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Vienna's Sweet Treats

By Sharon Hudgins

Photos by the author



Cafe Central, one of Vienna's most elegant coffeehouses.

Vienna has a well deserved reputation as a capital of cakes, confections and coffeehouses. The Viennese can't seem to get through the day without stopping for a mid-morning pick-me-up snack at their favorite coffeehouse and for mid-afternoon coffee-and-cakes at a neighborhood pastry shop. And who could resist buying a little box of handmade chocolates at one of the many tempting candy stores, to nibble on at home?

Winter is a great time to visit Vienna, when the city is decorated for the holidays and the colorful Christmas markets are in full swing. Even after the holidays, Vienna remains a festive city, with concerts, operas and other events to brighten up the gray winter days.

At this time of year, everyone needs more calories to cope with the cold weather. So let that be your excuse for sampling the many sweet treats that Vienna has to offer. Besides, what could be more romantic than sitting on a plush banquette under a sparkling chandelier in an elegant pastry shop, eating a rich torte and sipping hot coffee topped with whipped cream, while watching the snowflakes outside settle silently over the city?

KAFFEEHÄUSER & KONDITOREIEN

Vienna's coffeehouses (Kaffeehäuser) are an institution dating back to the 17th century. The city claims to have more than 800 of them, including 150 "classic" coffeehouses with their traditional wooden floors, dark wood paneling, little marble-top tables, racks of newspapers on the wall, and waiters dressed in black.

Most of them serve more than 20 different kinds of coffee drinks, hot and cold. If you don't know the differences among a

Grosser Brauner, a *Franziskaner*, a *Kapuziner* and an *Einspänner*, then ask the waiter to explain the coffees listed on the menu. Each will be served with a small glass of cold water on the side. And for the price of just one drink you've bought the right to sit in that spot for as long as you want, lingering over a newspaper or magazine, or writing your own journal or poetry, just like the historic figures who frequented that same coffeehouse in the past. Coffeehouses also serve a limited selection of sweet cakes and pastries as well as light meals (and sometimes more substantial fare).



Diglas, one of Vienna's 19th-century coffeehouses.

Vienna's most famous old coffeehouses include the elegant Café Central (corner of Herrengasse and Strauchgasse); Café Bellaria (Bellaria Strasse 6); Mozart bei der Oper (Albertinaplatz 2); Café Diglas (Wollzeile 10); Café Hofburg in the Imperial Palace (Hofburg/Innerer Burghof); Café Dommayer (Dommayergasse 1); Café Sperl (Gumpendorfer Strasse 11); and Café Sacher (Philharmonikerstrasse 4).



Cake counter at Demel's pastry shop.



Demel is one of Vienna's most famous pastry and confection shops.

Vienna is equally famous for its pastry shops (Konditoreien), which are often packed with customers getting their mid-morning or mid-afternoon sugar fix. The 200-year-old Demel pastry shop (Kohlmarkt 14) attracts hordes of locals and tourists to its elegant showrooms and cafe. Demel's high-quality cakes, pastries and confections are a temptation that can't be resisted. After admiring the wares in the display cases downstairs, go upstairs to the chandeliered cafe to order your coffee and cake, stopping along the way to peer through the glass into the kitchens where the goodies are being made.



Top, making marzipan roses at Demel's pastry and confection shop; below, stretching the dough for an apple strudel.

Founded in 1847, A. Gerstner is another outstanding traditional Viennese Konditorei. Visit its original location at Kärntner Strasse 13-15 for a taste of Gerstner's top-quality delights, perhaps dolled up with a dollop of *Schlagobers* (whipped cream). Both Demel and Gerstner have been official providers of sweets to the Hapsburg court in Austria, so you'll eat like an emperor at either establishment.

Although there used to be a stronger distinction between coffeehouses and pastry shops in Vienna, that difference is now somewhat blurred. You can often get the same range of coffee drinks at a pastry shop as at a coffeehouse, and a good (but usually more limited) selection of pastries at a coffeehouse. Formerly *Kaffeehäuser* were mainly for men, whereas *Konditoreien* primarily served the ladies (and also sold prettily boxed pastries to take home). In our modern era these gender differences have almost faded away.

TORTE WARS

Every visitor to Vienna wants to eat a slice of Sachertorte. Many pastry shops sell their own version of this rich chocolate cake, flavored with one or more layers of apricot jam and covered with a semi-sweet chocolate icing. But there are only two places that can claim to make the true Sachertorte: Hotel Sacher and Demel.



A slice of Vienna's famous Sacher-Torte (Photo courtesy Hotel Sacher).

Pastry cook Franz Sacher invented this cake in 1832, and much later the recipe was further developed by one of Sacher's sons while working at Demel's bakery. In the 20th century a legal battle developed between the Hotel Sacher and Demel over who had the right to call this popular cake "The Original Sacher Torte." After years of legal wrangling, the Hotel Sacher was given the right to attach a circular chocolate seal on top of its cakes and sell them as "The Original Sacher-Torte," whereas Demel was allowed to attach a triangular seal on its cakes and call them "Eduard Sacher-Torte," after the Sacher son who developed his recipe at Demel's. (Now you'll also see the cakes identified as "Demel's Sachertorten.") Each version is slightly different, so you'll want to taste both of them, at their bakeries of origin, to decide which you like best!

HAVE A BALL

If your sweet tooth is hungering for more, you can easily satisfy it at any of Vienna's many candy shops, some of which make their own special confections. A number of them are concentrated around St. Stephen's Cathedral in the heart of

Vienna's Altstadt. Look for Confiserie Heindl (Stephansplatz 11), which has 22 stores throughout Vienna; Manner (Stephansplatz 7); Metzger (also at Stephansplatz 7), which sells handmade confections, gingerbread and beeswax candles; and Lipizzaner (Stephansplatz 6), long known for its excellent chocolates, including some of the world's first white chocolate candies.



Marzipan confections cleverly colored and shaped to look like Austrian open-face sandwiches.



Lipizzaner, known for its fine-quality white chocolates.

Beyond St. Stephen's, but still in the Altstadt, are Schokolade König (Freisingergasse 1), featuring handmade chocolates; City Confiserie (Bognergasse 5), with its extensive array of whimsical marzipan confections; Christian Rosenauer (Fleischmarkt 12), an old-fashioned Viennese candy store chock full of Mozartkugeln and other traditional sweets; and Leonidas (Fleischmarkt 9), which sells luxurious Belgian chocolates. Blühendes Konfekt (Schmalzhofgasse 19) specializes in confections made from, and decorated with, flowers; and Xocolat (Strauchgasse 1) is a mecca for chocolate connoisseurs.



Advertising Austria's famous Mozart Kugeln confections.

Wherever you go in Vienna, you can't get away from those Austrian confections called *Mozartkugeln*. Invented in Salzburg in 1890, they've now taken all of Austria by storm. The original Mozart balls have a round center of sweetened green pistachio paste surrounded by a layer of hazelnut nougat, dipped in dark chocolate to coat the outside. Like all Mozartkugeln, they're about the size of a small walnut. Other candy companies make their own versions, too, each a slightly different variation of the original confection. Mirabell-brand Mozart balls are the most widely marketed, in their distinct red-and-gold packages. You can't leave Vienna without tasting this typical Austrian sweet.



Shelves of Mozart Kugeln at a Viennese candy store.



Apricot-filled dessert dumplings, a tasty example of sweet *Mehlspeisen*.

MEHLSPEISEN

Finally, any discussion of Viennese sweets should include mention of *Mehlspeisen*, those "flour foods" so beloved by the Austrians. This category of dishes made with flour includes *Palatschinken*, thin pancakes spread with jam, folded into quarters, and garnished with chocolate sauce and whipped cream; *Kaiserschmarrn*, a large buttery and sugary, raisin-studded pancake that looks like it has been hit by an earthquake; sweet *Knödel*, fruit- or jam-filled round dumplings garnished with confectioners' sugar; *Nockerln*, big light- and airy egg-white dumplings, sometimes served with berry sauce; and Strudel, layers of flaky pastry surrounding a filling of sweetened fruit, berries, or soft cheese. These are often listed in the dessert sections of restaurant menus, although they might be found under their own menu category, *Mehlspeisen*, reflecting the time when these dishes were also eaten as a main course, especially during fasting periods when meat products were prohibited.

► For more information about places to eat in Vienna (including restaurants, cafes, coffeehouses, pastry shops, and candy stores), get the 67-page booklet titled "Shopping, Wining & Dining" from the Vienna tourist office, WienTourismus (Albertinaplatz/Maysedergasse, www.vienna.info/en).

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About the writer

Sharon Hudgins is an award-winning writer with four books and more than 700 articles published worldwide. Her food and travel writing has appeared in *National Geographic Traveler*, *Saveur*, *Gastronomica*, *German Life*, *Russian Life*, *The World & I*, *Chile Pepper*, *Fiery Foods & Barbecue*, major newspapers in the United States, and periodicals in Germany, Russia, and the Czech Republic. For several years she was the food columnist for *The Stars and Stripes* newspaper in Europe, and since 1997 has been the food columnist for *German Life* magazine in the United States. A former editor of *Chile Pepper* magazine, she has also worked as a

cookbook editor, photographer, filmmaker, university professor, and lecturer on international tours offered by National Geographic Expeditions, Lindblad, Road Scholar, and Silversea Cruises.

Sharon Hudgins has lived in nine countries of Europe and Asia and traveled in 50 countries across the globe. Her European experience includes living in Germany for 15 years, as well as in several European capitals and small towns from northern Scotland to southern Spain to the Greek island of Crete. She is the author of an award-winning cookbook about the regional cuisines of Spain, and her personal memoir, *The Other Side of Russia: A Slice of Life in Siberia and the Russian Far East*, won two national awards for travel and food writing.

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