

Worldly Delights: Prague



Gordon Ramsay's Maze at the Hilton Prague

Prague is a city of spires; like sharp Gothic exclamations that say there are many surprises here. Cuisine is one of them.

The city's gastronomic revival began with the Velvet Revolution in 1989, the Czech Republic's poetic response to the Iron Curtain. The movement captured the country's historic persona of elegance, aristocracy and cultural sophistication.

Two decades later, Prague's culinary identity emerges as among the world's best.

In March 2008, Prague was granted a Michelin star, Central Europe's first. It went to **Allegro**, the restaurant in the Four Seasons Hotel Prague. Chef Andrea Accordi has an haute repertoire to match the luxurious sensibility of the hotel. He has a reputation for Asian spicing – Chinese anise, Szechuan pepper, cardamom, citronella, licorice, ginger, galangal and lemongrass – a holdover from a stint in Bangkok, but his main thrust is Italian. He is said to have imported a Tuscan farmer to show his North Bohemian supplier how to make real ricotta.

Accordi's food is authentic and traditional, but very modern. His dishes are exquisite. A recent lunch antipasto is called Variation on Blue Fin Tuna: mint-scented tartar, lime gelée, Pantelleria capers, seared in a peanut and pepper crust, borlotti beans, red onion and grapefruit salad, medallions poached in olive oil on artichokes, mustard and dill sauce.

Prague has become a city of foodies. The republic's first culinary institute just opened. Professionals and amateurs vie

With favourable nods from the likes of Michelin and Gordon Ramsay, Prague is the new mecca of epicurean delight. **Stephanie Ortenzi** visits seven restaurants all foodies should put on their list.

for sold-out seats in classes given by the city's celebrity chefs. The big break-out success on TV is a cooking show. Czech wines take six golds at the Concours Mondial de Bruxelles.

Then, as an endorsement of the city's gastronomic chops, Gordon Ramsay opens the Prague version of Maze, his most recent London restaurant success, in the Hilton Prague. Ramsay is saying there's a market here for modern, sophisticated cuisine. He would know.

In 2006 and 2007, three restaurants – Aromi, Brasserie M and Le Terroir – were given the *Bibendum*, recognition of good quality at a reasonable price by Michelin standards.

Aromi is also known as *Enoteca con Cucina*, Italian for 'a wine cellar with a kitchen,' making its priorities perfectly clear. The extensive wine list is unapologetically Italian. The warm, relaxed room of brick and wood delivers authentic Italian fare, but for the discerning business and cosmo crowd the kitchen likes to sex it up a bit with trendy foams. The kitchen's soul is made of pasta. They're imaginative and conservatively modern, which means they offer something contemporary while never losing hold of tradition. Consider pumpkin ravioli with chanterelles and grappa; pappardelle with duck ragout; and spaghetti with garlic, oil, chili peppers and tuna tartare.

Brasserie M is as French as Aromi is Italian, with classics like duck rilette and steak tartare. Similarly, it takes traditional on an interesting ride. Here's a dish not likely to be tasted anywhere else: a warm

filet of smoked salmon with a pequillo pepper jus, jasmine rice and roasted fennel. Brasserie M is a place to grab a midday sandwich, have a casual, quality, bistro-style meal or a full-on epicure's evening.

Le Terroir delivers what it says it is: the French concept that wherever we are, there is a unique goodness to the land, its food and its animals – and that's what we should eat. This restaurant's vision is directed by local sensibilities: the owner and chef are both Czech, and the former is also a formidable sommelier, with the good sense to give Czech wines their due. He's put seven on his list of European superstar wines. They love their cheeses at Le Terroir – a recent tasting menu had two cheese courses, one Italian and one French – twice the occasion to pair great wines with great cheeses.

To experience the diversity and details that round out Prague's culinary portrait, try one of these three restaurants:

David is a beloved throw-back (beef carpaccio with garlic dressing and curls of parmesan cheese) for dishes worth preserving, and a lover of Bohemian classics that continue to endure in Prague. Specialties like crispy duck and self-described old-fashioned goulash with dumplings get the honoured treatment they deserve, with home-style flourishes.

Le Degustation is the beloved of local cognoscenti who say that no one in Prague does tasting menus better. Only three menus are offered, seven courses each, in three styles: market fresh, continental or Bohemian. Organic products from local producers are given modern handling. Standouts from a recent menu: poached Prague ham, wild poultry soup, barley dumpling, smoked beef tongue, chickpea purée, roasted onion with marjoram, South Bohemian rabbit.

The Sushi Bar epitomizes Prague's culinary confidence. Everywhere else, sushi is left to an expat Japanese master. Here, instead, six Czech hipsters earned themselves a reputation for the best sushi in Central Europe. The long, slim room has only three tables, but a lengthy eating bar. ☑

Worldly Delights: Recipe

Bohemian Crispy Duck

SERVES 4

Ingredients:

1 large duck 5 to 6 lbs
1 tbsp paprika
4 large medium-sweet apples
1 tsp toasted caraway seeds
1 lb sauerkraut
2 bay leaves
1 cup dry white wine
salt and pepper to taste

Directions:

Preheat oven to 400° F. Peel and core the apples and grate coarsely. Combine the apples and sauerkraut. Add caraway seeds and season. Wash and dry the bird, season the interior and exterior with salt and pepper. Pierce the bird's thick skin thoroughly with a fork or the tip of a paring knife, being careful not to pierce the flesh underneath. Sprinkle the paprika all over the bird, including the cavity and work it into the skin by hand. Fill the bird's cavity as tightly as possible with the apple mixture. Insert one bay leaf at the top of the bird, and the other toward the centre. Close the opening securely with skewers or butcher's twine. Place the remainder of the apple mixture in the pan as a base for the bird and lay it on top. Splash the bird with wine, and place it in the oven. Baste the bird every 15 minutes, removing excess fat each time. If the bottom of the pan becomes too dry and threatens to burn, add water to keep it moist. The key to the bird's crispiness while keeping the flesh tender and moist is regular and even basting with juices and fat. At the two-hour mark, check for doneness by piercing between the thigh and the bottom of the breast to see if the juices run clear. If the top of the bird gets too dark, cover it with foil.

