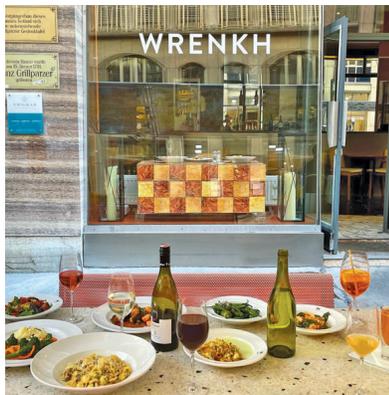




Austria

Vienna's plant-powered food revolution

Vegetable-focused dining in the Austrian capital is winning over even the most dedicated meat lovers, writes Lina Zeldovich



"I came here hungry for schnitzels, wüstels and tafelspitz and I fell in love with all things veg."



Clockwise from top: No visit to Vienna is complete without a stop at a wüstelstand; Tian Bistro's radish and rhubarb salad; Gugumuck snails, and harvesting them at the farm; a plant-centric spread at Wrenkh restaurant.

Karl Wrenkh, chef and co-owner of Wrenkh restaurant in Vienna, is determined to convince me that his oyster-mushroom schnitzel – a vegetarian version of Austria's celebrated veal escalope – is just as good if not better. As a schnitzel aficionado, I'm a bit sceptical. Besides, I had a terrific one for lunch earlier – ultra-thin and fried to a perfect crisp. Surprisingly, though, the first bites of Wrenkh's crunchy creation win me over. No matter how well you tenderise meat, it keeps some stringy, hard-to-chew parts that have a tendency to stick between your teeth. But mushrooms, skilfully fried inside the golden batter, are uniform through and through – making for a perfect veggie schnitzel indeed.

The world tends to think of Viennese cuisine as meat heavy. After all, it's famous not only for schnitzels, but also for a boiled-beef dish called tafelspitz, and a slew of sausages called wüstels, served everywhere from upscale eateries to street corners. But that's changing. The veal and pork dishes that dominated Viennese tables are making space for vegetable rivals, giving rise to a new generation of plant-focused restaurants and chefs.

According to the database of Vienna's Vegan Society, the city now boasts a few hundred vegetarian and vegan spots, from neighbourhood eateries to Michelin-starred establishments.

"We describe our cuisine as plant-centric," Wrenkh tells me. "For a long time, meat has been in the centre of the plate with vegetables pushed to the sides. In our restaurant, plants take centre stage. That presentation changes how people think of food."

Other chefs are also working hard to educate and upgrade diners' perspectives and palates.

At Tian Bistro, which has a Michelin star, chef Paul Ivčić whips up an all-vegetable tasting menu in which every dish looks like edible art and tastes like it, too.

A radish and rhubarb salad perches atop a bulgur base floating in nettle cream, fragrant like spring meadows. A beet-and-shiitake-mushroom carpaccio, one of Tian's signature dishes, beckons with its dark-red colour, not unlike its beef counterpart but tangier and fresher.

When a grilled celery root sprinkled with roasted buckwheat arrives awash in white and green sauce resembling a Salvador Dalí painting, I feel guilty digging my fork into it. That guilt evaporates when I take my first bite.

By the time dessert arrives – a cheesecake with cassia, kombucha and blackberry sorbet – I've finally come to terms with ruining edible art. It's just so delicious.

"We want to remove the old misconception that vegetarian food tastes boring," Ivčić says – and it's not hard, he notes. Meats come in a limited quantity of flavours. The variety of vegetables is much greater, which Ivčić knows better than anyone.

"As a kid, I was very lucky because we had our own garden, so I grew up with very high-end quality vegetables," he says.

"When I started Tian, I remembered all the flavours, all the tastes, so we began looking for fresh, local and good-tasting produce."

It's not a coincidence that he named his tasting menu Sharing Chef's Garden. Ivčić sources his produce from farms close to Vienna, but the Austrian capital also has a few hundred small urban farms that grow cabbages, kales, lettuces, tomatoes, cucumbers and edible fungi within the city limits.

Wrenkh's oyster mushrooms, which won me over, also come from urban farms. One of them, Hut & Stiel, uses spent coffee grounds to grow their crop, turning the waste of Vienna's numerous coffee houses into a mushroom feed.

Chefs are quick to tell you that the original Viennese cuisine dating back a couple of hundred years wasn't all that meat heavy. Not only was meat expensive then, but there simply wasn't enough of it for an average person to eat daily. It was only in the late 20th century, when industrial agriculture ramped up production, that it became a dietary staple. Back in the 19th and 20th centuries garden snails served as the necessary protein source and were especially embraced during Catholic Lent days when eating meat wasn't allowed. Today, Andreas Gugumuck, owner of Gugumuck Farm, which lies within the city limits, has revived the nearly forgotten craft of raising the gastropods.

"Snails are easy to grow because they eat all sorts of leftovers," Gugumuck tells me as he demonstrates his growing crop feeding on discarded vegetable scraps.

Cooked in butter or chopped into pâtés, snails have a musky and earthy flavour, but that doesn't seem to drive epicurean explorers away – quite the contrary.

"In summer we do a lot of tastings and we're always full," Gugumuck says.

Even if snails aren't your cup of tea, no carnivores will go hungry in the posh Austrian capital.

With several locations throughout the city, Plachutta serves all the classics, but is perhaps best-known for its boiled-beef soup, which, as the legend goes, Emperor Franz Joseph was a fan of.

The soup comes with instructions on how to eat it in proper order. First, I must savour the aromatic golden bouillon that I ladle into my bowl from the formidable orange copper pot, which takes up half the table.



ESCAPE ROUTE

GETTING THERE

Qatar Airways, a partner of Virgin Australia Airlines, offers several daily flights to Vienna from Sydney and Melbourne, with a stop in Doha.

STAYING

The cosy rooms of the new Indigo Vienna Naschmarkt overlook a garden. There is also a bar, gym and cafe. Prices start at €159. Vienna's Naschmarkt, a famous food market and restaurant heaven, is a 15-minute walk away and the city centre a 10-minute metro ride.



Only when I finish my last spoonful should I enjoy the grand finale: the tender slice of tafelspitz simmered for hours to almost melting point and accompanied by apple sauce and horseradish.

A short walk from the Vienna Opera House, Café Tirolierhof serves delectable schnitzels with potato salads. And Gmoa Keller, a traditional Viennese tavern, tempts daring food lovers with specialty bites, including a liver-dumpling soup, sliced lung and heart of veal, and spicy sausages.

Speaking of sausages, no visit to Vienna is complete without a few stops at wurstelstands – street kiosks that sell frankfurters, bratwursts and käsekrainers.

That last instantly becomes my favourite, because it's made with cheese that melts when the sausage is grilled, becoming an indulgent fat bomb that pops in your mouth.

Some sausages, generously swaddled in mustard, arrive inside a sizeable loaf of white bread, others with little dollops and a slice of dark rye on the side. They all are hearty and filling – a cheap and easy snack or dinner on the go.

Wurstels are evolving, too. Michael Lanner's Wiener Würstelstand, a recent addition to these street treats, dishes up vegetarian and vegan sausages, some laced with old-style mustards, others more daringly spiced with jalapeños, salsa

criolla and curry masala. "Growing up, I ate a lot of wurstels, which had all the same common flavours, so I wanted to offer people something different," Lanner says of his inspiration for unusual seasonings.

As I scan the menu, I spot a familiar name – the Hut & Stiel oyster-mushroom sausage.

Days before, I would have chosen the meat, but now I'm a believer, so I opt for the mushroom. I came here hungry for schnitzels, wurstels and tafelspitz and I fell in love with all things veg. There simply isn't enough time to savour all of Vienna's gastronomy in a week, so I'll just have to come back for seconds.

The writer travelled and stayed with support from Visit Vienna, wien.info



An adventurous omnivore, Lina Zeldovich fished for piranhas in the Amazon, cooked a zebu stew in Madagascar, sipped a drink made from a venomous snake in Peru, and always lived to write the story.

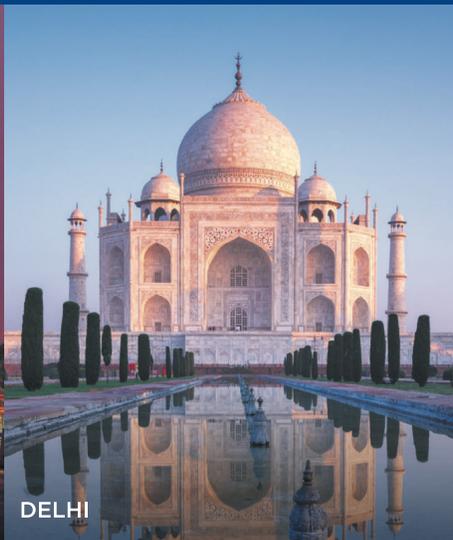


Viennese tavern Gmoa Keller and its tafelspitz (above). Top left: Wiener Würstelstand.

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