plumbing, they did all of the work to turn the space into a working kitchen themselves, including polishing the concrete floor until it shined. Once the renovation began to take shape, they thought they might use the space to serve business lunches for extra money. “It would be something to do during the day when we didn’t have a catering job,” says Jurij.

They opened December 9, 2015. They were the entire staff, and through the holidays Agnė was still working at Zoe’s Bar and Grill. “Right in the beginning, we had three dinners booked, three evenings in a row! We were only getting four hours of sleep per night, waking up at 5 AM and coming home after midnight,” says Agnė.

Before long, *Valgomasis* had a larger following than *Restoranas be Adreso*. They decided to close the supper club side of the business and just focus on *Valgomasis* and catering. “We still have those crazy days when we work over 20 hours a day. But when we see that we need rest, we simply don’t take any reservations,” she adds.

Jurij, as a chef, always had a dream of owning his own restaurant, running his own kitchen, but for Agnė that dream came later. “I started working as a waitress to make money while I was a student studying public administration, and realized that I’m good at it. I’m good with people, I’m good with service, and I’m very attentive. I became a bartender and eventually a manager. Then I began to dream that I would have my own restaurant. I didn’t know with whom yet, but I had a dream,” says Agnė.

At *Valgomasis* they are an ideal team: Jurij runs the kitchen and Agnė runs the front of the house, choosing the wines and helping with desserts. They knew they wanted



Lunch on Friday at *Valgomasis* usually features a fish selection: Baked cod, with asparagus, green peas, boiled potatoes, and a Béarnaise sauce.

their restaurant to be as local and as organic as possible and that they would make everything from scratch. They use only local, seasonal ingredients, all of their bread is homemade daily, as are the soups, and they have greens growing on the windowsill in their kitchen.

“There’s so much we can do with the ingredients that surround us. They are the same ingredients we’ve used as Lithuanians for generations, but I like to find new ways to use them,” Jurij says. He keeps a little recipe book he calls his “bible” with a few of his favorite recipes as well as standard recipes for breads and other items that have to be followed precisely. But the other dishes they serve are one-of-a-kind creations. “Even when we make the same basic soup, it’s still a little different every time. Sometimes we add sour cream, the next time it’s made with feta cheese. It’s a way to do the same thing in a lot of different ways,” explains Jurij.

The day I ate lunch, the main courses were pork tenderloin, spinach salad with beets and baked salmon, and a gorgeous vegetarian dish of buckwheat and poached egg.

The beets for the soup and salad were from Agnė’s mother’s garden, while the raspberries for the *kefyras* panna cotta were from Jurij’s mother’s garden. At the risk of sounding overgenerous in my praise, the puréed beet soup was the best I’d ever tasted – smooth and creamy, but not heavy, and very gently seasoned, the flavor of the beets really shined. I’d never really been a fan of panna cotta, but Jurij’s recipe made with buttermilk – a technique he’d learned while working at a two-star Michelin restaurant in Sweden – was silky and light with just a hint of sweetness.

“Officially, we can’t use the produce we take from our parents’ gardens or the mushrooms you find in the forest, but the customers, they love it. We are proud to tell them that Jurij was picking the mushrooms over the weekend, and they see and appreciate the effort we are putting into our food,” says Agnė.

Valgomasis started with four lunches a week and now serves five, as well as a monthly tasting dinner and Sunday brunches. The restaurant seats 18 inside, and another 30 outside during the warmer months.



Beef cheeks over polenta with red wine sauce are a popular lunch dish.

They usually serve chicken on Monday and fish on Friday, and the days in between generally feature a pork, beef, or turkey option, but for the most part, *Valgomasis* menus are written just a couple of hours before lunch service begins.

Popular menu items include beef cheeks served with polenta and red wine sauce, and spare ribs, which were so tender when I had them at my going-away dinner, you had to scoop the meat out of the pan with a spoon. Vegetarian lasagna is also a sell-out dish (and they make their own pasta!). Every day they have at least one vegetarian option on the menu and sometimes offer a vegan option. One of Jurij's favorite ingredients is pearl barley, which he cooks similarly to risotto. The vegetarian dishes are inspired by Agnė's best friend. "Ieva is a vegetarian, and we added the options because I want her to come to lunch," Agnė confides, "but actually, we found out that most of the people who are eating these dishes aren't veg-

etarians at all, they just want a lighter option."

Their catering menus are as fresh and as original as their business lunch menus. The menu is based on the budget – a minimum catering budget they work with is 300 euros, which could serve two people or twenty. They've catered events up to 120. "Once a customer gives us their budget, we design a completely custom menu for them based on available ingredients, and we make everything fresh for the event," says Jurij.

Their location doesn't get a lot of foot traffic, but they have gained publicity by placing sixth in an annual dessert championship this year, as well as being selected for inclusion in the new guidebook *99 Tastes of the Baltic*. "Every time someone compliments us on the food we're serving, it's like we're hearing it for the first time. We never get tired of hearing it," laughs Agnė.

Jurij says future growth will be in quality, not quantity. They'll make better bread, better desserts, and offer more sophisticated drinks. They'd also like to invest in nicer plates and cutlery – much of their current interior décor comes from Ikea. While they may add additional meal services and they have hired help for food prep in the kitchen and dishwashing, they both say they are unlikely to outgrow their space any time soon.

"The restaurant is not just a restaurant, the restaurant is us. This is our secret. People know us, they trust us – they love us, and we love them back," says Agnė. For Agnė and Jurij, success is an empty fridge at the end of the day.



Beautiful dishes for a catering event. Clockwise from top left, panna cotta with raspberries, green pea purée with beef in bacon, chicken liver pâté with potato chips and cranberries, and salad with oil.