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RESTAURANTS ADAM PLATT

Put On a Hapsburg Face

Austrian cuisine dances into the West Village with Wallsé, where the flavors are light and complex, the schnitzel is golden, and the knödel won't weigh you down.

I'VE BEEN TO AUSTRIA JUST ONCE IN MY LIFE, AND what I remember about that trip is not the dimly lit palaces or the pristine alpine peaks. What I remember is a formidable, lumpy dessert called a germ knödel, which my brothers and I encountered one wintry afternoon in Vienna's famous Café Landmann. Raised overseas as the omnivore sons of a diplomat, we'd already cut a swath through the restaurants of the world, sacking London curry houses, Tokyo noodle shops, and dim sum parlors in Hong Kong. But the germ knödel stopped us in our tracks. It's a single, tortoise-size dumpling (knödel), made of yeast dough (germ) and frosted with poppy seeds. It's served warm, in a pool of sweet butter, and deep inside the yeasty, lead-balloon interior is a slathering of plum jam. We ordered three but could finish only one before respectfully laying down our spoons.

I've been looking for a rematch with this majestic dish ever since. So imagine my quiet glee when I mentioned it to one of the waiters at Wallsé, the fine new Austrian restaurant on 11th and Washington Streets, and he fluttered his eyebrows in recognition. Wallsé is the brainchild of Kurt Gutenbrunner, a former chef at Bouley who was linked briefly with Bouley's own neo-Hapsburg dining spot, Danube, before striking out on his own. The restaurant is named for his hometown, in the Danube region, west of Vienna, and occupies the former home of Black Sheep, an old West Village standby. The décor has been redone in a black-and-white, Viennese aesthetic, and the menu is dotted with intricately composed odes to the chef's childhood comfort foods: sturgeon and cabbage, golden flapjacks of veal schnitzel, flaky strudels for dessert, and if you call in advance, my waiter hinted, possibly even a slimmed-down version of the germ knödel itself.

Not that Austrians enjoy stuffing themselves silly. The maître d' (who is actually from France) assured me that, compared with the fare beloved by their German cousins, classic Austrian cuisine is bathed in a gentle, imperial lightness. Pastries aside, Austrians prefer slim cuts of meat, fish dishes from the Danube, and ragouts sprinkled with Eastern seasonings left over from the Empire. "It's like New Orleans compared to the rest of the U.S.," declared one of my friends—a self-designated Austrian expert—as he waited hungrily for his veal schnitzel. The best of the semi-light delicacies on chef Gutenbrunner's menu is the modestly sized Viennese rostbraten (roast steak) decorated with crisp onion rings, and the platoon of perfectly grilled lamb cotelettes resting on a cool salad of heirloom tomatoes. When it arrived, the schnitzel looked almost crumbly, like a pastry, with a swirl of lemon on top. "My grandfather said if you can see between the crumbs and the meat of the schnitzel, you're in heaven," said Mr. Austria. "I'm in heaven tonight."

Gutenbrunner's little slice of paradise consists of just two middle-size rooms with tall picture windows, and

these days it's a little overrun. On one of my visits, I had to book a six o'clock reservation on a weekday, and even then, the front bar space was filling up with severe stylistas knocking back exotic \$10 cocktails mixed with castaloupes or elderflower syrup. My favorite potion was called the Lemon Grass, a tasty, un-Tyrolean mixture of crushed ice, Thai lemongrass, Absolut Citron, cane sugar, and lime leaves. It was a soothing counterpoint to the Art Deco interior, which seemed a little ragged in the light of day but began to look better as the sun set and the Lemon Grasses kicked in. The white brick walls are decorated with huge, fuzzy photos of deserted ballrooms. Fread-era filament bulbs dangle above the black Ultramodern banquettes, and the bathrooms, downstairs, are like strange little grottoes, filled with scented candles and piped-in soft rock by Sting.

But the food at Wallsé comes stylishly plated on canvas-white porcelain (from Germany) and is lovely to look at. My asparagus appetizer (topped with orange chanterelles, in a pink Riesling sauce) was so vivid, I felt churlish putting a fork to it. Among the fish entrées, the deliciously chewy sturgeon (with peppers and sweet cabbage) was colored in pleas-

The last Wallsé: the Viennese restaurant with green beans, and the Wallsé dining room.

