

Eating out in Budapest

14 Apr 2010 by Nick Lander/FT

By the end of my first day in Budapest, I, and particularly my stomach, seemed to have gone native, to feel Pesti, the name given to anyone born in Buda or Pest, the two halves of this photogenic and food-obsessed city.

My immersion had begun immediately, albeit innocently. An early morning walk past the British Embassy and into Vörösmarty Square had allowed me to watch one of the city's numerous, temporary fairs being set up in which food stalls predominated. Huge sausages were being grilled alongside knuckles of pork; pretzels and strudels were being rolled before being cooked in portable ovens; and strong aromas of baking and freshly ground coffee hung in the air.

When I returned to the square at 6 pm for a beer in Café Gerbeaud, whose cakes have given pleasure to so many since it opened in 1858, the square was packed. And, if anyone's appetite needed any further stimulus, this was thoughtfully provided by a gypsy band, if one is still allowed to use this term, playing in the corner.

Like much of the city, whose Art Nouveau buildings and low costs make it highly attractive for film production companies from around the world, the square felt like a set. And so too did my second stop that morning, the Central Market, close to the recently reopened Liberty Bridge.

This massive, colourfully tiled and turreted, three-storey building quickly revealed many of Budapest's distinctive charms and, from a restaurant perspective, its singular disadvantage.

The former were exemplified by its meat stalls, which would delight any chef or restaurateur from London, Paris or New York. This has less to do with the quality or price and everything to do with the fact that here, in abundance, are all the inexpensive but flavoursome cuts of meat that are only now reappearing on menus across these cities. But while many of Europe and America's butchers struggle to keep up with this renewed demand, here were piles of pigs' trotters, vast bowls of tripe, tongue, beef cheeks, bone marrow, pork and goose crackling, and, of course, shin of beef in abundance, a vital ingredient in Hungarian soups and goulash.

Fortified by a slice of poppy-seed strudel, from a stand that sold 15 different fillings but where the woman behind the counter displayed an approach to customer service that did not seem to have moved on from the Communist era, I was equally impressed by the freshness and abundance of the vegetable stalls. But as I left, I began to realise that there was something missing. Either there were no fish stalls or I had missed them altogether.

I was to learn that it was the former. Although there have been a significant number of new and exciting restaurant openings across the city, its geography still imposes a strict limitation on the fresh seawater fish available to any aspiring chef. There are regular shipments from the Mediterranean - and I was told that if I wanted to eat oysters then I should only do so on Thursday as that was when they were delivered - but it remains a disadvantage. It will be interesting to watch how Nobu, the Japanese sushi restaurant, will overcome this hurdle when it opens in the city's Kempinski hotel in September.

Babel restaurant is only a few minutes' walk from the Central Market but is a good example of Budapest's new, modern restaurants. An enticing window display, elegant lighting and an open kitchen had all whetted my appetite before we had even sat down. But even more appetising was the blackboard on the wall, which, under the headline 'Magyar Menu', listed numerous ingredients I had just seen in the market converted into mouthwatering dishes: veal tartare with eel; bean goulash; a stew of kohlrabi (a vegetable always worth ordering in a restaurant because it is so fiddly to prepare) with calf's brain; and a curd cheese and dill pastry.

But I was to be disappointed. The waiter had no sooner seen me rub my hands in anticipation than he announced that this was only the dinner menu and handed me instead their shorter, lunch menu. A pigeon consommé with beetroot; deep-fried pork with pumpkin risotto; ratatouille with couscous; and a crisp lemon and rhubarb tart were all good - but only served to make me keen to return to Babel for dinner.

Stamina, rather than timing, will determine for many whether they ought to visit **Fülemüle**, the city's Jewish restaurant, although no one should miss the tragic but now elegantly restored synagogue only a few minutes' walk away.

The restaurant's clubby atmosphere is underlined by its omnipresent owner Singer András (or András Singer as we would call him), and a collection of photographs on the wall that obviously recall happy occasions, including one of his baby granddaughter in a chef's jacket, even if they bear little relation to one another. Nor does there seem much connection between the menorah, the eight-branch candle, on the wine fridge, and the small busts of Lenin and Stalin in the corner cupboard. The pork main course also came as a surprise but András explained this is not a kosher restaurant and that anyway quite a few of his Jewish customers enjoy it.

The rest of the menu is classic. Goose crackling; creamed egg, onion and goose liver; duck and goose, including the stuffed neck, cooked numerous ways; various cholents, slow-cooked dishes that range from 'King's David's plate' to a Mexican version with chilli; and desserts that are almost as filling. All of which contribute to make Fülemlüle a happy restaurant.

Budapest's other restaurateurs may be happier once they shrug off their inferiority complex - many feel that their city is not as appreciated as nearby Prague or Vienna. But Budapest now has the opportunity to write a new chapter in its culinary history. The ingredients, other than the fish, are all there.

Babel www.babeldelicate.hu

Fülemlüle www.fulemule.hu