

Gourmet

1950s Archive

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THE COUNCILOR'S BOILED BEEF

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In America, few people think of boiled beef as a gastronomic treat, but in Vienna, the capital of Austria, there was not so long ago a restaurant which was held in high esteem by local epicures for its boiled beef—twenty-four different kinds of it. The restaurant was Meissl and Schadn, a place of international reputation, and the boiled beef specialties of the house were called *Tafelspitz*, *Tafeldeckel*, *Rieddeckel*, *Boinflleisch*, *Rippenfleisch*, *Kavalierspitz*, *Kruspelspitz*, *Hieferschwanzl*, *Schultenschwanzl*, *Sebuterschberzl*, *Mageres Meisel (or Mäuserl)*, *Fettes Meisel*, *Zwerchried*, *Mittleres Kügerl*, *Dueunes Kügerl*, *Dickes Kugerl*, *Bröserlfleisch*, *Ausgelöstes*, *Brustkern*, *Brustfleisch*, *Weisses Seberzl*, *Schwarzes Seberzl*, *Zapfen*, and *Ortschwanzl*.

The terminology was bound to stump anyone who had not spent the first half of his adult life within the city limits of Vienna. It was concise and ambiguous at the same time; even Viennese patriarchs did not always agree exactly where the *Weisses Seberzl* ended and the *Ortschwanzl* began. Fellow Austrians from the dark, Alpine hinterlands of Salzburg and Tyrol rarely knew the fine points of distinction between, say, *Tafelspitz*, *Schwarzes Seberzl*, and *Hieferschwanzl*—all referred to in America, with extreme vagueness, as brisket or plate of beef—or between the various *Kügerls*. Old-time Viennese butchers with the self-respect and the steady hand of distinguished surgeons were able to dissect the carcass of a steer into thirty-two different cuts and four grades of meat. Among the first-quality cuts were not only tenderloin, porterhouse, sirloin, and prime rib of beef, as elsewhere, but also fine cuts used exclusively for boiling: two *Scherzls*, two *Schwanzls*, and *Tafelspitz*. In old Vienna, unlike present-day America, where a steer is cut up in a less complicated, altogether different manner, only the very best beef was considered good enough to be boiled.

You had to be a butcher, a veterinarian, or a Meissl and Schadn habitu  of long standing to know the exact characteristics of these delicacies, *Gustost ckerln*, as the Viennese called them with affectionate delight. Many so-called Viennese were not born in Vienna but hailed from the Austro-Hungarian provinces of Upper Austria, Hungary, Serbia, Slovakia, Bohemia, and Moravia (even today some pages of the Vienna telephone directory contain as many Czech names as the Prague directory does). Naturally, such Viennese were somewhat touchy about their un-Viennese ancestry and tried to compensate for it in various ways. One way was to display a scholarly knowledge of the technical terms for boiled beef. It was almost like the coded parlance of an exclusive club. In Vienna, a person who couldn't talk learnedly about at least a dozen different cuts of boiled beef didn't belong, no matter how much money he'd made or even if the Kaiser had awarded him the title of *Hofrat* (court councillor) or *Kommerzienrat*.

The guests of Meissl and Schadn were thoroughly familiar with the physical build of a steer and knew the exact anatomical location, and the distinctive taste, of *K gerls*, *Seberzls*, and *Schwanzlt*. At Meissl and Schadn, precision and traditionalism were the keynote. You didn't order merely boiled beef any more than you would step into Tiffany's and ask for a stone; you made it quite clear exactly what you wanted. If you happened to be a habitu  of the house, you didn't have to order, for they would know what you wanted. A Meissl and Schadn habitu  never changed his favorite cut of boiled beef.

The restaurant was part of the famous Hotel Meissl and Schadn on Hoher Markt, which was popular with incognito potentates for discreet service and excellent accommodations. It was an old-fashioned place with highly personalized service. The chambermaids looked like dignified abbesses and were known to everybody by their first names. They knew the sleeping habits of every guest who had been there in the past twenty years. If you came to Meissl and Schadn after an absence of several years, you might find a small, hard pillow under your head because the maid still remembered that you liked to sleep hard.

There were really two restaurants, the *Schwemme* on the ground floor—a plebeian place with low prices and checkered tablecloths—and the de luxe *Restaurant* on the second floor with high prices and tablecloths that were not just white, but snow-white damask. The upper regions were under the command of the great Heinrich, who was already a venerable octogenarian when I first saw him in the late twenties.

He was a corpulent man with the pink cheeks of a baby and the wisdom of a Biblical patriarch. His hands and jowls were

sagging down and he had serious trouble keeping his eyes open. He never budged from his command post near the door, where he could overlook all tables. There he would stand like an admiral on the bridge of his flagship surveying the units of his fleet. Austria had only a small navy until the end of the first World War and none at all afterwards, and few people in Vienna had ever seen an admiral, but everybody agreed that Heinrich looked more like an admiral than many a real one. Once in a while, it was said, his pulse stopped beating and his eyelids would droop, and he would remain in a strange state, suspended between life and death, but the *défilé* of the waiters carrying silver plates with various cuts of boiled beef never failed to revive him.

Heinrich had spent his life in the service of emperors, kings, archdukes, *Hofräte*, artists, and generals, bowing to them, kissing the hands of their ladies, or wives. His bent back had taken on a distinct curvature reflecting the fine nuances of his reverence, from the impersonal half-bow with which he would dispose of the contemptible *nouveaux riches* of the black-marketeering years after the first World War to the affectionate deep-bow which was reserved for his old habitués, impoverished court councillors and aristocrats living from the sale of one painting to the next.

Between Heinrich and his habitués there existed a highly civilized, strictly regulated protocol. Upon entering the restaurant the guest would be greeted by Heinrich—or, rather, by Heinrich's bent back expressing the exact degree of respect in which the guest was held. The depth of Heinrich's bow depended on the guest's social standing, his taste for, and his knowledge of, boiled beef, and his seniority. It took a man from twenty-five to thirty years to earn the full deep-bow. Such people were greeted by “*Meine Verehrung, küss' die Hand.*” which was breathed rather than whispered, and never spoken; Heinrich wasn't able to speak any more.

The guest would be taken to his table by one of Heinrich's captains. Each guest always had the same table and the same waiter. There was mutual respect between waiter and guest; when either one died, the other would go to his funeral. The waiter would hold the chair for the guest and wait until the guest was comfortably seated. One of Heinrich's axioms was that “a man doesn't enjoy his beef unless he sits well.” For a moment there-after, the waiter would stand at attention in front of the guest, going through the motion of waiting for the guest's order. That was mere politeness, of course. The waiter knew what the guest wanted, and the guest wouldn't dream of ever changing his standing order. The waiter would nod to the *Speisen-ltäger*, or *Commis*, who thereupon departed for the kitchen.

The *Commis*' order to the cooks had the highly personal flavor that distinguished all transactions at Meissl and Schadn. It would be “the *Schulterschertzl* for General D” or “Count H is waiting for his *Kavalierspitz.*” This implied a high degree of finickiness on the part of the habitué who wouldn't be satisfied with so narrow a definition as the *Kavalierspitz*; his refined palate demanded that he get his private, very special part of *Kavalierspitz*.

After a suitable interval the *Commis* would bring in the meat on a massive, covered silver plate. Some people would have a consomme before the meat; clear consommé was the only preceding dish Heinrich approved. The *Commis* was followed by the *piccolo*, an eight-year-old gnome wearing it tiny tuxedo and a toy bow tie. His job was to serve the garniture: horseradish, or *Essigkren*, mustard, pickles, boiled potatoes, boiled cabbage, spinach, or whatever else the guest desired with his meat. The classic way of eating boiled beef was to have only horseradish with it; the horseradish might be mixed with grated apple, which was called *Apfelkren*. Other garnishings were frowned upon by Heinrich.

A beverage waiter would appear and serve a glass of wine, beer, or water, depending on the guest's wish. Heinrich had no objection to the guest's drinking Vienna's *Hochquell* water, which came from the Schneeberg and was as cold and clear as a mountain spring on a March morning.

An elaborate ritual would then ensue. The waiter who had been standing motionless, watching his subordinates put the various plates on a small serving table next to the guest's table, would step forward, lift the cover off the silver plate, and perform the presentation of the meat. He would wait a moment for the guest's approval—or disapproval. This was another mere motion. Never, never would a guest dare beef about the beef. The waiter would serve the meat on a hot plate, put it on the table in front of the guest, make a step back and glance at Heinrich. Then the guest, in turn, would glance at Heinrich.

There followed a critical moment. Heinrich would review the table with a short, sweeping glance that would take in the meat, the garniture, the position of the water glass, *Essigkren* or *Apfel-kren*, salt, roll, toothpicks. It was hard to understand how he managed to see anything through the narrow slit of his almost closed eyelids; but see he did. He would give a slight nod of approval to the waiter, and to the guest. Only then would a genuine habitué begin to eat.

It has been said that words of prose were not adequate to express the delights of boiled beef at Meissl and Schadn. Many Austrian poets were moved to rhymed praise while they regaled themselves on a well-nigh perfect *Hiefer-schwanzl*. But poets,

especially Austrian poets, are rarely given to tenacity of purpose, and somehow the poets forgot to write down their poems after they had left the restaurant Richard Strauss, an ardent devotee of the *Beinflfleisch*, often considered writing a tone poem about his favorite dish, but after he had finished writing his ballet "Schlagobers," Whipped Cream, he thought that another major composition devoted to an Austrian specialty food might be misinterpreted by posterity and resented by his admirers in Germany, who, like most Germans, disliked Vienna. Strauss, not unaware of his considerable German royalties, dropped the project.

"Too bad he did," one of his Viennese admirers said not long ago. "He was crazy about *Beinflfleisch*. Such a *Tondichtung* might have surpassed the beauty of 'Death and Transfiguration'".

There was a sound reason for the excellence of the beef served at Meissl and Schadn. The restaurant owned herds of cattle which were kept inside a large sugar refinery in a village north of Vienna. There the steers were fed on molasses and sugar-beet mash, which gave their meat its extraordinary marble texture, taste, tenderness, and juice. The animals were slaughtered just at the right time, and the meat was kept in the refrigerator from one to two weeks.

In Vienna, in those days, boiled beef was not a dish; it was a way of life. Citizens of the Danube capital, venturing from their home base into hostile, foreign lands where boiled beef was simply boiled beef, would take along Viennese cookbooks which contained the anatomical diagram of a steer, with numbered partitions and subdivisions indicating the *Gustostückerln*. This was a wise precaution, Viennese living abroad who went to a local butcher to get a special cut of beef often experienced difficulties when they told their exact wishes to the butcher, who didn't know what they were talking about. Even in German-speaking countries, the technical expressions denoting various cuts of beef differ from land to land, Vienna's *Tafelspitz*, brisket, for instance, is called *Tafelstück* by the Germans and *Huft* by the German-speaking Swiss. A Viennese *Beinflfleisch* is called *Zwerchbricd* in Germany and *plat de côtes* among the German-speaking Swiss. If the Viennese customer got nowhere with his butcher, he would go home and return with the diagram to show the butcher exactly what part he wanted.

Professional Viennese in foreign lands were often appalled by the degree of ignorance which local gourmets professed for the subtleties of boiled beef. A Viennese would step into a restaurant in Germany or Switzerland, hired by the menu promising *Rindfleisch* or *Siedfleisch*. He would inquire hopefully what *kind* of *Rindfleisch* they served, but the waiter would give him a blank stare and say, "What do you mean, what kind? *Rindfleisch* is *Rindfleisch*."

"I got so discouraged one day in Zurich that I wound up with a steak," a Viennese said to me recently. "I felt utterly lost. Couldn't even ask for a roll, which we call *Semmel* in Vienna, but they insist on calling it *Weckli* in Zurich, and in Berlin it's a *Weiss-brötchen*. Before they start to unify Europe, we ought to unify the German language. Go and order a *Tellerfleisch* anywhere outside of Vienna. They don't even know what it is." He sighed. "It's terrible."

Tellerfleisch is another boiled beef specialty from the banks of the Danube. It is a soup plate filled two-thirds with clear beef soup, boiled carrots, split green onions, parsley, a piece of almost but-not-quite-boiled beef, and several slices of marrow, sprinkled with chopped chives. *Tellerfleisch* is always eaten between meals, never at mealtime. It comes closest an American New England boiled dinner or a French *pot-au-feu*, although the Viennese indignantly dismiss the foregoing dishes as incompetent imitations of the real, Viennese, McCoy. They don't recognize France's *petite marmite*, because it is cooked in an earthenware stockpot, with the necks and wings of fowl added, or that wonderful French specialty, *bœuf saignant à la ficelle*, a rare beef with a string, which is a piece of filet tightly wrapped around with string, roasted quickly in a very hot oven, and dipped for sixty seconds—not fifty-eight or sixty-two, but sixty—in boiling consommé just before it is served. The meat is well done outside, and all the juices are kept inside the pinkish meat by the string and the trick of quick boiling. If the meat stays in the boiling consommé too long or if the slices are placed on cold plates, the meat becomes tough. One would think that such precision would appeal to Vienna's beef-eaters, but it doesn't, possibly because *bœuf saignant* is a French creation. Vienna's epicures were always fiercely nationalistic

There were two schools of cooking beef in Vienna. People who cared more about a strong soup than about the tender meat put the raw meat into cold water and let it cook on a slow fire. They added parsley, carrots, green onions, celery, salt and pepper. After an hour the white foam that had formed on top was skimmed off. Sometimes half an onion, fried on the open range plate, was put in to give the soup a dark color. If, on the other hand, you didn't care about a consommé and wanted your beef juicy and tender, you put it straight into boiling water and let it simmer. This procedure closes the pores of the meat and keeps all juices inside.

The Meissl and Schadn was hit by American bombs in March, 1915. A few weeks later the exuberant members of the liberating Red Army, for reasons known only to themselves, tossed gasoline-soaked rags and gas cans into the half-destroyed building and set fire to it. The hotel burned down. But the tradition that had made Meissl and Schadn a great eating place had come to an end long before. The Meissl and Schadn was a veritable creation of the Hapsburg monarchy. It lived and died with the Danube

Empire. Under the formidable Heinrich it survived the hectic twenties, but when Heinrich died a couple of years later, the restaurant, and a way of life, were doomed.

“People would come in and ask for boiled beef,” a former habitu  remembers. He added, with a shudder, “And they would get it.”

The second World War finished the place altogether. By 1944 there was no boiled beef at the restaurant. There was no beef at all in the starving city of Vienna, and a piece of horse meat was held in high esteem.

Marshall Plan aid has brought recovery to Austria's industry, but it has not revived Vienna's boiled beef tradition. Elderly Viennese report, with a severe sense of loss, that Vienna's butchers have all but forgotten the fine points of analyzing and cutting up a steer. These days most Viennese restaurants simply serve *Rindfleisch* or *Beinfleisch*, without any specification. The meat is raised, cut, and cooked without the loving care which made it such a treat. It is often tough and dry, served by ignorant waiters who recommend to their customers expensive “outside” dishes, such as Styrian pullet or imported lobster, and are more interested in the size of their tip than in the guest's palate. Restaurant owners, operating on the get-rich-quick principle (“Who knows—the Russians may take over Austria tomorrow!”), no longer keep herds of cattle inside sugar refineries. It wouldn't be profitable, they say; besides, many refineries are located in the Soviet zone of Austria. Even the salubrious, well-tasting Viennese *Hochquell* water has deteriorated, since, owing to increased demands, it has been mixed with less salubrious, chlorinated Danube water. It no longer tastes like a mountain spring on a March morning.

Where Meissl and Schadn once stood, there is now an office building with no claim to gastronomic or any other fame. Most of Heinrich's habitu s are dead, and the few survivors have been scattered to the winds by the last war. Once in a while two of them may run into each other at an undistinguished Viennese restaurant whose menu offers a *Tafelspitz*, a first-quality cut of boiled beef, which, the old habitu s see at a glance, is really *Kruspelspitz*, a fourth-quality cut, somewhat comparable to an American chuck or round of beef.

At such moments of gloom, the old habitu s are likely to remember, with a nostalgic sigh, the day in the late twenties when old dignified *Hofrat* (court councillor) von B, one of Heinrich's favorite guests, came into the dining room of Meissl and Schadn, exactly at twelve fifteen, as he'd done almost every day in the past twenty-seven years, and was ceremoniously guided to his table. Everybody knew, of course, that the Herr *Hofrat* came to feast on “his” *Tafelspitz*, the front part of that special cut which almost, but not quite, touches another first-quality Viennese cut called *Hieferschwanzl*. If the Kaiser himself would have come in, he wouldn't have been served that particular piece of *Tafelspitz*. Heinrich had a deep sense of loyalty toward his long-time habitu s.

On that day, as on any other day, there was the familiar ceremonial after the *Hofrat* had sat down. In due time the *Commis* appeared with the covered silver plate, followed by the *piccolo* who carried the *Apfelkren*. But at this point the waiter did not lift the cover off the silver plate to “present” the meat, as he'd always done. Instead he discreetly glanced at Heinrich. Then the old man himself advanced toward the *Hofrat's* table, slowly and cautiously, like a large ocean liner moving toward the pier. Everybody looked at him. It had become very quiet in the dining room.

Heinrich bent his back until his mouth almost touched the *Hofrat's* ear.

“I'm disconsolate, Herr *Hofrat*,” he whispered. “A regrettable accident in the kitchen. The *Hofrat's Tafelspitz* has been cooked too long. It has—well, dissolved.” Heinrich's trembling fingertips indicated that the overcooked meat had dissolved in the soup like snowflakes in the February sunshine. He was very pale and his jowls were sagging. He looked as though he had been dead for a while and had been resurrected by mistake.

His breath almost gave out, but with a supreme effort he continued, “I have taken the liberty to order for the Herr *Hofrat* the rear part of the *Hiefer-schwanzl*, close to, and very much like, the *Tafelspitz*.”

He made an effort to open his eyes and nearly succeeded. At his nod, the waiter lifted the cover off the plate with a flourish and presented the meat. There it was, a large, beautiful cut, tender and juicy, sprinkled with consomm , as delicate and enticing a piece of boiled beef as you could find anywhere in the world.

The *Hofrat* sat up stiffly. He cast one short, shocked glance at the meat. When he spoke at last, his voice had the ring of arrogance—arrogance instilled in him by generations of boiled-beef-eating ancestors who had been around in Vienna as early as

1684, when the city had fought off the assault of the Turks and saved, for a while at least, Western civilization.

“My dear Heinrich,” the *Hofrat* said, with a magnificent sweep of his hand, and accentuating every syllabic, “you might as well have offered me a veal cutlet.”

A slight shiver seemed to run down his spine. He got up. “My hat and cane, please.”

He strode stiffly toward the door. Heinrich made his deepest full-bow, and he kept bowing all the time until the *Hofrat* had left. But people sitting near Heinrich swear that there was a smile of pride on his face. He looked almost happy.

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