

Authentic European Dishes

Vienna: the Schnitzel Revelation

Some people come to Vienna to linger over Sacher torte at Belle Époque cafés. More cultured types bustle straight to the Museum Quarter. Me, I came to nurse my addiction to Wiener schnitzel, a fried cutlet so simple, satisfying, and eloquent that it restores your faith in old-world cuisine. A great Wiener schnitzel is to any old breaded fried cutlet what foie gras is to chopped liver. And like any regional masterpiece, this culinary souvenir from Mitteleuropa relies on its own set of rules and techniques. There is little argument as to the preferred meat: thin, pounded discs of veal, cut from the leg, loosely coated in flour, eggs, and white bread crumbs, then gently pan-fried—never deep-fried—in that glorious fat known as *butterschmalz*, a.k.a. clarified butter. (Alarming, chefs these days are switching to healthier oils). According to Viennese schnitzelmeisters, final perfection rests in a crucial trick called *soufflieren* (from the word soufflé), achieved by splashing hot fat over the meat while it cooks, which causes the breading to puff up in spots like whitecaps on a merry sea.



A compromise between heft and weightlessness, an *echtes* schnitzel is at once enormous and whisper-light with a color that has been likened by the Viennese violinist-gourmet Joseph Wechsberg to the burnished gold of a Stradivarius. (Wechsberg also insists that the dish should be so greaseless that a man could sit on a schnitzel—oh, those Viennese—without getting grease stains on his pants.) The accoutrements? A wedge of lemon, a salad of potatoes and/or cucumber, and a fried parsley garnish, perhaps.

Armed with this knowledge, Barry and I set off for Vienna to taste-test the best examples in town, and, like all other tourists, quickly found our way to the wooden benches of **Figlmüller**, a folksy Viennese shrine to the dish. Whoa, their schnitzel was *huge*, with edges that hung over the plate and a thick, clingy breading that would please the heretical crumbs-over-meat school of schnitzel enthusiasts. I asked Barry to take the Wechsberg trouser test. He sneered. That he valued his Agnès B pants over my research came as a blow. And anyway, why was he so smitten with Figlmüller's kitschy shtick? It must have been the Prälattenwein, an aromatic, compulsively drinkable white plonk served in cheesy green goblets.

The following evening we dined in style at **Korso Bei Der Oper**, the formal restaurant at the Hotel Bristol. Sautéed in vegetable oil, then brushed with butter, the schnitzel presented by an elderly waiter had the brownest, crispest, most supernaturally brittle breading of all (their secret: a quick stop under a heat lamp before serving). Small boiled potatoes and a refreshing green salad dotted with crunchy radish curls made a welcome addition, and the veal—saddle steak instead of the usual shoulder—was a cut above the rest, with a particularly plush, aristocratic texture. Korso also scored high for the grand old-school service and the long-live-the-Habsburgs opulence of its 1895 dining room, a sumptuous orchestration of dark walnut wood. That, and the inspired renditions of such anachronistic Viennese specialties as *beuschel*. Who knew that veal lungs stewed in wine could be so transporting?

Ultimately, though, we found our grail at **Zum Schwarzen Kameel**, a place that would still be my favorite restaurant on the planet even if they served jellied scorpions. We loved the Jugendstil room, with ornate chandeliers suspended on beaded strings and weathered ceramic tiles offset by polished mahogany wainscoting. We adored the maître d's operetta muttonchops and Kaiser Franz Josef outfit. We could have lingered forever in the tiled front bar washing down dainty open-faced ham sandwiches with flirty Gelber Muskateller (yellow muscat). As for the schnitzel, it was a spectacular specimen: succulent veal in a particularly loose, floppy breading that owed its crunch and complex, faintly sour nuttiness to the authentic frying medium. Behold the *butterschmalz*!