

# Gourmet

1950s Archive

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## VURSTY AND KNEDLIKY

### THE SAUSAGES AND DUMPLINGS OF PRAGUE

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Historically, there has been bitter antagonism for centuries between Vienna and Prague, but gastronomically the two cities have complemented each other well. Vienna was the citadel of boiled beef and strudel. Prague was the stronghold of roast pork and dumplings.

French gastronomes often look down their noses at fresh pork, which is considered a dish of the *cuisine bourgeoise*, something you eat only at the family table. No French de luxe restaurant of reputation puts pork dishes on its menu. But, in Prague the good restaurants—and the best of them were very good—featured a dazzling variety of pork dishes: *carré* of pork, pork shoulder, pork tongue, pig's snout, pig's feet, pig's ears, pork chops—breaded, grilled, fried, *à la charcutière*, with *sauce piquante*, *sauté* with caraway seeds, with paprika, with mustard sauce—pork goulash, pork ribs, pork schnitzel, and so on.

Pork was the common denominator of all classes of the populace. The poor people ate cheap cuts of pork, and rich ate whole suckling pig, but everybody loved pork. Some of my friends would eat pork twice a day, for lunch and dinner, hot or cold, and between meals they would fortify themselves with hot pork sausages at their favorite *uzenarna*.

A Prague *uzenarna*—the word can be translated only inadequately as “smoked-sausage shop”—was a unique gastronomic institution. Some of them were combined with a butcher shop; sausages, hams, and smoked meats were sold in the front room, fresh meat in the back mum. But the best sausage shops would not demean themselves by selling fresh pork, to say nothing of beef or veal.

In the happier prewar days, when food and drink were far more important to the *Prazak*, the native of Prague, than the platform of one of the seventeen political parties which he'd voted for in the last election, the social standing of a man was often determined by the sausage shop which he patronized and the kind of hot sausage which he ate there. A sausage eater never switched allegiance. There were two main varieties of hot sausage: the lean ones, either short or long, called *parky*, which looked somewhat like frankfurters and wieners, and always came in pairs; and the fat, short ones, called either *vursty*, *klobasy*, or *taliany*, which were sold in strings like pearls. *Taliany*, “Italians,” were white and very fat, larded with pieces of bacon and garlic; *klobasy* were somewhat bigger, fatter, and thick skinned; and *vursty* were juicy and less fattish, the feminine species of the hot-sausage family, and mostly eaten by men. Women preferred *parky*.

The most popular hot sausages of all were *vursty* and *bursty*, after the German word *Wurst*. They were two and three-fourths inches long and were eaten with the skin. To leave the thin skin of a *vursty* on the plate was like putting fresh water into vintage wine. The quality of the *vursty* was tested by pricking it. If the *vursty* was fresh and properly made, the juice would spout into the eater's face. *Vursty* eaters recognized one another by the fat stains on their ties and lapels. They wore them proudly, like campaign ribbons.

The making of *vursty* was perhaps the most closely guarded secret of Czechoslovakia's prewar economy. *Vursty* addicts would discuss for hours whether the products of Chmel or Zemka or another large sausage producer were better than those of the small makers or of the neighborhood sausage artists. The question was never settled.

All hot sausages were eaten in the sausage shop, where they were kept steaming all day long in special containers. The customer announced at the counter what he wanted, and a salesgirl, wearing a nurse's white coat, would fetch the *parky* or *vursty* with a big wooden fork out of the steaming pot and place them on a hot plate. Raw or cooked sauerkraut, potato salad, Russian, French, or Welsh salad were served with it. but orthodox sausage eaters had nothing but mustard or horseradish with *vursty* and bread or rolls. Along the wall across the counter ran a long, breast-high marble counter for hurried customers who ate while standing, and a back room with small tables accommodated guests who preferred to sit down. The sausage shops were white-tiled and had

stone floors. They were cool even in summertime, and their red-cheeked salesgirls even wore sweaters under their white coats.

The sausage shops opened at eight in the morning, and the first customers came in almost immediately. They were the ones whose breakfast consisted of *vursty* instead of coffee. By ten thirty most places were crowded with people who pretended to be in a hurry but always had time to stop in for a couple of *vursty*. A second rush hour started around noon, when many people stepped in for a couple of fat *vursty* as New Yorkers step into a bar for a couple of dry Martinis. Both seem to have the same relaxing and invigorating effect after a few hours of hard work. Other people came into the sausage shops after lunch and had a couple of hot sausages instead of cheese or dessert, and many came in later in the afternoon. Around dinnertime the shops were crowded again. Many families dined there. Young men would take their dates for hot sausages before they went to the movies.

Sausages were also sold uncooked and cold, but few people took them home. At home they never tasted as good as they did in the shop: Perhaps it was the steaming containers, or their freshness, or just plain imagination. In the early days of our marriage, long before my wife became an accomplished lady *chef de cuisine*, at dinnertime she would often send our maid-of-all-work downstairs for hot *vursty*. There was a sausage shop on the premises, right next to the entrance door of our house. There was one in almost every block. There was a rumor that owners of buildings housing a sausage shop often charged higher rentals because of the convenience. It was convenient, all right. Our servant would dash down and shortly thereafter would return with half a dozen steaming, delicious *vursty*. They were good, but not *quite* as delicious as if we had gone down ourselves and eaten in the shop.

The habit of sending out for *vursty* was as firmly planted and widespread as the English habit of drinking tea at certain hours. Around ten thirty in the morning the lowliest apprentice or janitor in every office, shop, factory, or government bureau would make the round of all employees, from salesgirl to general manager, and ask each of them what he wanted, and a while later he would return with many small packages. All work stopped, and fat stains began to appear on papers all over the city.

In those days I worked in a lawyer's office, after I had graduated, to my family's and my own surprise, from Prague University's Law School. I usually spent my mornings in court, pleading the cause of some unworthy individual who happened to be our client. Around ten the court would adjourn and the judge would retreat for fifteen minutes to his chambers, where he would sit at his table, surrounded by law books, eating a couple of *vursty*, which were properly wrapped in paper. I would go down with my adversary or with the district attorney with whom I had just exchanged verbal insults to the small *uzenarna* which was installed on the ground floor of the court building, or we would have the attendant fetch our *vursty* and then eat them in the rear of the courtroom with the plaintiff and the defendant. During those ten minutes all actions and emotions stood still, tempers cooled, and many a settlement was reached later.

I spent my evenings at the *Prager Tagblatt*, an influential daily whose editors and contributors looked upon their paper as the *Times* of Prague. News-papermen work late, and most sausage shops closed at eight or nine in the evening, but there was a *uzenarna* across from the Tagblatt Building which opened in the evening at eight and remained open all night for the convenience of newspapermen, night-club employees, prostitutes, street cleaners, and taxi drivers.

Newspapermen the world over are devotees of strong, hot, black coffee, but the newspapermen in Prague were the only ones who ate hot *vursty* or *parky* with their coffee. The dean of the *Tag-blatt's* editorial writers, Professor Steiner, a widely renowned scholar of Greek and Latin who had exchanged his teacher's platform for the more important rostrum of the paper's front page, was often seen evenings nervously pacing the corridors between nine and ten, muttering Greek curses at passers-by. Alarmed visitors were quick to deduce that another political crisis had broken out somewhere and that the professor was trying to work out his thoughts for a last-minute editorial. Actually he was only waiting nervously for the arrival of Becvar, the copy boy, with his *vursty* and a big glass of beer.

Beer was the only other acceptable drink with hot sausages. In Prague's *uzenarna* circles wine drinkers were as suspect as Communists are today in Washington. Wine drinkers were considered quaint, not to be trusted, potential sources of danger. All beer was tap beer; the local patrons took a dim view of bottled beer, which was proclaimed inferior, "good only for export." The sausage shops had no license to sell tap beer, but there was sure to be a beer parlor next door or a few doors farther away. A sausage shop always lay strategically between two beer parlors; or, as the beer drinkers would have it, each beer parlor was in a tactical position between two sausage shops. Either the sausage shop would send a girl out for beer—it was sold in heavy glasses with heavy handles and an experienced girl was able to carry from six to eight in one hand—or the beer parlor would send a *piccolo* over with the beer. At certain hours of the day the streets of Prague were animated by white-coated shop girls and tuxedoed *piccolos* bearing beer glasses.

When Prague's sausage addicts grew tired of arguing over what kind of sausage to eat, they would start to fight over what beer to drink. Outside the country the beer of Pilsen was best known, but there were many experts in Prague who disliked its strong,

bitter aftertaste, and preferred another brand, such as Tomas, Budejovske, or Velke Popovice. One of the greatest beer philosophers, the author Jaroslav Hasek, who wrote most of his book *The Good Soldier Schweik* in a beer parlor, claimed the beer of Smichov, a Prague suburb, to be the best. But, Pilsen or Smichov, there was never any agreement as to whether beer should be poured gently into the slightly bent glass or poured into it from high above.

To the Czechs dumplings were as important as rice to the Chinese and macaroni to the Italians. There was no meal without dumplings, and sometimes there was no course without them. Dumplings showed up in the soup; they were made of ground liver and rice or of ground meat, bread crumbs, marrow, greaves, ham, or potatoes. Dumplings instead of potatoes were served with the entrée; they were called *houskove knedliky*, “bread dumplings,” because they contained small cubes of sautéed bread. And dumplings were also the most popular dessert. Czech housewives talked about *knedliky* knowingly and in highly technical terms — “I steam them in a napkin,” “I use farinaceous potatoes”—which were as unintelligible to foreigners as the mysteries of Czech grammar, which, for instance, has seven cases of declension.

A nation dedicated to the cult of dumplings was not diet-conscious and had no desire to reduce. Prague's women, known all over Europe for their charm, sex appeal, and vivacity, were rarely slim and long-stemmed. Eating dumplings was the favorite national indoor pastime; to be able to eat twenty or thirty dumplings in one sitting was considered a proud feat of virility.

Not all dumplings were round. The bread dumpling, which was served with meat, was prepared in a half-a-yard-long piece of dough which had the shape of sandwich bread. It was cooked in salted water and slit in one-inch-thick slices by a taut piece of thread. The dumpling was never cut by a knife.

The dumplings which were served for dessert were round and individual, but there their similarity ends. Their size ranged from that of a walnut to that of a grapefruit. They could be as fluffy as a soufflé or as hard as a tennis ball. They were made with or without flour, with boiled potatoes that were unpeeled and pressed, or with raw potatoes that were peeled and grated, with or without yeast, with eggs or with egg yolks only, out of strudel dough or macaroni paste, with milk or with sweet cream or with sour cream. No one has ever recorded all the local and regional varieties. They were filled with whole plums—those were the most famous of all, called *svestkove knedliky*—with sweet or sour cherries, strawberries, apricots, marmalade, *povidla* (plum jam), sweet cabbage, nuts, or with nothing. They were served with sugar, or with brown butter, or with cinnamon, or with poppy seed, or with almonds, or with grated cheese, or with practically anything else. Each hostess had her personal recipe, which she wouldn't trade for anything in the world.

My favorite dumplings, the formula for which has been evolved by my wife after years of trial and error, are of the bantam-weight variety. They are made of butter, egg yolks, dry cottage cheese, salt, with just enough flour added to keep the dough from falling to pieces. My wife usually tests a small dumpling first and may add butter or flour to give the dough the needed consistency. It is almost as light as a soufflé, and much better.

Our dumplings are the size of golf balls and are served on very hot plates. They are separated with the fork in small pieces by each guest, and the guest himself performs the ritual of sprinkling them with brown butter, sugar, and grated dry hoop cheese, again with brown butter, hoop cheese, and sugar, which comes this time on top. You may add more layers of brown butter, sugar, and cheese ad infinitum until the dumplings disappear underneath like a landscape under snow. It's a dish for Lucullus.

Another Prague Specialty was hot ham. Of all hams on earth—Parma or Bayonne, Westphalia or Kentucky, York or Poland—the ham of Prague was the best. It was perfectly cured and hardly salted and, like *vursty*, was eaten hot in the *uzenarua*. Customers were expected to specify their wishes: lean, half lean, or fat, which side, which cut, with mustard or with horseradish. Fanatic sausage addicts looked upon ham eaters the way disgruntled proletarians look upon members of the long-hair intelligentsia. Ham was far more expensive than sausage, and ham eaters were in a social caste by themselves, except for the very poor people, who would buy a ham bone for little money and make a meal out of it.

Prague's hot ham was one of the all-time delicacies of the cured animal kingdom. The Polish ham, which came quite close to it, never reached its exalted heights of taste and tenderness. Prague's ham was never roasted or baked, only cooked and steamed. It was never served at home. It was a great surprise to my wife and me when we came to America in 1938 and were invited to dinner by the most hospitable people on earth, to be served baked ham. We had to admit that the hams were well cured. In fact, there are Czechs now living in America who maintain that the cured hams of Virginia or Kentucky are better than Prague's hams ever were, but perhaps admiration for their new country out-weighs the memory of their palates.

I returned to Prague in the final days of the second World War as a soldier in the United States Army. It was not a joyful homecoming, and one of my sorrows was what had become of the once-famous sausage shops. Of Prague's *uzenarny*, many were

closed, many had simply disappeared, and the ones that were still open sold next to nothing. Meat had been strictly rationed for years, and pork, the main ingredient of all hot sausages, was obtainable only in the labyrinths of the black market. Some shops had *vursty* for sale, against ration coupons, but their *vursty* seemed to be filled with cured sawdust and were a sad imitation of the genuine article.

The meat shortage has never been relieved, except for a brief span in 1946, when UNRRA was active in Prague. By 1950 many sausage shops were bankrupt and had closed their doors. A whole ham had become as rare as a black pearl. Sometimes a ham was served at a diplomatic reception or at the party of a Communist cabinet member. Today in Prague a generation of young people is growing up that doesn't know the difference between *vursty*, *parky*, *taliany*, and *klobasy*, and cares even less. Prague's hot sausages, like many other far more important things, are only a bittersweet memory of a time which seems so far away now that many people wonder whether it ever existed, except in someone's homesick imaginings.

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