I went to Berlin last summer for the Seventh World Congress of the International Council for Central and East European Studies, to chair a panel on “Food Trends as a Marker of National Identity in Post-Soviet Europe.” First Giles MacDonogh, who writes for London’s Financial Times, presented a paper on the influence of Nazism and Communism on Germans’ perception of food and discussed how centralized government affected production and distribution. He was followed by Alexandra Grigorieva from Moscow State University, who examined two iconic Russian foods: salt-cured pickles and sour rye bread. With the rise of a capitalist economy in Russia and the country’s opening up to the West, these two traditional foodstuffs are endangered, with cheaper European-style marinated pickles (which are less time-consuming to make) and French-style white bread (which is perceived as more privileged) flooding the market. Then Ursula Heinzelmann spoke on three distinctive foods that are identified with East Germany: Teltower Rübchen, small turnips from Teltow, a town just south of Berlin, whose exceptional flavor none other than Goethe praised; Pfefferkuchen (gingerbread) from the town of Pulsnitz in Saxony—East Germany’s counterpart to Nuremberg’s better-known Lebkuchen; and Spreewälder Gurken, pickled cucumbers from the Spreewald region near Cottbus (which Ursula wrote about in the Summer 2004 issue of Gastronomica). In an opposite process from the one taking place in Russia, East Germans today are making an effort to revive many regional foods that fell into near-oblivion under the previous political regimes, and to market them as distinctively East German. After her talk, Ursula offered samples of the gingerbread and pickles, both the traditional preparations and the knock-offs that West German producers have tried to pass off as authentic.

My appetite whetted, I set out to explore gastronomic Berlin. It was early August, and chanterelles appeared on every menu—stewed with mushrooms and tarragon, enlivening a cream sauce over noodles, sautéed as a garnish to smoked salmon, roasted for pizza topping. One memorable lunch, enjoyed on the terrace of Restaurant Engelbrecht overlooking the Spree River, featured a chilled red onion and red bell pepper soup, which captured a taste of Berlin in its culinary
straddling of Eastern and Central Europe. In fact, fusion could be found throughout Berlin, not only on its tables. The crumbling edifices of the Soviet era are now flanked by skyscrapers designed by the likes of Rem Koolhaas, I.M. Pei, and Richard Meier. Even more dramatically, train and metro service was temporarily suspended while we were in Berlin, as giant cranes joined the two halves of the central train station’s roof. This symbolic moment reunited East and West Berlin, literally welding the two divergent German cultures.

Such a visible joining made me think of all that reunification promises, and I found myself hoping that the newly unified city would not result in homogeneity, that East Berlin would retain some elements of its past identity, shabby and Soviet as some of them may be. These musings led me to think about fusion in general, and about fusion food in particular. Although fusion food is as old as conquest or intermarriage, it can still generate excitement. Just the other day, I read about a new Judeo-Latino fusion restaurant opening on New York City’s Lower East Side. I imagined soulful hamins and pilafs recalling the rich era of pre-1492 Jewish life in Spain. But I discovered instead Cuban Reubens (the sandwiches) and Manischevitinis—martinis made with Manischewitz wine.

Whether a marriage of cultures or cuisines, fusion must be more than a simple joining of two unrelated elements. A po-mo building or a fusion dish succeeds only when its components are transparent, when the parts that comprise it are revealed. No one wants a murky mélange. In food, as in architecture, fusion becomes meaningless unless the cultures underlying it are understood. Those in power during the Soviet era attempted to reduce human experience to a common level, and the result was often a trite vulgarity, for which the Russians have a special word, poshlost’. A similar kind of banality can be found in the food world when restaurateurs jump on the latest culinary bandwagon, dishing out food that has been fused in name only, in which the distinct flavors and histories of the original foods have been lost. We need to be careful about the way we meld ingredients, careful to keep differences distinct even as the ingredients are tweaked into new combinations. Only then will the result be genuinely new and exciting.

Both on the streets and in the kitchen, Berlin is, right now, a city of fusion. Travel there, and you’ll experience a vibrant city, simultaneously old and new, that is transforming itself before your eyes. Visit the DG Bank on Pariser Platz with its signature Frank Gehry undulations turned inside out so that it won’t distract from the neighboring Brandenburg Gate. Then cross from East Berlin into West and head for Curry 195, a fast-food joint on the Kurfürstendamm that specializes in currywurst, which you have to eat standing up. Here you’ll taste Berlin’s favorite fusion food: plump sausage sprinkled with curry powder and served with tomato sauce and French fries. If you like, you can cut the fat with some Dom Perignon, at 140 euros a bottle. But even with a mug of local beer, for less than five dollars you’ll experience the frisson that results from a successful fusion.

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