

KNOW YOUR NEIGHBOR: URBAN CREPERIE

By Bob Garsha

We sat down with Ilya Asanassiev, the owner of the Urban Creperie located at 1216 SW Morrison. We hope you enjoy this interview as much as we enjoyed getting to know Ilya.

EQ: Ilya, tell us a little about the Urban Creperie.

Ilya: This is a project I started at the end of October of 2019. We were ready and able to open the restaurant in March, but because of Covid we were unable to open. We pushed it back to May 5th, 2020, for just takeout due to Covid restrictions. We operated till June, then had to close again, so it was not a very fun year. Right now, everything is good. Very good feedback, regular customers, new faces, old faces, so I have no complaints so far.



EQ: I understand it was hard, no doubt. So why crepes?

Ilya: It's something I know as a child. It's a traditional food in Russia. I did not want to have a formal restaurant. I wanted to provide a place where my customers could come in, any time of the day, and enjoy inexpensive comfort food. Sandwiches are everywhere. I wanted to bring something new to the customer. And I think I have been successful at that.

EQ: Do you yourself enjoy cooking?

Ilya: Yes, I am in the kitchen every week. At the beginning, I was in the kitchen seven days a week. Now I am in the kitchen one or two days a week. And yes, I do love cooking. I hate to cook for myself, but I love to cook for somebody else.

EQ: Did you learn from your parents or grandparents?

Ilya: I started to cook as a kid with my mom. I remember she told me "You know you love to eat good food but there is no guarantee that your wife will be a good cook, so you better learn." So I did!

EQ: Are you using any old family recipes in the Urban Creperie?

Ilya: The crepe batter is from my family's recipe and we use that at the restaurant. The crepe batter is how my mom would make crepes. Everything else I have created.

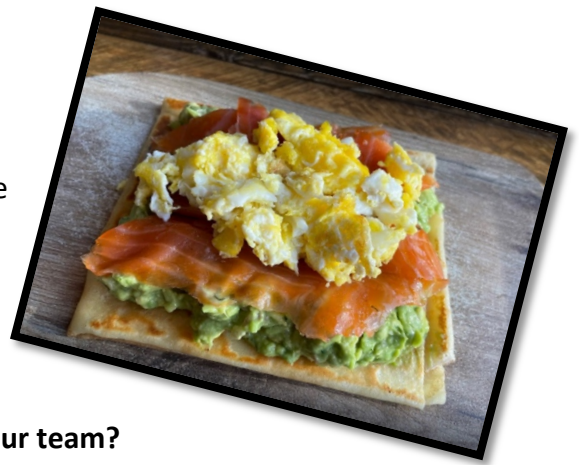
EQ: What is your background in business? Have you started any other businesses?

Ilya: Well, yes. I had a chance to open a bar in San Francisco, back in 2015. The Creperie is my second opening from scratch project.



EQ: Do you miss San Francisco? What was your life like there?

Ilya: I do miss it. I met my wife there, and both my kids were born there. Even though it is a great city, my life is here now. We came for a purpose, a better life for the kids. San Francisco is San Francisco. It's fun when you are young and single, but as a parent it is much more difficult. We enjoy being here. My daughter will be going to school in September. She's very excited about that. March 3, 2019, we moved here.



EQ: What are you most proud of in both the restaurant and your team?

Ilya: In San Francisco, when I was running teams of say 30 people, I was very proud of having a low turnover. But here, I cannot call myself a completely new business even though we had to deal with Covid related closures, the turnover is pretty big. Right now, I have one employee who just completed a year with me, a second employee who is going over six months and another going over one year. When I have more employees who celebrate six months or a year with me, I will be the happiest person in the world. I really believe I am offering a great work environment, so sooner or later I am going to have a team who will look like and feel like family.

EQ: I want to mention that you are open seven days a week, Monday to Friday 10-4 and Saturday and Sunday brunch 9-3. How is brunch going?

Ilya: Brunch is my most consistent busy day and yes, you are right, weekdays 10-4. But I am hoping in the next two weeks to add dinner, so we will be open 10-9PM.

EQ: That will be great. Your restaurant is so comfortable. I sat by the Urban Creperie (UC) logo. It is a very nice room.



Take us back to your younger days. I know you are from Saint Petersburg, Russia. What was it like growing up there?

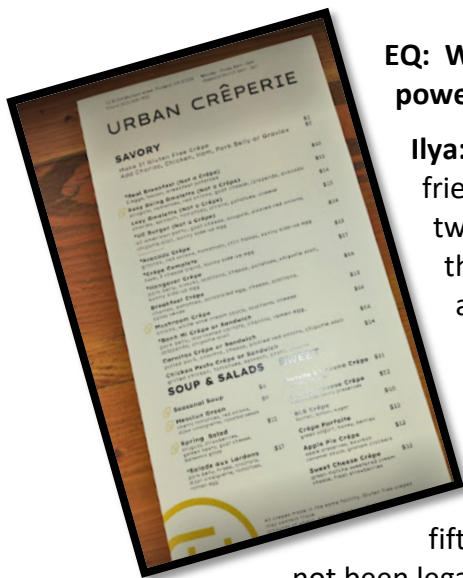
Ilya: It was different times. I was born in 1983, the end of the Soviet Union era. It was crazy times in Russia. There were shortages of everything. Food, supplies, clothing, anything – you name it – we didn't have it. Then a democratic Russia started to build up, but I moved here in 2003.

EQ: Saint Petersburg looks beautiful. I believe the Neva River runs through it?

Ilya: Yes, it runs right through the city. It runs all the way to the Baltic Sea. Saint Petersburg is the birthplace of the Russian Empire.

EQ: Ilya, how hard is it for you to view the current state of war with Ukraine?

Ilya: Hard doesn't say enough. Ukraine is an independent country, but through the centuries we had so much in common. My grandfather relocated from Ukraine after World War II, so my mom is half Ukrainian. My cousins live in Ukraine and I would visit them when I was growing up. There are millions of people in Ukraine with the same heritage as me. It is very sad to see a war right now without any reason. The people of Ukraine will hate Russians for a long period of time. With the crimes the Russians are committing, I don't have words for it. I have never been a fan of Putin, especially for the last ten years. I do understand the propaganda wars very well in Russia. There are so many intelligent people, I don't know why he has so much support. It's a mystery to me!



EQ: What are the political demonstrations like that oppose Putin and his power?

Ilya: That is another subject that drives me crazy. I have been talking to a friend of mine for a long time. We were classmates back in school. A week or two after the war started, she said, “Oh my God, can you help me get out of the country, anywhere?” I told her some of the ways she could emigrate, and we started to talk about these subjects, like Putin changing the constitution so he could stay President for as long as he can. In the last two months, there is a law restricting the use of social media. They have banned Meta, the parent company of Facebook and Instagram. If you don’t support the military or you mention something negative in public about not supporting the war in Ukraine, you can go to jail for up to fifteen years. You originally asked me about the right to demonstrate? It has not been legal in the last two years to stage a protest without government permission.

But interestingly, you can do a single protest, say stand outside by yourself with a poster, that would be legal. But what the police do is one undercover policeperson would come to you and ask you a question. Then this is no longer a one-person protest, there are now two of you, and the original person would be arrested. There has been a massive exodus from Russia in the last two months. A lot of people are leaving. One more example I’d like to share, a girl who used to work with me in San Francisco, her sister, for the last thirteen or fifteen years, was living in Saint Petersburg and she ran away to Tijuana. If you are familiar, there is that pedestrian bridge at the border. She told her sister there are lines of Ukrainians, Armenians, Russians, Belarusians, just standing in line trying to get refugee status and enter the United States.

EQ: How do you see the healing happen in Eastern Europe?

Ilya: Well, I don’t see anything positive. Ukraine is destroyed, completely wiped out. Russia, as the aggressor, will need to pay a lot to restore Ukraine. Financially, emotionally, physically, this has to happen. If we look at it historically, Germany, after World War II, had to pay at great costs first to the Soviet Union, then to individuals. An example, my grandmother was taken to Germany to a labor camp when she was thirteen years old. In the 1990s, she received one or two big payments from Germany. Russia will have to do something like that. There are so many destroyed lives and families and businesses and cities. But the thing is, before instituting something like that, Russia has to realize what they have done. That’s the first step for Russian politicians, Russian society. Get out of the bubble they have there and realize what they have done. Then maybe the right track will take shape of normal civil and political life. Russia must change the Constitution to provide for a different President every four or eight years. Accepting different political parties’ opinions, not arresting you. Healing? There is a lot to be understood before that can take place.

EQ: Ilya, your time, your thoughts, your concerns, are what need to be heard. Thank you for taking this time.

Ilya: You are welcome.



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