

Recreating A Vienna of the Mind

As you enter *Danube*, an Austrian fantasy of celebrated chef David Bouley, there's a moment of hushed reflection. This newly opened New York restaurant is accessed through an underlit antechamber where, as your eyes adjust to the dimness, an intricate ceiling of gilded leaves comes into focus, as if tiny stars are appearing at dusk. Through a heavy door to the restaurant bar, soft tasseled lamps spill caramel colored light onto dark paneling, and the colored stripes of rich fabric on the walls slowly come alive.

Make no mistake: You aren't merely entering a restaurant to have dinner; you're passing through a portal into a world that celebrates dining as fantasy.

Danube is one of a number of ultra-luxe restaurants, in New York and elsewhere around the country, that celebrate the highest level of culinary fantasy. In both food and decor, they reference a world with vague origins in Europe but, much like the Disney castle, exist more in the geography of the mind.

In the pantheon of top New York fantasy restaurants, the antechamber plays a key role in heightening expectations of this fantasy world. This stutter-step before the table allows the sounds of the street to fade, strips off the stresses of the day, and removes any lingering assumptions about commonplace food and dining. This holding pen of the palate prepares you for a sublime culinary experience.

This antecedent effect is most apparent at *Jean Georges*, the most formal of Jean Georges Vongerichten's mini-fleet of New York restaurants. As you enter this chrome and granite laboratory of flavors, glass doors automatically spread wide, and you find yourself standing before an imposing maitre d' desk – almost as if entrapped in a *New Yorker* cartoon about the pearly gates.

At *Daniel Boulud's Daniel*, grandeur also reigns, as a host escorts diners to the table through a former hotel lobby that's been designed to make you feel as though you've been summoned by the Doge himself to sup at his Venetian palace.

And at *Alain Ducasse's* restaurant of the same name, a new entry that has



© Maurice Rougement

Preparing for a night of fantasy at Alain Ducasse.

The heady heights of New York's fantasy dining.

by Roger Mummert

Gently heated yellowtail tuna was adorned with cabbage with paprika sauce. Florida snapper with a goulash of lentils in bacon sauce was a luscious mélange of smoke and spice.

gained notoriety for presenting stunned patrons with bills the size of tuition statements, the effect is metaphorical. Diners enter through gilded doors, then repose in a 12-foot-square mahogany anteroom that suggests an elevator capable of whisking you to dizzying culinary heights.

Grandeur reigns at Daniel.

Fortunately, in all of these restaurants, the food, ambiance and overall power of the fantasy are actually capable of transporting you in a gastronomic form of astral travel.

A recent meal at *Danube* provided that magic carpet ride. We were served a series of tiny dishes that, like a medley of waltzes, comprised Vienna as concept, the fin de siècle Vienna of Freud, gaslights and gilded cafés. There were direct references to Austrian cuisine – here a dollop of belly-warming spaetzele, there a pool of elderflower soup with the fresh snap of Alpine air – and all the while, towering above us, huge paintings rendered in the style of Gustav Klimt challenged



Shinichiro Inoue

Matching Fantasy Cuisines & German Wine

The Danube, the elegant river that meanders through Austria, derives its headwaters from deep in Germany. Germany also provides some of the best wine matches for traditional Austrian cuisine, as well as for many other classic cuisines that have been elevated to culinary fantasy status.

The remarkable food compatibility of German wines was apparent at a gargantuan tasting of the 1999 crop of German wines held in New York in September. The event was sponsored by the German Wine Information Bureau, and scarcely a producer of note was omitted in the array of 300 wines that were set up along the dimensions of an Olympic track event. Clearly, this “mütter of all German wine tastings” demanded a long distance tasting strategy.

One noble grape

Such a massive roll call of labels also demonstrated the spectacular range of results from basically one “noble” grape: the Riesling. While wines from a few other grapes were tossed in (Silvaner, Müller-Thurgau), Rieslings were on full display, from the

dry end (trocken and halb-trocken QbAs and kabinetts) to the sweet middle (spätleses and ausleses), to the ridiculously sweet (beerenausleses, trockenbeerenausleses and a few eisweins) that elude most attempts at food matches.

German wines have long been celebrated for their food compatibility and for good reasons. They are low in alcohol, so they seldom overpower a food. Also, even fairly dry German wines tend to give a sweet impression, which is a refreshing counterpoint to heavy or spicy foods. What’s more, some of the trocken wines revealed slight fizziness in their youth, an appealing quality capable of scrubbing away the heavy residue of rich foods.

The taste test

After tasting our way through (... well, most of ...) the line-up, a companion and I sat down to sample the wines with food. We loaded up at a buffet with a field green salad in a neutral dressing, grilled chicken in mustard sauce, pork and brussels sprouts, grilled summer squash and eggplant, and spicy crab cakes

the food to lofty heights.

Still, the food was more Bouley than bräten, distinctly contemporary in lightness and in spare, artistic presentation. Throughout the meal, each bite (and many entrées are scarcely bigger than that) was a velvety thread in a rich tapestry. Among assorted appetizers was a tomato coulis, consisting of a pool of intense red tomato essence, topped by a white tomato froth.

“How do they do it?” was the question that my tablemates and I pondered repeatedly from dish to dish.

Another teeny bite consisted of a Spanish sardine held captive in a freshly made potato chip. The chip, which was completely greaseless, had two cut-outs (elves with scissors?) that belted down the sardine like a damsel over train tracks. One bite reduced it to a scrumptious collision of coarse salt and warm fat. Following that was a nibble of sashimi gravlax of mahi mahi so fresh it brought up memories of a seaside vacation my family took when I was six.

Indeed, there were “Austrian” flavors, albeit with subtlety. Gently heated yellowtail tuna was adorned with cabbage with paprika sauce. Florida snapper



Bill Milne

A magic carpet ride at Danube.

flaked with hot red peppers and accompanied by a rich remoulade.

From wine-stained tasting notes, I selected a flight of Rieslings – a trocken spätlese, a scarcely sweet kabinet and a dramatic auslese, each of which seemed tailor-made for the richness of the crab and the bite of the peppers. When the hot peppers sent up flavor flares, the dry spätlese washed away the fire, and the richness of the egg remoulade was counterbalanced by the mouth-filling weight of the kabinet and accented by the apricot topnotes of the auslese. A second helping confirmed the perfection of the food and wine match, and repeated mouthfuls made it no easier for me to choose one wine over another.

Sensory overload

While several light desserts were provided, such delectables as berry tarts were completely dwarfed by the massive flavors of the ausleses, beerenausleses and trockenbeerenausleses on hand. A flight of these dessert wines from the premier Rheingau producer Schloss Johannisberg provided a fitting end point to our escapades. These stunning wines (some with equally stunning prices for half-bottles) range from bright, balanced flavors to syrupy apricot-scented nectars. These are sensuous wines to be served isolated from food since they command so much space on the palate. Even experienced palates go on sensory overload when tasting them. Like a word processing program that’s hit with a 40-mb photo insert, it takes a while to quietly digest all of the delicious information.

—RM

Three German Rieslings Made For Food

Dry

Deidesheimer Mäuschöhle Riesling Spätlese trocken. Weingut Joseph Biffar (Michael Skurnick Wines, importer). \$31

Sweet

Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Spätlese. Weingut Heribert Kerpen. (Michael Skurnick Wines, importer). . . . \$26.50

Sweeter

Graacher Domprost Riesling Auslese. Weingut Willi Schaefer (Michael Skurnick Wines, importer). . . . \$72

And One More Made For The Spotlight...

Very sweet

Schloss Johannisberg Riesling Spätlese trockenbeerenauslese. Weingut Schloss Johannisberg (Valckenberg International, importer). \$432.50


Recreating A Vienna of the Mind

with a goulash of lentils in bacon sauce was a luscious mélange of smoke and spice. And there was a hearty “kavalierspitz” of traditional boiled beef with spinach and apple horseradish sauce. A mixed bread basket offered counterpart to these intense tastes. Included

among the rolls, in a stroke of whimsy, was a small soft pretzel that proved a wonderful accompaniment to the food.

At some point in the meal, when our taste buds were all aquiver with the culinary silk in such a delicious tapestry, the overpowering paintings no longer overpowered; they simply melted into the background, completely appropriate and equal in grandeur to the food.

The pyrotechnics of taste at *Danube* suggest one thing: If a restaurant can deliver such intense bursts of flavor to the palate, it can commandingly project a sense of time and place to the soul.

At the end of the meal, as I again passed through the darkened antechamber, I was a believer. I was in a Vienna of the mind. 

Roussanne Revisited

In our last issue (Vol. 1, Issue 2), we told you that Roussanne was one of the more interesting varietal wines to emerge on the California wine scene. Since that time, we have learned that vines in Zaca Mesa’s Vineyards thought to be Roussanne have been found to be the variety Viognier through DNA testing conducted at the University of California Davis.

According to Zaca Mesa President Jeffrey Maiken, all remaining product labeled as 1999 Roussanne and still under Zaca Mesa’s control will be returned to the winery for relabeling as Viognier.

“It’s the same great wine; only the name has changed,” says Jim Fiolek, Zaca Mesa’s VP Marketing.

Roger Mummert is a Syosset, N.Y.-based writer specializing in food, wine, and travel. He has been a frequent guest on the Television Food Network and is the former host of the radio show Gastronomic Gossip.

Advertiser Index

| Advertiser | Page | Advertiser | Page |
|-----------------------------------|------------|--------------------------------------|-------|
| Ariba | 40-41, BC | IBM | 8-9 |
| LIVE 2001 | 67 | International Special Olympics | 52 |
| Arthur Andersen | 30-31, IBC | K.I. Lipton Inc. | 78 |
| Chicago Consulting Partners | 35 | Luminant | 25 |
| CoreHarbor | IFC, 1 | PureMarkets | 29 |
| DCI’s eB2B World | 75 | Sun microsystems | 15 |
| diCarta | 2 | TotalMRO.com | 45 |
| Deloitte Consulting | 10 | USinternetworking | 7 |
| eXcelon | 19 | Vivant | 5 |
| Hewlett-Packard | 20-21 | webMethods | 60-61 |

Advertising Sales
Jeffrey Berman
jeffb@ariba.com
215-345-4525 x119

To Order Reprints
Lori Noffz, Reprint Management Services
800-494-9051, ext. 104
lnoffz@rmsreprints.com

Letters to the Editor
Linda DiBiasio
lindad@ariba.com
212-982-0665

To request a free subscription, visit Ariba’s website at www.ariba.com