

Gourmet

1960s Archive

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THE LOST WALTZ

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At Demel's, the pastry is nearly perfect, the waitresses are "abbesses," and a count would never be mistaken for a duke.

Once I called Demel's in Vienna "the world's greatest pastry shop." That was an understatement; Demel's is much more. It is one of the world's last great institutions, one that manages to fit into modern times without losing the glories of the past. At Demel's one doesn't talk about tradition; it's taken for granted. The loudest sound you hear is the breaking of strudel dough.

The Viennese have shown Demel's their reverence and affection by calling the pastry shop, like a human being, "*der Demel*." When they love and admire somebody, they replace the first name with the article: *der Kennedy*, *der Bernstein*, *der Caruso*, *die Lehmann* (Lotte, of course).

No guidebook mentions Demel's under "What to See in Vienna," although it ranks with St. Stephen's, the Opera House, the Brueghels, Schönbrunn Palace, and the not-so-blue Danube as one of the city's great sights. On Sundays after church, one goes to Demel's. "One" are the members of the Austrian aristocracy. Officially, hereditary titles are outlawed in Austria, but Demel's remains a noble enclave inside the democratic Republic of Austria.

On Saturdays and Sundays, the Lobkowitzes, Palffys, Liechtensteins, Schwarzenbergs, et al. drop in—to have a glass of Sherry, to taste the saddle of venison or a tiny asparagus sandwich, to buy a small candy box, or just to see who is there. It may be a great actor, a prima donna, a couple of ambassadors, a famous tax evader, a ski champion, or a millionaire. Demel's is the local oasis of refinement in a desert of faceless inelegance. At Demel's, people are still what they once were—not what they want to be.

The "abbesses" are the guardians of tradition at Demel's. They are the older waitresses who came to Demel's 40 or 50 years ago straight from convent school. Only a few of them are left. Nowadays the pretty young waitresses arrive via the modern route, from the labor office. But they have to comply if they want to stay. At Demel's one takes a dim view of lipstick, makeup, and red fingernails. That's all right for an espresso waitress, but not for a Demel's girl.

The waitresses, like famous artists, are sometimes known under pseudonyms. "Frau Paula," for instance, is really Hélène, but when she was hired, long ago, there was already a "Frau Hélène," and there couldn't be two. When a real Paula arrived a few years later, she was renamed "Frau Grete" by order of Frau Demel, the owner, though this Paula would have preferred to be called "Agnes." (Even her husband now calls her "Grete.")

The waitresses use an archaic idiom, never addressing their customers directly as "Sie" (you) but in the third person plural. "*Wurden schon bedient?*"—"Have they already ordered?"—the "abbess" may ask, referring to you alone. If the ordinary customer has been promoted to *Stammgast* (habitué) by the top secret councils at Demel's, which may take 19 years or longer, a "von" may be bestowed. All this is done matter-of-factly, with no trace of snobbism. The "abbesses" at Demel's are totally unimpressed by aristocratic titles, although they never confuse a count with a duke, or a baron with a prince. They are impressed only by Demel's. If they want to express their highest approval they say, "It's Demelish." In their considered opinion Demel's is the only great place on earth. It's only fitting that the assorted highnesses pay their respects to the institution, as they always have since Demel's was founded in 1786.

The founder was one Ludwig Dehne, sugar baker's apprentice from Württemberg. His bakery was located across from the stage door of the old Burgtheater, close to the Imperial Palace. Naturally, Dehne's sugar bakery became popular with the people from both the Burgtheater and the Imperial Palace. In Vienna, the stage and the aristocracy have often been linked by romantic legends, and the sugar bakery was obviously in the middle. The most famous legend is the bittersweet story of Katharina

Schratt, the Burgtheater actress, and Emperor Franz Josef I, who considered Frau Schratt's homemade *Gugelhupf* the finest in Vienna. No one but an emperor could get away with that heretical statement; at Demel's everybody knows that their own *Gugelhupf* is the finest.

At Demel's the pastry is the quintessence of a sweet (Demelish) way of life. Some people (such as this writer) occasionally go there without ordering anything, just to walk between the shelves and tables laden with *Salzgebäck*, tortes, petits fours, and crèmes, and to know that Demel's is still there.

If there exists a nicer sight than Demel's pastry it is Demel's famous buffet. The word *buffet* might be misleading; Demel's is no rush-hour cafeteria. There is always a consommé, and there are warm dishes—fine things made of chicken or sweetbreads, vegetables au gratin, a marvelous spinach torte, and Demel's *Schinkenfleckerl*—boiled pasta in squares, covered with butter, egg yolks, and minced ham, topped with bread crumbs and melted butter, and baked to perfection.

A while ago, an American tourist who had lunched at Demel's every day during his stay in Vienna, and often came again in late afternoon for some pastry, said good-bye to the "abbess" who had served him.

"I'm going back home," he said. "It was wonderful. Even the water is better at Demel's than elsewhere."

The "abbess" wasn't surprised. "Of course," she said.

A story about menus aboard luxury liners published by GOURMET in 1949 was the first of **Joseph Wechsberg's** many articles for the magazine. In 1974's "A Very Late Confession," he told of—arriving in America as a violinist on a decrepit ship and ending up (briefly) as a bootlegger.

You can still experience the delicious allure of Demel's today—it's located at Kohlmarkt 14 and is open every day from 10 A.M. to 7 P.M. (1-535-171727).

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