

EXCLUSIVE! TRIP-PLANNING ADVICE FROM TOP EXPERTS

TRAVEL + LEISURE

SEPTEMBER 2008

ULTIMATE

FALL TRAVEL GUIDE

LONG-WEEKEND
GETAWAYS





Dishing in Austria

On a tour of some of the country's best taverns, tasting rooms, and pastoral restaurants with a pair of demanding epicures, CHRISTOPHER PETKANAS delights in one of Europe's most overlooked cuisines. *Photographed by JASPER JAMES*



Erwin Poller sets up an alfresco wine tasting at Der Pollerhof estate in Rössitz, Austria. Above: A poppy-seed noodle dessert at Mohnwirt restaurant, in Armschlag.

AUSTRIA

JOHANN DONABAUM'S MOTHER WAS STIRRING AN eight-gallon pot of apricot jam when we interrupted her in the kitchen of the family winery in Spitz. For the crazy price of \$35 per person per night, she lets out a few plain rooms with pretty mountain views, and the jam—soupy but vibrant—was for the breakfast table.

Opposite the kitchen in a 16th-century vaulted room was the *Heuriger*, the name in Austria for a seasonal tavern

that offers only the most recent vintage and, here, cold plates of the pork loin—flavored with juniper, garlic, and coriander—that Frau Donabaum salts and smokes herself.

It was the wrong time of year for the *Heuriger*, and I punished everyone by sulking until Johann opened a bottle of his 2005 Riesling Offenberg Smaragd. Monika described it as “creamy and lush yet strongly mineral, with a brothy, savory finish and a saline quality that stains the back of the palate.” Toni nodded in agreement, as she would many times on »



Country Fare Clockwise from above left: Der Floh, in the village of Langenlebar, in northeastern Austria; chef Josef Floh's venison, served with a parsnip purée-filled crispy crêpe; Floh in his dining room.

THE FIRST OF 17 DIFFERENT kinds of knödel, or dumplings, we would try over six days was made with *Topfen*, similar to pot cheese, rolled in bread crumbs and spooned with melted butter.

our eating and drinking tour of Niederösterreich, the north-eastern province wrapping Vienna, where Monika is from and lives part-time. One of the wonderful things about being a wine person is that you get to use extravagant language that would get you fired as a magazine writer.

However much they know about the Austrian table, which is a lot, Monika and Toni are friends first to me

and connoisseurs second. There is no record of Toni and me trading cookies at milk time in second grade in 1962, but carefully preserved ticket stubs show that we saw the "new" Supremes together at the Schaefer Music Festival in Central Park eight years later (for \$1) and the Fifth Dimension at Forest Hills tennis stadium in 1972. Now Toni's image decorates the funny green label on thousands of bottles of Grooner, a new easy-pouring Austrian white created by Monika to take a bite out of the colossal Pinot Grigio and Sauvignon Blanc market in the United States.

HOW DID THIS HAPPEN? HOW DID MY HIGH SCHOOL confessor and best girlfriend become the face of a wine whose name is spoofed (the real name is Grüner Veltliner) so Americans can pronounce it? Well, Toni and I did lose touch for a while. I moved to France for two decades and the Lovely and Talented Miss Toni Silver (as she bills herself) became a serio-comic performer of one-woman »

shows like *A Cab Is Cheaper Than a Funeral*, the title borrowed from her mother's exhortation, when Toni first moved to Manhattan in the David Berkowitz era, not to take the subway at night. To pay the bills Toni has also worked as Lauren Bacall's PA (one of her jobs was to inventory all the soap the actress collects when she travels) and as a barmaid in the VIP lounge during Barbra Streisand concerts at Madison Square Garden.

By the late 90's I began spending more time in New York. Except for the sound track, my adolescence was frivolous and I dislike being reminded of it. So even with all the affection I felt for Toni, I was ambivalent about restarting our friendship. But she pursued me, I was flattered, and she wore me down. What I discovered is that our relationship had rich midlife possibilities. For one thing, she knew interesting people I would not have met on my own. Her great pal—her sidekick and soulmate, really—was the bossy-adorable Monika Caha. Having imported loden coats and capes from her home country, Monika, at the time of our introduction, was trying on another way of making money that made use of her Austrian-ness: cooking and serving the food and wine she grew up with as the owner of Kaffeehaus, later the Candy Bar and Grill, in New York's Chelsea neighborhood.

The closing of Candy Bar was a noxious experience; Monika might have said goodbye to the food and beverage business forever. But she bounced back with Monika Caha Selections, an exclusive portfolio of 10 boutique Austrian vineyards for which she acts as U.S. agent, working in some states with Frederick Wildman and Sons as importer and distributor. One of her star producers is the precocious *Wine Spectator* darling Johann Donabaum, whom the magazine awarded 94 out of a possible 100 points for his 2006 Grüner Veltliner Smaragd Spitzer Point. Monika does



Monika Caha, winemaker, importer, and guide extraordinaire.

the high-low thing very well. Her own Grüner, whose label pictures Toni in a yodeling cap calling out "Grooner" as if from a *Sound of Music* hilltop, sells for as low as \$9.

Whatever her CV may suggest, Monika is not a dilettante; she is as much a chef as Thomas Keller. I know because over the years she has made a number of stunning meals for Toni and me at her West 73rd Street apartment. The idea of our trip was born at one of those dinners. Recently we burned a CD with "Up the Ladder to the Roof" and "The Girl's Song"; booked a suite of rooms in Mühldorf at the moody Burg Oberranna, every American's fantasy of a 10th-century castle in the Wachau; stuffed ourselves into a rental car; and I finally formed an opinion about Austrian food based on more than apple strudel.

"Austrian cooking doesn't even have the benefit of being maligned," Monika says in a speech I have heard her give 10 too many times. "It doesn't get a bum rap; it gets no rap. People confuse it with German, but it has its own identity. It's one of the great European cuisines, with links, obviously, to the old Austro-Hungarian Empire. It's all there hiding in plain sight: the tortes, the sweet and savory dumplings, the boiled-beef and fresh-water-fish dishes, the cult of the pig and potato."

Just as she rejects schnitzel made in a deep fryer (it should be done in a pan), Monika does not tolerate in- >>



Austrian Classics Clockwise from above left: The city hall and bell tower in Retz's main square; Sonja Pollak, wife of chef-owner Harald Pollak, at Pollak's Retzbacherhof restaurant, in Unterretzbach, near Retz; the restaurant's crispy-pork-fat-filled dumpling served on sauerkraut.

AUSTRIA NEVER GOT THE MEMO about 'things tasting of what they are.' But there are so many cuisines that bend over backward to deliver clear flavors and bright tastes, what do we need another one for?

dustrial kaiser rolls, which are stamped out hourly by the tens of thousands and get their characteristic swirl shape from a plastic machine attachment punched into the dough. She wanted to acquaint us with the real thing, so we went to see Hubert Schweighofer-Steiner, who sells a tiny portion of his production at retail from his plant, squeezed between car

dealerships on the outskirts of Tulln. Schweighofer-Steiner's kaisers are formed by hand, so they're a little uneven, a little imperfect, which, like a piece of hand-thrown pottery, gives them their cachet. Monika found the rolls appropriately chewy—"they'd be terrific with goulash"—and admired their special shine, the result of a potato-starch glaze (most kaisers are only brushed with water).

She was less wild about the flood of cream, which she said was absolutely not typical, at Jamek, about 50 yards from the Danube, in Joching. A posh favorite of the local *Bürgermeister*, the restaurant has a ravishing stone terrace where you dine amid old-fashioned roses, mixed borders, wisteria vines, and an emerald lawn with a velour pile. The waitresses wear checked dirndls, buttoned bodices, and smocked aprons and don't even look ridiculous. Parsley sauce would have been more traditional with the pike quenelles—"they used to be on every menu in Vienna that way"—but Monika forgave the chef for substituting basil. Many of the main courses—which included a ragoût of »

veal heart and lung zapped with mustard, vinegar, and capers—came with a little green salad, plated together.

“Salad in Austria is not served before or after the entrée,” Monika said. “It’s a condiment that furnishes acidity with fatty and other rich foods.” Right. The first of 17 different kinds of *knödel*, or dumplings, we would try over six days was made with *Topfen*, similar to pot cheese, rolled in bread crumbs and spooned with melted butter. The apricot hiding inside was so ripe and had so little fiber, poaching had turned it to liquid.

Dinner at Gasthof Zum Lustigen Bauern, in Zeiselmauer, was a bust according to the ladies, but not to me. I am not used to being the least demanding member in my party at a restaurant, but, ostensibly because I was the least knowledgeable about what we were eating, that was the happy case on this trip. It was just so freeing to have someone else in that role, rolling their eyes, shaking their heads, hating everything! Austria has its own vernacular bistro tradition, embodied in *Gasthöfe* and *Gasthäuser*. The most important elements are the *Schank*—a corner of the dining room, often with a zinc or copper bar, where beer and wine is dispensed—plus a big, conspicuous crucifix. The Lustigen Bauern’s *Schank* is unusually handsome, set off by collections of carafes, antique ceramic canisters, and kugelhof molds. Homey elegance is tricky to pull off, but this place nails it with bare plank floors and snowy damask

tablecloths. Toni thought the blood sausage wasn’t spicy enough, and Monika said the potato dumplings were overworked. Amid little puffs of exasperation I dared to like a type of schnitzel I didn’t even know existed, made with lightly cured pork instead of fresh.

Breakfast the next morning was chased by a 10 a.m. hard-cider and schnapps tasting at Seppelbauer, in the Mostviertel, the largest contiguous pear-growing region in Europe. On the way in, Monika said, “Wait till you see. The guys who make this stuff think they can drink Toni under the table and then get her into bed, but she’s always the only one left standing.” Two hours later we were still at it, auditioning literally dozens of alcohols and increasingly bony cider vintages—the driest were like biting into a block of granite—all made from obscure pear varieties. You’d have to be crazy to schedule a vinegar tasting after this, but I’m a little scared of Monika so I didn’t say anything. The wild-ramp and green-walnut vinegars sampled neat at the Reikersdorfer family farm, in Neuhofen, made me sick, though they were eventually delicious on the boiled-beef salads we ate at their *Heuriger*. It’s even more picturesque than Donabaum’s, if that is possible, with hikers seated outside on benches pulled up to tables covered in red-and-white-checked oilcloth. The air smells twitchingly of livestock, and the views stretch across the Danube valley to the mountains of the Waldriertel.

After a brief moment when I thought we might be eating at a backup restaurant where we were also holding a reservation, we settled down to dinner that night at Sodoma, in Tulln (Monika was initially offended that *branzino* was on the menu instead of trout—“pandering to Viennese businessmen!”). The first time she ate at Sodoma, a *Gasthaus* in the same mold as Bauern and nearly as good-looking, she invited herself into the kitchen, leaving only after getting the chef’s recipe for salsify in a Riesling–brown butter sauce with spinach dumplings. The food at Sodoma is exceptional (especially the headcheese and clear beef broth with crêpe slivers). The trouble is everybody who works there knows it. There can be an attitude problem.

The cult of the poppy and poppy seed in Austria reaches its apotheosis in Armschlag, nicknamed *das Mohndorf* (literally, “the poppy village”), as we observed the next day at lunch at Mohnwirt, a *Gasthaus* that is the village’s major draw. Armschlag is threaded with a charming “poppy path” that ends in a cooperative selling 10-pound sacks of poppy seeds, poppy-printed tea towels, and poppy honey, plus an excellent drizzling oil, chocolate, soap, and schnapps made with or from the seeds. If you’ve only ever had them on bagels or in cakes you have no idea what they can do. Adorned with thousands of old poppy-seed grinders and dried rafter-hung bunches of the pods, Mohnwirt uses the seeds in noodles, dump-

lings, to crust fish.... This is not to take anything away from the restaurant’s beautiful Viennese-style torte, seven five-millimeter layers interposed with a mixture of whipped cream and poppy seeds.

There were other hits, other misses, though in a pattern established early on, I refused to agree just for the sake of peace when my companions pronounced a miss. The restaurant Pollak’s Retzbacherhof, in Unterretzbach, is hung with Helmut Newton–style photographs of women wearing grapes instead of panties, and Toni and Monika’s indignation flared until I thought we might have to leave. They swallowed their outrage because Monika was determined I try the semolina-filled strudel, cooked in broth, bathed in butter, and served with a vinegary salad of green beans and red onions. In the event, she liked it. Erwin Poller, of the Pollerhof estate, in Röschitz, near Retz, set up a table in his vineyard, threw a cloth over it, and guided us through a tasting of regional cheeses, cured meats, pickled walnuts, and the Grüner Veltliner and Gewürztraminer that put him on the map. No fancy credentials are required: Poller will organize picnic-style lunches like this for the average wine tourist. Chef Josef Floh, of Der Floh, in Langenlebar, is a little foam-happy for my taste and, I would have thought, Monika’s. But after arctic char in a creamy, garlicky cucumber sauce, and crispy crêpes piped with parsnip purée, she crowned the *Gasthaus* the best of »



Top Seeds From above left: Rosemarie and Johann Neuwiesinger, owners of Mohnwirt, a *Gasthaus* in Armschlag; the restaurant's signature poppy-seed dumplings; inside the Mohnwirt dining room, where dried poppies hang from the rafters.

our trip. "Josef is doing amazing things for the food of this country," she said. "If I were the president of Austria I'd give him a medal."

With our last meal behind us, I poked Monika. While acknowledging the limitedness of our tour I said I found Austrian cooking sophisticated, fascinating, complex, its own thing, and profoundly satisfying—but with none of the virtues we have all been instructed to find desirable for the past three decades. Austria never got the memo about "things tasting of what they are." Then I thought, there are so many

cuisines these days that bend over backward to deliver clear flavors and bright tastes, what do we need another one for? A fashionable fetishizing of these qualities has led the world to forget that there are other ways of looking at food. Usually a remark like the one I made about Austrian cooking's being great but a difficult sell triggers a lecture from Monika on the French-Italian conspiracy to hold Austrian food down. But she took it well. +

Christopher Petkanas is a T+L special correspondent.

GUIDE TO AUSTRIA



WHEN TO GO
The weather is best April through October, when daytime temperatures generally stay in the 60's and 70's. Nights tend to be cooler, so plan to dress in layers.

GETTING THERE
United Airlines has direct flights from New York City, and most major carriers connect to Vienna

through London or Paris. For easier access, rent a car or travel by rail on the Austrian Federal Railways (43-1/930-000; oebb.at).

WHERE TO STAY
Burg Oberranna 1 Oberranna, Mühldorf; 43-27/138-221; schlosshotels.co.at; doubles from \$200.

WHERE TO EAT AND SIP

Der Floh 1 Tullnerstrasse, Langenlebar; 43-22/726-2809; dinner for two \$100.

Der Pollerhof 48 Winzerstrasse, Röschitz; 43-29/843-995.

Familie Reikersdorfer 1 Greinöd, Neuhofer; 43-74/755-6481; dinner for two \$30.

Gasthof Zum Lustigen Bauern 1 Kirchenplatz, Zeiselmayer; 43-22/427-0424; dinner for two \$65.

Jamek Winery and Restaurant 45 Joching, Weissenkirchen; 43-27/152-235; dinner for two \$125.

Mohnwirt 9 Armschlag, Armschlag; 43-28/727-421; lunch for two \$65.

Pollak's Retsbacherhof 1 Bahnstrasse, Unterretzbach; 43-29/422-0171; dinner for two \$80.

Schweighofer-Steiner Bäckerei 165 Königstetterstrasse, Tulln; 43-22/726-2409.

Seppelbauer 12 Pittersberg, Amstetten; 43-74/726-4660.

Sodoma 48 Bahnhofstrasse, Tulln; 43-22/726-4616; dinner for two \$95.

Winery Johann Donabaum 15 Laaben, Spitz; 43-27/132-488; doubles from \$70, including breakfast.

For more on the wines carried by Monika Caha Selections, visit mcselections.com.



A bottle of Grooner, Monika Caha's own Grüner Veltliner, with Toni Silver on the label.