

Food for Thought -- A New Look at Schnitzel: It Takes Bold Chef To Revisit the Cuisine Of Vienna's Empire

By Robert Templer

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

There is a growing desperation in the way restaurateurs lure people in during these competitive times. Theme restaurants get more bizarre by the day -- there is an S&M restaurant in New York where diners get to eat out of dog's bowls if they have been bad. (Actually an old idea -- there was a place in London where middle-aged schoolboys ate nursery food and were spanked by the waitresses). In San Francisco, a restaurant has just opened called French Cinema that shows old movies on a screen in a courtyard. The conversationally challenged can listen to the dialogue through a little table-top speaker like those found in drive-in theaters.

The future may be in the past. Not just chefs reviving the food their grandmothers cooked but in re-imagining a time and place in a way that evokes history but remains contemporary and surprising. Nobody has done this better than David Bouley at his new restaurant, Danube, a journey back to the Austro-Hungarian empire at the turn of the century. Closed off to the rest of the world by heavy velvet drapes, the interior is a wonder of black lacquer, gold leaf and luminous colors inspired by the works of Gustav Klimt. Here you are transported to a sumptuous past in cosmopolitan Vienna that in its heyday must have had some of the same energy that New York has today.

Mr. Bouley has been a star of the New York food scene for a while, earning extraordinary praise for his cooking at his eponymous restaurant (now closed but scheduled to reopen) and bakery (still open). One hyperbolic reviewer said he cooked the way Racine wrote and Descartes thought. People magazine named him one of its "50 Most Beautiful People." Even with his talent, it was a little hard to live up to. And the city's media, which now shines the harsh klieg light of celebrity on chefs, displayed much nasty relish when some of Mr. Bouley's restaurant plans fell apart.

FULL TEXT

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But now that chefs have scoured the earth for inspiration, fused nearly every combination of foods (only Swedish-Polyesian remains to be done, in case there is anyone out there looking for an idea), pillaged every ethnic group and revived every species of heirloom vegetable, where can they go?

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Amid this white noise, people overlooked that he is one of the world's outstanding chefs, an intense man whose kitchens turn out incredibly good food. He is also brave enough to surprise people. Austrian food is a courageous choice, as for many it means little more than Sacher torte (a chocolate cake) and Wiener schnitzel. For me, there was a slight edge of anxiety. I lived in Germany for years and still shudder at the memory of menus where the 20-syllable name of every dish ended with -fleisch or -wurst. Names like teufelsfleisch, literally "devil's meat," summed up all my fears of Teutonic food.

But the food at Danube takes its inspiration from an empire and a river that stretched from Germany down to the Black Sea, incorporating influences of Italy and Turkey, the fish of the Adriatic and the spices of the Balkans -- particularly what Mr. Bouley calls the "lipstick-colored" fresh paprika of Hungary that is a revelation compared with the stale, too often pallid powder that most people know. There are also earthy ingredients and game from the lush forests and high mountains in what is one of the most abundant and diverse corners of Europe.

Mr. Bouley worked in Vienna in the late 1970s and picked up some of the ideas that came to fruition in Danube. "There was not much of a restaurant culture there and so what we have done here is refined the food for the way people eat today," he says. Mr. Bouley and Danube's executive chef, Mario Lohninger, have created dishes that are lighter and more vivid than you would expect but still grounded in tradition.

So how good is the food? Well, soft groans of surprise and a slight whimpering were audible in the room as people ate lunch. One set of neighbors, a group of glossy Cantonese-speaking women, were back for their second meal in a week and they weren't just pushing a forkful of risotto around their plates in the manner of tai-tais that lunch. On my other side, a grizzled eastern European gentleman who looked like Alexander Solzhenitsyn had a glazed, dreamy look that spoke of some deep connection to the food. The Chinese women expressed disbelief that this was Austrian food: It clearly didn't fit their stereotype. Meanwhile, the eastern European man growled amazement at its authenticity.

The meal begins with a variant of the traditional vorseisen, or small appetizers. A tiny mound of white mousse packed an intense burst of tomato flavor while a sardine and sage woven through a potato crisp was unexpectedly subtle. Soups are always part of Austrian meals, dressed with dumplings, pancakes or croutons. Here a sweet-sharp wine soup, light as foam, was offset with a smoked trout crepe.

What is amazing about Danube is that it takes stolid foods designed to fuel alpine farmers and Budapest burghers and through some alchemy makes dumplings, ravioli and spaetzle both light and bold. A salad of rabbit and greens with a herb dressing was extraordinary, a evocation of dewy forest glades. Cheese ravioli, tasty and sharp without being as heavy as the kaesnudeln found in the southern Austrian area of Carinthia, came with smoked chanterelles. Halibut was paired with a crisp but not nose-clearing horseradish sauce, while a square of Atlantic salmon, oily and

deep, was matched with caviar and spinach.

Even dishes like boiled beef and beef cheeks were elevated to a new level here. Both meltingly tender and yet robust, they came with the most luxurious mashed potatoes I've ever tasted and a powerfully flavored red cabbage as well as a garlic-chive spaetzle and carrots touched with citrus. Lobster and foie gras, a sybaritic pairing that risked being overpowering, was balanced with a airy green-pea foam.

There is no tired Sacher torte on the dessert menu that includes light farmer's cheese dumplings with figs and nougat ice cream. A coffee cup made of chocolate is filled with delicate marscapone ice cream and creme anglaise. One of the most unusual desserts is the elderflower soup with elderberry sorbet that somehow captures the flavor of European summers.

Another revelation at Danube are the wines. Austrian wines faded into oblivion for a while after a scandal involving anti-freeze being added to make them sweeter. The industry was shaken up and is now producing wines of extraordinary character. Now, I have to admit to knowing very little about Austrian wines but they have a vivid individuality that make the ubiquitous Californian whites seem machine-tooled and pallid.

Stepping out of the gilded half-light of Danube after lunch is like leaving a movie theater during the day after watching a particularly absorbing film. You step out, blinking and a little dazed, while still caught up in a fantasy world. Quickly New York rushes back but the memory of the food lingers on.

Send comments to awsj.food@awsj.com

Austro-Hungarian Tastes
Danube is at 30 Hudson Street in New York. Tel: (212) 791-3771.
Appetizers range from \$7.50 to \$16, main courses from \$28 to \$33,
desserts \$8.50 to \$10. There is a six-course tasting menu for \$80.
Wines are not overpriced by New York standards. There is a small bar
and a private dining room. The restaurant is heavily booked in advance
but there are openings if you are willing to eat early or late.

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