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Food

The Way We Eat: Schnitzel on the Brain

By SARA DICKERMAN

Fifty-odd years ago, the journalist Joseph Wechsberg introduced many Americans to the pleasures of Austro-Hungarian food, but somehow the cuisine faded in the shadow of French cooking. Such fare may not quite be trendy these days, but it has at last gained a certain gravity and visibility, thanks largely to Kurt Gutenbrunner, the New York City chef and restaurateur. He recently added Blaue Gans, a fifth, more casual restaurant with German leanings, to his collection of Wallsé, Café Sabarsky, Café Fledermaus and Thor. Unlike David Bouley, whose well-regarded Danube plays with certain Austro-Hungarian dishes, Gutenbrunner makes it his mission to introduce fusion-minded customers to such unadulterated classics as kavalierspitz (boiled beef served with apple horseradish, potatoes and creamed spinach). "I cook it the same way every single day," he said. "This is what classical musicians do: they play a classic well, doing it over and over again the right way." The truth is, Americans might not recognize his masterly technique. They need a little tutorial in the Austro-Hungarian culinary canon — the schnitzels, spaetzles, goulashes and all those astounding pastries. For them, there is still no better English-language guide than Wechsberg.

"His writing about food, and music, was so unbelievably precise, you couldn't argue with it," said George Lang, Wechsberg's friend and collaborator on "The Cooking of Vienna's Empire," a 1968 entry in the Time-Life Foods of the World series. But, he added, "I never heard his name mentioned in the last 15 years." Wechsberg, who died in 1983, also profiled truffle hunters, waiters, musicians, bankers and silversmiths, all of whom shared his affinity for flawlessness.

Born in 1907 to a Jewish banking family, Wechsberg enjoyed the last days of the Hapsburg dynasty in haut bourgeois comfort. Although he grew up in the Moravian Czech town of Ostrava, his cultural beacon was Vienna, which it remained until his death. Wechsberg's father died in battle in 1914, and the family lost its money. The young Wechsberg earned a Czech law degree but also spent time in Paris living la vie bohème, playing violin in Montmartre dives, at the Folies-Bergère and eventually on French cruise ships. As a young man, he worked many jobs — lawyer, soldier, croupier, journalist — before coming to the United States in 1938, the year that [Hitler](#) took over part of Czechoslovakia. During the war, he served in the U.S. Army; his mother died at Auschwitz.

Wechsberg began writing again, reporting in his newfound language for magazines like The New Yorker and Gourmet on cultural and historical matters but with a particular keenness for music — and food. In "Blue Trout and Black Truffles," which is still in print, and "Dining at the Pavillon" (available through Web sites like [Alibris.com](#)), he ebulliently profiled the great French chefs of the era. But he reserved a certain sweet affinity for describing the food of his youth in Czechoslovakia and Austria, where eating was an act of self-definition. In prewar Prague, he wrote, "the social standing of a man was often determined by the sausage shop he patronized and the kind of hot sausage he ate there. . . Vursty [sausage] eaters recognized one another by the fat stains on their ties and lapels. They wore them proudly like campaign ribbons."

The Time-Life book was his most populist. (Unlike his other works, it came with recipes.) Wechsberg's Vienna was crowded with many of the dishes that Gutenbrunner loyally serves today: strudel with dough as thin as onion skin, Wiener schnitzels so greaseless you could sit on them without a stain, painstakingly layered doboschtorten (spongecakes) and piles upon piles of whipped cream, or schlagobers.

Wechsberg sometimes displayed a stubborn nostalgia, and he could be a snob. Plenty of his restaurant essays cast a disparaging eye on ugly Americans or Communist Party officials who failed to appreciate a chef's talents. No matter how much money or power such diners had, they lacked the finesse of those at one

Viennese restaurant he frequented: "The guests of Meissl & Schadn were thoroughly familiar with the physical build of a steer and knew the exact anatomical location of Kügerls, Scherzls and Schwanzls," he wrote. "Precision was the keynote. You didn't merely order 'boiled beef' — you wouldn't step into Tiffany's and ask for 'a stone' — but made it quite clear exactly what you wanted."

Although the world wars and Soviet rule in Eastern Europe devastated his homeland, Wechsberg did not tend to engage in politics in his writing. Instead his stories reflected the fragility of his world in the underappreciated, evanescent performances of cooks and musicians, marking a preference for ephemeral delights like schlagobers and arias that may have been the worldly Wechsberg's most Viennese trait: "The Viennese put up a beautiful monument to Johann Strauss, who makes them forget," he wrote, "but no monument at all to Sigmund Freud, who makes them remember." Much as Gutenbrunner does in his kitchens, Wechsberg fashioned his own monuments: it's as if by cataloging all 24 varieties of boiled beef served at Meissl & Schadn and the many varieties of dumplings patted out by Czech housewives, he could quietly obscure some of history's cruel sweep. Today his remembrances of schnitzels past seem more timely than ever.

Liptauer Cheese

1 cup cottage cheese
8 tablespoons unsalted butter, softened
1 tablespoon sweet paprika
Freshly ground black pepper
½ teaspoon kosher salt, plus more to taste
2 teaspoons caraway seeds
1 teaspoon dry mustard
1 teaspoon chopped capers
1 tablespoon finely chopped onion
½ cup sour cream
3 tablespoons finely chopped chives
1 baguette, thinly sliced and toasted.

1. With the back of a spoon, press the cottage cheese through a fine sieve into a mixing bowl.
2. In a mixer fitted with a paddle, cream the butter on medium speed. Beat in the cottage cheese, paprika, a generous grinding of black pepper, the salt, caraway seeds, mustard, capers, onion and sour cream until it forms a smooth paste.
3. Spoon it into a 1 ½ -cup bowl lined with plastic wrap. Cover and refrigerate for 2 hours, or until set. Unmold onto a platter and sprinkle with chives. Serve with baguette slices or crackers. *Makes 1 ½ cups.*

NOTE: To make a Liptauer dip, stir an extra ¼ cup sour cream into the paste. Pour into a serving bowl and sprinkle with chives. Serve with crudités.

Transylvanian Goulash

1 pound sauerkraut, fresh, canned or packaged (note: a 1-pound jar of sauerkraut weighs far less when drained)
2 tablespoons butter
1 cup finely chopped onion
¼ teaspoon chopped garlic
Salt
2 tablespoons sweet paprika
3 cups chicken broth

2 1/2 to 3 pounds boneless pork shoulder, trimmed of fat and cut into 1-inch cubes

1 1/2 teaspoons caraway seeds

1/4 cup tomato purée

1/2 cup sour cream

1/2 cup heavy cream

2 tablespoons flour.

1. Wash the sauerkraut thoroughly under cold running water, then soak it in cold water for 10 to 20 minutes to reduce its sourness. Strain well, pressing out all the water.

2. Melt the butter in a 5-quart casserole and add the onion. Cook over medium heat, stirring occasionally, until lightly colored, 6 to 8 minutes. Add the garlic, season with salt and cook a minute or two longer. Stir in the paprika, pour in 1/2 cup of the broth and bring to a boil. Add the pork cubes.

3. Spread the sauerkraut over the pork and sprinkle it with the caraway seeds. In a small bowl, combine the tomato purée and the rest of the broth and pour the mixture over the sauerkraut. Bring the liquid to a boil once more, then reduce the heat to its lowest point. Season the cooking liquid with a pinch of salt, cover the casserole tightly and simmer for 1 hour. Check occasionally to make sure the liquid has not cooked away. Add a little stock or water if needed; the sauerkraut should be moist.

4. When the pork is tender, combine the creams in a mixing bowl. Beat the flour into the creams with a whisk, then carefully stir this mixture into the casserole. Simmer for 10 minutes longer. Season with salt to taste. Serve in large, wide bowls, accompanied by a side of sour cream. *Serves 4. Recipes adapted from "The Cooking of Vienna's Empire," by Joseph Wechsberg, part of the Time-Life Foods of the World series.*

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