

Something's Brewing in Vienna

By Peter Wortsman
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The word "cafe" is French, the drink itself of Turkish extraction--but the classic coffeehouse, that civilized refuge from civilization, was born and bred in Vienna. And here, at last count, in any one of the Austrian capital's 300-plus cafes, in surroundings cozy or sprawling, simple or lavish, humming or hushed, you can still while away a long afternoon, or succumb to the lure of pastries fit for an imperial palate.

Every Viennese cafe worth its beans cultivates its reputation. One legendary establishment, the Cafe Central (Herrengasse 14), was headquarters to Russian revolutionaries Lev Bronstein (a.k.a. Leon Trotsky) and his chess partner Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. Long defunct, the Central reopened in 1983 at its original location, and has since clocked in at close to 1,000 cups a day.

Purists also flock to the Cafe Hawelka (Dorotheergasse 6), the most austere and compact of the great cafes, near St. Stephan's Cathedral. Heaven forbid you ask the prickly little waiter for an ordinary cup of coffee. "There is no ordinary coffee here!" he has been known to enlighten. Aficionados order a melange, a large coffee with a froth of hot milk and dash of whipped cream. Per ritual, it's served on a tiny metal tray with a jar of sugar cubes and a glass of water. The sign outside welcomes "Kunstler und Lebenskunstler" (artists and artists of life), a throwback to the '50s and '60s, when conversations could get as intense as the coffee. The current proprietor, Gunther Hawelka, a tall, doe-eyed man, works the counter and personally, lovingly, brews the coffee. "The Hawelka is a living legend!" he says, guarding a sacred trust passed on from his 87-year-old dad, who still drops by for his daily cup. Don't expect much in the way of nibbles. But the atmosphere is as authentic as the coffee and the waiter's acerbic lip.

For a snack, or what the Viennese call Jause, try Trzesniewski's, across the street. For 80 years and counting, this cramped buffet bar has been dishing out a savory array of open-faced finger sandwiches of chopped chicken liver, herring and the like, washed down by a Lilliputian (1/8 liter) glass of draft beer. At about 75 cents a pop, you can afford an assortment.

Vienna's most lavish and illustrious cafe is the K.u.K. Hofzuckerbaker Ch. Demel's Sohne (His Majesty's and Imperial Highness's Royal Confectioner Christoph Demel's Sons)--Demel's for short (Kohlmarkt 14). Its baroque decor, thick with chandeliers and ornate murals of frolicking water nymphs, can get a bit unctuous. And the dour waitresses in their stern black habits could well be mistaken for an order of nuns devoted to disciplining naughty hedonists. But the dazzling spectacle of glass cabinets teeming with chocolate, trays heaped with cookies and biscuits, and tier upon tier of pastries of every conceivable shape, color and content, makes Demel's a shrine to sweet-toothed devotees. The gerollte mandeltorte (multiple rolled layers of ganache, meringue, almond and buttercream), nusscafetorte (a nut and coffee cream cake) and mocha cream, to mention only a few offerings, make a pilgrimage a must. Be

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prepared to wait for a table.

A brisk walk back along the Kohlmarkt, through the yard of the Hofburg (the imperial palace), across the Heldenplatz (Heroes' Square) and along the immaculate lawns and flowerbeds of the Volksgarten (People's Park) will put you on a busy corner of the Ringstrasse. This monumental thoroughfare modeled on Paris's Champs-Elysees literally rings the old city, following the foundations of the medieval wall. Traffic can get tangled, with streetcars, automobiles and horse-drawn carriages jockeying for space.

Seek asylum in the sumptuous Cafe Landtmann (Dr. Karl Lueger Ring 4), next door to the Burgtheater (Imperial Theater). Catering to a lively mix of theatergoers and players, politicians, journalists and professors from the nearby university, this cafe epitomizes in its understated elegance the Viennese ideal of "Gemutlichkeit," congeniality. Its inlaid mahogany walls, burgundy plush cushions and impeccable black tuxedos of the waiters--all to be hailed as "Herr Ober!" (headwaiter)--quietly confirm the pedigree. And true to tradition, whatever your tab and however long you linger, the waiter will not trouble you with a bill until you strenuously flag him down. In addition to the 19 available varieties of coffee (including a mazagran iced with a dash of rum, an einspanner with a dollop of cream in a tall glass, a turkischer poured piping hot from a long-necked copper pot and, of course, the classic melange), you will not be scolded for ordering a decaf.

For a modernist alternative, the Cafe Pruckel (Stubenring 24) reflects the innovative aesthetic of the Wiener Werkstatte, the famous school of design, whose work is featured across the street at the MAK (Museum of Applied Arts). The ceilings are high, the seating comfortable, the coffee strong and the crowd eclectic.

It would be heresy to overlook the Hotel Sacher (Philharmonikerstrasse 4), home of the famous chocolate cake. Despite the seven egg yolks in the recipe, Sachertorte was concocted as an allegedly "light" dessert for noble digestion. Its secret is the apricot streak subtly but unmistakably dividing the cake down the middle and underlying its bittersweet varnish of chocolate icing.

Then there's the Frauenhuber (Himmelpfortgasse 6), the city's oldest, where Beethoven sometimes performed; the Mozart (Albertinerplatz 2), featured in "The Third Man"; the Diglas (Wollzeile 10), noted for its exotic tea and splendid cakes; the postmodern Do & Do Cafe (Haas House, near St. Stephan's); and Gustav Mahler's favorite, the Sperl (Gumpendorfer Strasse 11). Take your pick or, better yet, try them all. Then you can repair to the Viennese branch of Weight Watchers, located right on the Ring.

For more information about travel to and within Vienna, contact the Austrian National Tourist Office, 212-944-6880, <http://www.anto.com>.