

Every body gets equal treatment at no-frills New York bathhouse

By Joann Kilnkiewicz
THE HARTFORD COURANT

NEW YORK — Somewhere in this land of many spas is a place where the work-weary can ease their achy bones and knotted muscles without having to navigate the bells and whistles of today's boutique salons.

A place where there are no perfumed lotions or loathsome "spa therapists" to scowl at one's clogged pores and pasty legs. A place devoid of fluffy robes and tinkling mood music.

That place, tucked unassumingly in New York's East Village, is the Russian & Turkish Baths, a bare-bones health spa with zero pretense and a century's worth of Old World charm.

Generations have flocked to the 10th Street baths for a no-frills *shvitz* and scrub they say rejuvenates body and soul.

Bankers sweat next to artists who sweat next to retirees who, under a haze of steam, look the same.

Built in 1892, the baths served an immigrant neighborhood without the luxury of running water in their tenements. The baths today reflect a changing neighborhood, decidedly more hipster haven than borscht belt.

Outside, swank shops outnumber aging Russian storefronts. Inside, bathers with thick accents and sagging skin sit unapologetically next to the perky trend-setters who are just discovering the baths.

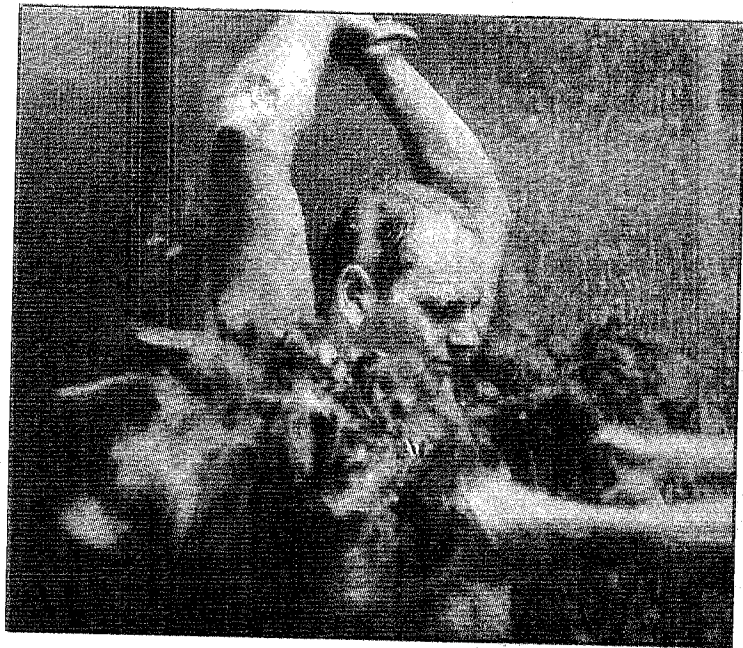
And, owners say, it's word of mouth that keeps the folks coming and keeps the baths going.

For my inaugural *shvitz*, I visit the baths on a Wednesday morning — ladies' day. (Most days are coed, when clothing is mandatory.)

I pay \$22 for a day's admission and proceed to a stark locker room, grabbing a stack of scratchy towels and the baths' version of a robe: an oversize smock that appears to be sewn from threadbare sheets.

Wrapped in the green robe, I descend a long flight of stairs into the subterranean bathing area.

There is nothing plush or fancy about the baths — a sterile-looking expanse of tile and metal. A word to the bashful: Leave your insecurities at the door.



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A patron at the Russian & Turkish Baths receives a *platza*, a massage that involves being struck by bundles of soapy oak leaves.

There is no judgment here.

Women (and, on coed days, men) of all colors and shapes lounge unabashedly, sweating with oblivious abandon to the parade of flesh around them.

There are three steam rooms of varying heat: the Russian Room, Turkish Room and Redwood Sauna.

I start with the most popular, the Russian Room. It's a dim catacomb whose searing heat grows so oppressive that buckets of icy water sit for the dousing. The steam immediately hits my chest and burns my nostrils.

A few minutes into this inferno, I am sweltering. I throw a bucket of cold water over my head. My heart stops. I decide never to do that again. When my breathing resumes, I see something odd has commenced in the center of the room.

A woman clasp what I learn is a hand broom of oak leaves is assaulting the skin of another woman sprawled on a wooden table. She appears to approve, having paid \$30 for this torture called the *platza* — what I'm told is a treatment described as "Jewish acupuncture."

I'm intrigued but opt for a less abusive treatment: a \$40 seaweed salt scrub. A brawny Russian woman named Masha calls me into a metal stall and

instructs me to lie face-down on a towel-draped cot. She assures me that the next half-hour "is very relaxing, very good for skin." I decide to trust her.

Masha sloshes coarse black mud on my back — and everywhere else. She scours my skin with the fervor one might a dirty kitchen floor, leaving no patch of flesh — front or back — unscrubbed.

Masha sprays me down with what feels like a garden hose, and I am the squeakiest clean I ever have been.

But as luscious as all the massaging feels, I ask one of the baths' owners what good all this sweating and scrubbing really does.

In broken English, Zina Solon says, "This is open your pores, and when you finish, you feel it right away. Is very good for the skin and take all the junk out."

Back in the locker room, I pull my clothes over fresh, new skin — the buttery-softest I remember it being.

Days later a co-worker comments on how refreshed and de-stressed I look, noting a hint of a glow in my skin.

The Russian & Turkish Baths is at 268 E. 10th St. between 1st Avenue and Avenue A. For more information, visit www.russian-turkish-baths.com