

NEW YORKER

TABLES FOR TWO



WALLSÉ

344 W. 11th St. (352-2300)—At this snug, sometimes boisterous spot, which attracts both homesick Austrians and the city's more sombre food lovers, the proprietor and chef Kurt Gutenbrunner shows what his native country's specialties can achieve when they are prepared with understated grace. The tiny twin storefronts, with whitewashed brick walls and blurry architectural photos, are more Josef Hoffmann than Gustav Klimt, but they are somehow grand in their simplicity, just like the food.

Chestnut soup, billed on the menu as a "Viennese Mélange," is a creamy holiday treat spiked with cognac. But the oxtail consommé is kind of depressing, all tradition and purity. The savory spaetzle, flavored with Quark—a fresh curd cheese that comes across like sour cream—are fortified by braised rabbit and wild mushrooms. And the potato rosti is perfectly balanced between crispness and fluff—supporting a punchy coalition of salmon tartare, salmon caviar, and watercress.

Wiener schnitzel is the chicken-fried steak of Central Europe, and Wallsé's lack of pretension suits the humble breaded veal cutlet, which is juicy and light. The second most important Viennese dish for traditionalists is Tafelspitz, but no matter how nicely beef is boiled, the eating becomes a chore about halfway through, even though the side of creamed spinach helps matters. The menu's Hungarian ringer, beef goulash, is surprisingly light and balanced, with none of the usual over-paprikaed-leftover taste. Pastries are sacred in Vienna, and there's a great entrée option here: cod strudel with melted tomatoes, tarragon, and Riesling sauce.

More traditional pastries turn up at dessert: apple strudel, Salzburger Nockerl, and crêpelike Palatschinken, with oranges. The standout is the poached dumplings filled with more Quark and coated in sautéed bread crumbs and ground nuts. The wine list offers the opportunity for an easygoing, inexpensive education in Austrian wines, from Grüner Veltliners to Blaufraenkisches, among them a terrific spicy red that is fun to say aloud—Heinrich's Pannobile Rot. (Open daily for dinner only. Entrées \$20-\$28.)

—Owen Phillips



O. Smish