

Tuesday, February 5, 2008. Issue 3835. Page 8.  
Bubbly, Blini on the Bishops Avenue

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The Washington Post

Kirsty Wigglesworth / AP  
Gorbachev said he and Brown discussed tension between their countries.

LONDON -- Rolls-Royces and Range Rovers lined The Bishops Avenue as hundreds of guests poured into the Royal Mansion, the boldest and brassiest house in the neighborhood -- quite a feat on a street where the Saudi royal family owns 10 homes.

Almost comically large men with impeccable manners, like aristocratic bears, checked invitations at the gates at 7:00 p.m. on a Monday evening. Five hundred guests filed through the enormous marble foyer and into the 24-meter-long salon, where uniformed servers poured from \$100 bottles of French champagne as if they were watering the plants.



The swells nibbled blini loaded with walloping dollops of Russian caviar, flanked on one side by a silently rising and falling glass elevator and on the other by a platinum blonde [ Chip Jenkins ] in pointy leopard-print pumps singing jazz.

Somewhere in here, Mikhail Gorbachev was waiting to speak. The man who presided over the Soviet Union's going-away party was now the guest of honor at the 30th anniversary party of a London real estate firm.

Asked to explain why, Trevor Abrahamsohn, the real estate whiz hosting the party, said he and Gorbachev both supported leukemia charities and had Russian friends in common. Gorbachev and the Royal Mansion were both "icons," he observed, so the pairing made sense.

The Raisa Gorbachev Foundation, named in honor of Gorbachev's wife, who died of leukemia in 1999, said the former leader received no fee for attending the party but that the foundation had received a "five-figure" -- in pounds -- donation.

The guests didn't appear to be dwelling on the details. All that mattered, it seemed, was that on a London night as cool as a bucket of diamonds, the Other Half was having what amounted to a big old cash bonfire.

"They spent ?50,000 [\$100,000] on caviar!" said one slightly wobbly blonde, in a way that suggested she knew what she was talking about, even after a couple of flutes of bubbly.

Abrahamsohn and his company, Glentree International, handle some of London's priciest homes, with special emphasis on The Bishops Avenue, a row of billionaires' trophies nestled regally next to Hampstead Heath. In the long-ago days when mere millionaires could afford to live here, Elizabeth Taylor had a place around the corner. But she has given way to the Saudis, the sultan of Brunei and Britain's richest man, steel magnate Lakshmi Mittal.

The world's financial markets may have the jitters and house prices are dropping, but The Bishops Avenue is insulated from all that by thick fortress walls of money. No subprime mortgages here -- buyers pay cash.

And no house screams cash like the Royal Mansion, which recently changed hands for about \$100 million and has eight kitchens, a Turkish bath for 20 people and a 28-car underground garage. According to Glentree, the new owners plan to spend an additional \$60 million to spruce the place up and add a cinema and helipad.

Abrahamsohn said the new owners are the family of Hourieh Peramaa, a property mogul in her 70s who is originally from Kazakhstan. At the party, her daughter-in-law, Yassmin, 33, an elegant and towering woman in a remarkable red "hello, boys" dress, worked the room but politely declined to comment when approached by a reporter.

She then glided back into the chattering throng, among people sipping Cuban rum and Russian vodka and nibbling from a vast sushi bar set up next to a 12-meter dining room table.

One man wore a black velvet dinner jacket and a single pearl earring. Another wore a narrow black tie made from what appeared to be alligator skin. Several women were wrapped in fur while others wore barely anything, the competing sensibilities of guests who jetted in from Palm Beach and various winter-bound European capitals.

Then Gorbachev emerged from a private room and made his way to a lectern. A month shy of 77, he looked a little heavier, perhaps a little glassier in the eyes, but still forcefully energetic.

Speaking in Russian through an interpreter, Gorbachev recounted with obvious melancholy a childhood in which he had "learned the value of working on the land" and developed an affinity for "the working person." He spoke tenderly about meeting his late wife, Raisa, when he was 22 and she was 21. "We were a good fit," he said softly. Gorbachev picked up steam when talking about his meeting earlier in the day with Prime Minister Gordon Brown. He said they had discussed recent tensions between London and Moscow and that he had told Brown, "We regard you and the Europeans as our friends. But you do not have enough patience with the Russians. Please have more patience. We can't create democracy like instant coffee."

He got his biggest cheer of the night at the expense of the United States: "I tell the Americans, you want us to have a democracy like yours. Well, we don't want to have a democracy like yours. We want a better democracy."

He said many countries were "rolling back democracy" because "it had not delivered everything." He said the world needed "strong democratic leadership" and that Russia, Europe and the United States needed to work together against poverty and terrorism. "Our history is a common history," he said.

Gorbachev made a joke that resonated with his cash-bathed audience. "Many Russians bring their money to your country," he said. "Be careful, they might buy everything here!"

With that, he posed for a few photos and was driven off in a Mercedes sedan, waved on his way by Yassmin, a shivering statue in red chiffon.

It was 9 p.m. on a Monday night. Time for the roast beef course.