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Oh, Vienna

The soufflé never sets on the neo-Austrian empire of chef Kurt Gutenbrunner, for whom cooking is a labour of love.

There is something uniquely satisfying, if not spiritually rewarding, about ordering the same dishes at a beloved restaurant. I enter into this familiar dance every few months at Wallsé, a charming neighbourhood bistro located in the West Village. My guests rotate for each visit to this understated neo-Austrian eatery, but my order never does: crabmeat and shrimp on a bed of avocado and cucumbers as my appetiser; Wiener schnitzel with potato cucumber salad and lingonberries for the main course; and, the coup de grâce, Salzburger nockerln laced with huckleberries as dessert.

Without fail, I float home, sated.

It's not that I am unstirred by the rest of the offerings. It's just that the crabmeat dish is always luscious. The breaded veal – crisp, golden and greaseless – is sublime. And the dessert, a crowd-pleasing eggwhite soufflé, is the culinary equivalent of cloud nine. Something tells me that Kurt Gutenbrunner, Wallsé's chef and owner, would not be affronted. After all, he has dedicated his career to fine-tuning the classics of his cuisine, dishes such as kavalierspitz (boiled beef with apple horseradish, potatoes and creamed spinach). "I believe in the classics," he says, typically upbeat on a recent afternoon. "Like a musician, I play what the people want to hear, but I leave myself enough space to experiment."

Gutenbrunner's culinary improvisations, his flair for making famously lumpy dishes light and palatable, are in demand. The chef heads an Austrian empire that garlands New York like the vines of a Viennese garden. Wallsé opened in 2000 to rhapsodic reviews. Suddenly, goulash seemed positively glam, schnitzel became chic and spaetzle kind of sexy. Then came Café Sabarsky. Based on a fin-de-siècle kaffeehaus, this café serves astounding pastries such as Sachertorte in the Neue Galerie uptown (and spawned Café Fledermaus, in the same location). Late last year he added two more feathers to his cap. Thor, a sleek restaurant in The Hotel on Rivington on the Lower East Side, and Blaue Gans ("Blue Goose"), a casual diner in TriBeCa.

No matter the location, the menus always feature riffs on the Austro-Hungarian canon. At Blaue Gans, where TriBeCa families animatedly pack in alongside yuppies, guppies and foodies, one of the best starters is also the simplest: fried blood sausage and fingerling potato chunks piled on a bed of sauerkraut. To balance the meat and fish, Gutenbrunner serves lots of vegetable dishes, scouring local markets for seasonal delicacies. "I grew up on a farm," Gutenbrunner says, explaining his affinity for greens. At Thor, a cavernous, clubby space, the chef dishes up a slew of divine small plates, including red-beet terrine with goat's cheese and horseradish.

Gutenbrunner paid his culinary dues at starry restaurants in Europe before emigrating to the United States. Home



was a small village called Wallsee (hence the restaurant name) and, at the age of 17, he began his apprenticeship in the Danube Valley, flitting, in succession, to Switzerland, Vienna and Munich, working in the latter at a three-star Michelin restaurant called Tantris. In 1988 he was recruited to work at New York's Windows of the World's Cellar in the Sky. After a two-year stint, Gutenbrunner returned to Munich to oversee a French bistro, and then an Asian-fusion restaurant. In 1996 he rebounded back to New York to join David Bouley, an esteemed chef, for a period and then branched out on his own.

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What I love about Wallsé is that there are no fusty wooden chairs, mounted boar heads or nanna fabrics. On the contrary, the restaurant has inviting decor with a small bar and two sparsely adorned dining rooms. Ornamentation is limited to a spray of flowers on the bar and a few vivid paintings by the likes of Julian Schnabel (a regular) and photographs by Dennis Hopper (another regular). Though it has its well-known patrons – John Travolta, Lou Reed and Karl Lagerfeld among them – Wallsé is not the type of hotspot scenesters flock to, which suits the chef fine.

"Some nights we know everyone in the room," he says. Somehow, with five restaurants and four kids, Gutenbrunner still finds the time to ponder other projects: exporting Blaue Gans to Los Angeles, and several cookbooks, including one for children. Armed with the recipe for schnitzel, I doubt I would ever be able to match his. "You gotta have a lot of love," he says. Turns out I'm not the only one with favourites. Lagerfeld is partial to the steamed halibut, and Elton John is stuck on the Mohr im hemd, a heavenly chocolate almond pudding. All of us, even creative wizards, could use a little stability in life. ★

Wallsé, 344 West 11th St, +1 212 352 2300; Café Sabarsky, 1048 5th Ave, +1 212 288 0665; Thor, 107 Rivington St, +1 212 796 8040; Blaue Gans, 139 Duane St, +1 212 571 8880.