

Waltzing through Vienna

by John Blanchette

Vienna is the capital of Austria and its cultural center. It is the city built by the Habsburgs, who ruled from the 13th century to the 20th century. Sigmund Freud is its most famous resident and Johannes Brahms, Ludwig van Beethoven, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Franz Schubert, several Strausses and Antonio Vivaldi composed here. It is the headquarters for Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries. It's the only city that lends its name to a waltz, cuisine and coffee, and its major food group is desserts.

Food, pastries and drink are as much a part of the city as commerce and culture. Viennese live for the sensual and spiritual pleasures of art and life, and enjoy them fully.

A grande dame with beautiful boulevards, large expanses of parklands, many walking streets and impressive buildings, Vienna supports more than 100 museums and is packed with magnificent sculptures, fountains, palaces, concert halls, cafes and wine bars. During World War II, about a fourth of the city was destroyed by bombs, but much was rebuilt in the original style, integrated with modern architecture.

SEEING THE CITY IN STYLE - A fiaker (horse buggy) shuttles visitors through Vienna in noble splendor. CNS Photo by John Blanchette. MEMORIAL TO MARIA'S MOM - A statue of Habsburg Queen Maria Theresa, mother of 16 children, including the 'hapless' Maria Antoinette, fronts the Museum of Fine Arts, which serves sumptuous buffets on Thursday nights. CNS Photo by John Blanchette. COFFEE BREAK - Hundreds of cafes in Vienna dispense some of the best coffee and pastries in the world and are packed at all times of the day. CNS Photo by John Blanchette. NOT WORTH THE CLIMB - St. Stephen's Cathedral is at the center of Vienna. Unfortunately, its steeple is shrouded in scaffolding, which obstructs views from the windows. CNS Photo by John Blanchette. A city of 1.6 million, about a fifth of the country's population, the old city swirls in concentric circles from a center anchored by St. Stephen's Cathedral, out toward the Danube, the Vienna Woods and the commercial and industrial zones beyond the river.

Arts and politics are very accessible in this sophisticated city. During intermission at the Historic Vienna State Opera House (tickets from 2 to 100 euros, \$2.60-\$130), I met Dr. Heinz Fischer, the much-beloved president of Austria, and later that night while dining at the Sacher Hotel, Austrian writer Elfriede Jelinek, the 2004 Nobel Prize winner for literature, was sitting at the next table.

Wien (pronounced Veen) is the Austrian name for Vienna. Now you know the derivation of Wiener schnitzel and wieners.

An anagram of wine, Wien is the only capital in Europe that has large commercial vineyards within its borders. More than 1,700 acres of exceptional wine grapes ripen on the hills above the city, adjacent to the Vienna woods. Whites do very well here, especially Riesling and the local grape, grüner veltliner, similar to a fruity sauvignon blanc.

In a matter of minutes you can reach the wine country on the No. 38 tram and transfer to the Heurigen Express, a funky little train that will ferry you around to the local tasting rooms (7.5 euros, \$9.72).

The Viennese often spend the late afternoon leisurely dining at the winery cafes.

One of the best is Napa Valley-trained Fritz Wieninger's. Some of the best salads I tasted in Vienna accompanied the vineyard's wonderful wines. Fritz's Vienna Blend won this year's contest for the Best Oyster Match, held at The Oyster Bar at Grand Central Station in New York.

Vienna celebrates its wine harvest every year with tasting events, vineyard tours and concerts in October and November.

Many consider Viennese coffee to be the best in the world. Its reputation is certainly enhanced by the pastries. Perhaps the most famous is the Sacher torte, created at the Sacher Hotel. A rich cake bathed in apricot syrup and frosted with a shiny chocolate glaze, it is traditionally served with a dollop of whipped cream and a cup of good Viennese coffee at the Sacher Cafe. Incidentally, Graham Greene lived in the Sacher Hotel and his book "The Third Man" was filmed in Vienna.

The most famous pastry shop in town is Demel's, worth a pilgrimage to taste the cakes and fruit tarts.

The city is full of pastry and chocolate shops. Manner is famous for its chocolate wafers and packaged candies, Suesses Eck is a traditional Viennese sweet shop and Altmann & Kuehne specialize in Viennese chocolates.

Visit Wiener Schokoladekoenig to meet Wolfgang Leschanz, the Chocolate King and the greatest chocolatier in Vienna. He grew up with Wolfgang Puck, was his pastry chef at Spago in Los Angeles in the 1980s and pastry chef at the Sacher Hotel and Demel's before opening his own shop a few years ago.

One of my favorite gastronomic areas is the Naschmarkt (literally nosh market), where you can find all things sweet and sour, cured, fresh and salted. This is the city's most lively food paradise, especially on Saturdays during the flea market (originally named for the practice of hiring monkeys to preen your hair of unwanted critters).

This is where I was able to end my sugar binge with the best-tasting sauerkraut in the world, according to the Sauerkraut Man. He made me buy one of his pickles to take his photo serving up kraut from one of his two 30-gallon barrels.

Just down the way was the vinegar baron Erwin Gegenbauer, who sold 27 varieties (20-30 euros, \$26-\$39, a bottle) like perfume, putting a drop on the back of your hand so you could appreciate the aroma.

Across was the cheese and cured meat stand Urbanek, where 80 local farmhouse cheeses were available along with wursts and cured hams, which you chased with a glass of the local wine - my favorite stand in the market.

A good place to start sampling Viennese cuisine is at the Oesterreicher im MAK, the stylish restaurant at the Museum of Applied Arts, where Vienna's top chef, Helmut Oesterreicher, prepares traditional foods at affordable prices. Don't miss the tafelspitz (braised beef), Wiener schnitzel and the apple strudel.

Landtmann Cafe serves filling bowls of goulash and frittatensuppe, beef soup with pancake stripes (6 euros, \$7.78). Also try zum schwarzen kameel and Viennese beisl zum huth for Viennese specialties.

On Thursday nights, the Museum of Fine Arts offers Art and Pleasure, a buffet of Viennese foods, including pastries, local wine and beer, and access to the museum's impressive art collection, including works by Bruegel, Rubens, Titian, Tintoretto, etc. (34 euros, \$44).

In addition to its wine and coffee, Austrian beer is also quite nice - hoppy, crisp and refreshing. Ottakringer, Hainfelder and Goesser were my favorites.

There is a hop-on, hop-off tourist bus that travels the city (13 euros, \$16.85) and you can also purchase a 72-hour city transit pass at the Tourist Office good for all the buses, trams and trains and more than 200 discounts at cafes, shops, restaurants and museums (17 euros, \$22).

A popular, if expensive, transportation mode is the horse buggy (Fiakers - 95 euros an hour, \$123). And stay out of the bike lanes at intersections. They look like crosswalks to the uninitiated, but the speeding bicyclists pay no heed to the ignorant tourist.

The worst bargain was the 3 euros I paid to climb the 343 narrow, winding steps in St. Stephen's steeple, risking heart attack and experiencing vertigo to arrive at four tiny windows at the top that were covered in scaffolding, obliterating the view!

The Freud House (7.3 euros, \$9.46) has very little left from the days Freud lived and practiced there. The couch is in London, only a few photographs and personal effects are left in his office and the house is packed with disappointed visitors.

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