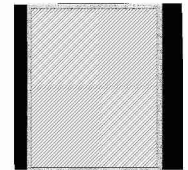
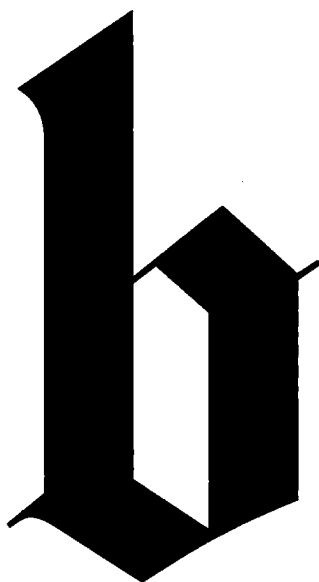


teutonic plates

MOVE OVER, SPAIN. THE LATEST CULINARY TRAIL LEADS TO GERMANY — AND, AS WILLIAM GRIMES DISCOVERS, IT'S NOT YOUR MOTHER'S BLUTWURST ANYMORE.

Photographs by
ELINOR CARUCCI





efore the meal proper begins at Silk, Frankfurt's most futuristic restaurant, you're handed a ceramic spoon containing what appears to be the yolk of an egg. It isn't. The blob quivers like a yolk and looks like a yolk. But the color is emphatically, undeniably green.

Then something remarkable takes place. With a tilt of the spoon, the mysterious sphere slides into your mouth, where its gelatinous membrane bursts, setting off an explosion

of olive — pure, concentrated, pristine essence of olive, somehow transmuted from a solid into a liquid.

It's quite a trick, and there are more where that came from. One requires a bucket of liquid nitrogen. Others allude playfully to ur-German ingredients, like the pool of kohlrabi-horseradish tea surrounding a small block of lightly poached salmon. Still others, like the porcini consommé and hojiblanca soba noodles served with a little taco, express, almost deliriously, a postnational consciousness.

THIS IS WHAT HAPPENS WHEN GERMAN CUISINE BREAKS LOOSE. Either this, or something entirely different. About 20 miles southeast of Munich, on a farm in a tiny village, diners at Das Wirtshaus zum Herrmannsdorfer Schweinsbräu sit at mighty oak tables in a converted barn or outside in a patio fragrant with the tang of fresh manure.

There, just out of earshot of grunting pigs and gamboling goats, they feast on stripped-down, no-frills German food, all of it organic and most of it obtained either from the farm itself or from organic growers in the neighborhood. This is roots cuisine, quite literally — one of the best dishes on the menu is local beets, steeped in a light ginger marinade. For anyone who thinks of German food as oompah cuisine, it is a life-changing experience.

Ultra-urbane Silk and its country cousin have something in common. They have sprung to life, like dozens of other new restaurants across Germany, as French haute cuisine has loosened its international grip. All over Europe for the past 20 years, experimental chefs have rushed into this vacuum, energized by a global outlook on food culture and a nagging suspicion that there might also be rich possibilities in their own native cuisines. The same synthesizing impulses that propelled new American cuisine in the United States took on a new life in Europe in the 1990s, especially, of course, in Spain, where chefs like Ferran Adrià at El Bulli showed that it was possible to rework the national vocabulary and, while remaining faithful to the idea of regionalism and using local ingredients, create startlingly innovative food.

Germany took note. Sitting side by side with France, it had long

suffered from *Minderwertigkeitsgefühl* — an inferiority complex. Fine dining, by definition, was French, even when the chef was German, and the Michelin Guide called the shots, imposing French values wherever it went. A powerful local green movement, however, and the example of renegade chefs like Adrià, encouraged revolt. In the last decade, and more rapidly in the last five years, a new generation of German chefs has made *neue Deutsche Küche*, or new German cuisine, an engine of culinary progress, particularly effective when allied, as it often is, with top-quality traditional ingredients from organic farms.

“It’s kind of a small revolution, in minds and in cuisine,” says Otto Geisel, the president of Slow Food Germany and the owner of Zirbelstube at the Hotel Victoria in Bad Mergentheim, about 80 miles southeast of Frankfurt. “Everyone has seen what has happened in Spain, where chefs are using the best local products, and they have developed their own philosophy. The top chefs in Germany, until now, were a little afraid because of the Michelin Guide.”

Almost five years ago, Geisel overhauled his French-oriented menu and converted it to a new German format, with dishes like Leipziger allerlei, a traditional vegetable medley of peas, carrots, asparagus and morels served with river crayfish and calf’s-head ravioli in tarragon broth. Interestingly enough, the Germanized Zirbelstube retained its Michelin star, further evidence that the guide’s judges, faced with a much more even distribution of culinary power across the map, have loosened up. In Wolfsburg, a city known primarily for its giant Volkswagen plant, Sven Elverfeld has earned two Michelin stars at Aqua for new German dishes like sea bass with sautéed blutwurst and mustard foam. At Oki, in Berlin, northern German cuisine fuses with Japanese, a marriage that boggles the mind but serves as convenient shorthand for the freewheeling spirit behind the new German cuisine.

MY FIRST INKING OF THE CHANGES AFOOT CAME IN DORHEIM, a village outside Frankfurt. At Grossfeld-Gastraum der Sinne, a cozy little restaurant hidden in a tight maze of residential streets, you are offered two menus, labeled traditional and experimental. It was hard to figure out which dishes belonged where, and that may say something about German cuisine at the moment. The experimental menu did include bold options like a goose-liver parfait layered with rhubarb ragout and a sorbet made from argan oil (a nutty Moroccan oil). But jellied oxtail with beef tartare and tobiko-wasabi cream counted as traditional. (Could German-Japanese fusion already have spread its tentacles to little Dorheim?) The ancient bärlauch, a type of wild onion, added a punch of flavor to baked sea bass with chunks of octopus in a spicy paprika emulsion, but this authentic, ur-German note did not push the dish over to the traditional side of the menu. Meanwhile, in the midst of this fusion festival, Wiener schnitzel somehow made an appearance.

Grossfeld turned out to be a useful warm-up for Silk. Located on the outskirts of Frankfurt, in a semi-industrial neighborhood dominated by car dealerships, Silk takes dead aim at the city’s bright young things — it’s wrapped inside the night spot CocoonClub and pulls out all the stops to revolutionize the dining experience. Silk may be the only restaurant in the world where the D.J.’s outnumber the chefs.

Stepping gingerly over holograms projected on the floor, diners pass through the club to enter Silk itself, where they must remove their shoes and, taking a leap of faith, hop onto enormous white leather bed-sofas surrounded by diaphanous white curtains. From a booth manned by a

dead-serious D.J., moody world-beat music pours forth nonstop, creating a wall of muted sound. The lighting is kept high for people watching, which is high quality.

New Yorkers will find a familiar face at Silk. Mario Lohninger is the Austrian chef who opened Danube in Manhattan to wide acclaim and three stars from me (out of four) when I was restaurant critic for The New York Times. At Danube, Lohninger specialized in refined, occasionally modernized Austro-Hungarian cuisine. At Silk, he has enthusiastically embraced an international style that reflects Adrià's influence, with occasional ventures into molecular cuisine (this latest break of the new wave has been eagerly embraced by **Germans**).

Lohninger is a superb chef. But there is no denying that dinner at Silk makes demands. Everyone eats the same meal, a multicourse tasting menu placed, one dish after another, on translucent TV-dinner trays. More than a meal, it's an extended voyage that can last four hours or more. After the exploding olive ball and a startling sorbet concocted, by some alchemical process, in the nitrogen bucket, a procession of exquisite flavors followed on the night I was there: a tiny ice cream cone filled with tuna tartare and P.X. ice cream; lobster with avocado and smoked paprika; a meltingly tender lump of buffalo surrounded by porcinis and pimentos.

Clarity, subtlety and inventiveness are the persistent notes in Lohninger's menu. The portions are precisely calibrated, as are the intervals between courses, leaving room at the end for a feather-light cherry soufflé flavored with sherry. Nevertheless, you have to be in a certain mood. The young German couple in my booth, dressed all in white to blend in, definitely was. After their second bottle of Champagne they were entwined and writhing, to the delight of nearby patrons.

ANYONE INTRIGUED BY THE NEW GERMAN CUISINE MAKES A reservation in Munich at Restaurant Ederer. Karl Ederer, at 52 a senior statesman of the movement, has been emphasizing seasonal cooking and locally sourced ingredients for years. In the early 1980s at the Gasthaus Glockenbach, he single-handedly resuscitated Bavarian cuisine by giving it a new German slant; since 2001 he's cooked at his namesake restaurant, located on the mezzanine of a handsome historic building in the city center.

Ederer's center of gravity has shifted. Sometimes the accent is distinctly German (Simmental beef loin with artichokes and sweet corn), but as often as not Ederer steers an international course in dishes like zucchini blossoms stuffed with polenta, mushrooms, grilled eggplant and mint. What has not changed is his emphasis on the freshest ingredients and his partnerships with artisanal producers.

Dining at Ederer is a reminder that Germans, even at top-tier restaurants, do not take food nearly as seriously as their French neighbors. Music commands reverence but food is meant to be enjoyed, so there's none of the studied formality that prevails in so many French restaurants. On one wall of Restaurant Ederer hung an enormous portrait of the actor Harald Juhnke, executed in brightly colored plastic shopping bags, like some sort of industrial-age quilt. For sheer absurdity, it was matched only by the mysterious suit of armor perched atop a cupboard near the kitchen. Some of the food is funny, too. Round envelopes of celery root, stuffed with ricotta cheese and topped with a yellow dab of spicy onion-purslane compote, come to the table three

to a plate, looking for all the world like a serving of fried eggs.

At G-Munich, surprise is built into the format. The restaurant is the brainchild of Holger Stromberg, the leader of a breakaway group of new **German** chefs known as *Die Jungen Wilden*, or Young Wild Ones. Organized about 10 years ago, they have a Web site, a motto (“different, younger, wilder”) and a manifesto strong on rule breaking and weird flavor combinations: “blutwurst strudel with scallops — any questions?”

Americans inured to shock tactics in the kitchen might find the wild ones a little tame, but the sense of youthful energy is infectious. At G-Munich, Stromberg and his frequent stand-in, Kai Grosse, offer two options. Diners can order from a standard menu or roll the dice and let the chef create a tasting menu on the spot. Appetizers include a terrine of wild Scottish salmon layered with soy-marinated radish slices, sweet and fiery, in a light saffron-basil vinaigrette. Even better is a clever dish of squid stuffed with succulent bits of oxtail, surrounded by a coconut-wasabi foam and painted with a Madeira nage. Sweet and savory at once, with the squid impersonating a dumpling wrapper, it was like a giant piece of dim sum. The surprise plates of small bites are arranged on a tiered holder: calf’s head with kohlrabi cream, shallot tarte Tatin with truffle foam, smoked catfish with olive jam — that sort of thing.

Down the road in tranquil Herrmannsdorf, where the Alps peek up over the horizon, a different aesthetic reigns. Thomas Thielemann takes a purist’s approach to his food, which is no surprise. He worked with Karl Ederer at the Wirtshaus when it opened in 1993, and the ingredients at hand are superlative. Like Alice Waters at Chez Panisse or Dan Barber at Blue Hill at Stone Barns, Thielemann regards his cooking as an argument for a new relationship between restaurants and their suppliers, who, in turn, use their products to plead for sustainable agriculture and a new respect for traditional plants and animals.

The complex at Herrmannsdorf — which includes a bakery, a dairy and a brewery along with vegetable gardens and pigsties and the restaurant — was created by Karl-Ludwig Schweisfurth, a former large-scale sausage maker who repented of his ways and designed the constellation of enterprises to illustrate a better way of living and eating.

The eating is certainly good. Those beets, velvety and full flavored with a luxurious mouth feel, redefine the category. It seems ridiculous to exclaim over such a lowly vegetable, but these are simply off the charts. Likewise the pork. It often comes from the pink-and-black Schwäbisch-Hällisches pigs, once dominant in the region but nearly extinct by the 1960s as farmers raced to produce leaner, cheaper meat. Served at the Wirtshaus in a thick slab with its own juices, the pork is tender, full flavored and, wonder of wonders, deliciously fat, the way pork was meant to be.

In Berlin, the home of currywurst, internationalism comes with the territory. New German cuisine fits naturally in a city traditionally receptive to revolutionary politics and audacious art. At Vau, a sleek, wood-paneled bistro with a Michelin star, the old potato dish known as kartoffelschmarrn has been given an upgrade comparable to Daniel Boulud’s reworking of the all-American hamburger at DB Bistro Moderne in Manhattan. Kolja Kleeberg, a chef with a fine hand and a love of local dishes and

local organic ingredients — Müritz lamb, Berlin-style blutwurst and spitzkohl, a mild spring cabbage that looks like a pointy gnome's hat — has whipped up something halfway between a soufflé and dumpling, fluffy but studded with little chunks of potato and crowned with dollops of caviar. This signature dish, priced at about \$74, launches the humble potato into the stratosphere. It's a stunt, but Kleeberg's modernizing impulses are on view, less dramatically, in a warm appetizer of ham hock with crayfish and kohlrabi, or succulent Müritz lamb with bean cassoulet and dandelion. There's nothing strained about his cooking; he has a light, insouciant touch to go with his evident earnestness.

Even cheekier is Germany's chef of the moment, Tim Raue, a full-throttle modernist in his glory at Restaurant 44 in the Swissôtel, where the subdued dining room does nothing to distract attention from the Kurfürstendamm, visible three stories below, or from the fireworks on the table. The German edition of GaultMillau, the French restaurant guide, recently named Raue chef of the year, a vote of confidence for the new wave. "I have corners, I have sharp edges, I have a big mouth," he once told an interviewer.

He also has a good eye. The exquisitely arranged dishes on his Asian-influenced menu reflect a highly sophisticated visual sense that supports his precisionist, daring small plates. On the night I ate at 44, a shockingly orange-colored passion-fruit-tomato gazpacho, spicy and bracingly acidic, struck a resounding opening note in a meal that progressed in dazzling fashion. A deep-green chive sorbet offered both a sharp taste contrast and a striking visual complement to cauliflower in chicken-feet gelee, with an ecru stripe of sweet cauliflower purée extending the length of the plate.

Raue is not a *Junge Wilde*, but he knows a thing or two about unexpected combinations. A rogue bit of bright-red watermelon accented a pristine block of cod, swathed in a subtle ginger-leek purée. Hyssop, of all things, lent an astringent, minty note that played off the richness of duck tongues with beets in a morel jus. Raue managed to come up with one of the few

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memorable desserts I encountered in eight straight days of eating in Germany: peanuts, gianduja and puffed rice formed into a light, chewy disc, accompanied by a pepper meringue and currant sorbet.

Raue enjoys celebrity status, thanks to the attention that Germans now lavish on their favorite chefs. A surprising number of them divide their time between the kitchen and the television studio. There they cook for a food-crazy national audience primed by cheap and easy travel, shaped by European integration, kept in the know by swarms of food critics and eager to snap up cookbooks dedicated to the latest trends in German cooking. It all adds up to a palpable sense of energy on the German restaurant scene and, in its wilder flights, some culinary absurdities. "What did the damned oxtail ragout ever do to the chef to deserve being sunk into a Madeira cappuccino?" complains Vincent Klink, the chef at Restaurant Wielandshöhe in Stuttgart and a leading figure in new German cuisine.

I can report that it is still possible to find sausage,

sauerkraut and potatoes, uninflected, in the new Germany. At a highway service plaza, I threw myself, with gratitude, on a plate laden with a giant smoked pork hock, a mountainous pile of sauerkraut and three enormous boiled potatoes. It tasted good. And then I began to wonder. Why no wasabi foam? Perhaps they haven't heard. ■

Germany

RESTAURANTS G-Munich Geyerstrasse 52, Munich; 011-49-89-7474-7999; www.g-munich.de; entrees \$31 to \$54. Grossfeld-Gasträum der Sinne Erbsengasse 16, Friedberg-Dorheim; 011-49-6031-791-8909; www.andre-grossfeld.de; tasting menu from \$70. Restaurant Ederer Kardinal-Faulhaber-Strasse 10, Munich; 011-49-89-2423-1310; www.restaurant-ederer.de; entrees \$30 to \$43. Restaurant 44 Augsburgerstrasse 44, Berlin; 011-49-30-220-100; www.restaurant44.de; entrees about \$26 to \$60. Silk CocoonClub, Carl-Benz-Strasse 21, Frankfurt; 011-49-69-900-200; www.cocoonclub.net; tasting menu \$125. Vau, Jägerstrasse 54/55, Berlin; 011-49-30-2029-730; www.vau-berlin.de; entrees \$31 to \$74. Das Wirtshaus zum Herrmannsdorfer Schweinsbräu Herrmannsdorf 7, Glonn; 011-49-8093-90-94-45; www.schweinsbraeu.de; entrees \$24 to \$33.

HOTELS In Frankfurt, you'll find traditional city-center luxury at the Steigenberger Frankfurter Hof (Am Kaiserplatz; 011-49-69-21502; www.frankfurter-hof.steigenberger.de; doubles from about \$235); for modern design, there's the Radisson SAS Hotel (Franklinstrasse 65; 011-49-69-770-1550; www.frankfurt.radissonsas.com; doubles from \$141), and a small, comfortable option is the Hotel Villa Orange (Hebelstrasse 1; 011-49-69 40584-0; www.villa-orange.de; doubles from \$206). Munich's top-tier properties are the Hotel Bayerischer Hof (Promenadeplatz 2-6; 011-49-89-21200; doubles from \$311), Hotel Vier Jahreszeiten Kempinski (Maximilianstrasse 17; 011-49-89-2125-0; www.kempinski.com; doubles from \$341) and Mandarin Oriental (Neuturmstrasse 1; 011-49-89-290-980; www.mandarinoriental.com; doubles from \$559). Berlin has a wealth of central high-end choices, including the Hotel Adlon Kempinski (Unter den Linden 77; 011-49-30-22610; www.hotel-adlon.de; doubles from \$654), Grand Hyatt Berlin (Marlene-Dietrich-Platz 2 011-49-30-2553-1234; www.berlin.grand.hyatt.com; doubles from \$354), Regent Berlin (Charlottenstrasse 49; 011-49-30-20338; www.regenthotels.com; doubles from \$420) and Ritz-Carlton (Potsdamerplatz 3; 011-49-30-337-777; www.ritzcarlton.com; doubles from \$448); or try the intimate, gently priced Hotel Askaniischer Hof (Kurfürstendamm 53; 011-49-30-881-80-33; www.askanischer-hof.de; doubles from \$167).



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CREATIVE LICENSE Previous spread, left: cauliflower in chicken-feet geleé with green chive sorbet and caviar, at Restaurant 44 in Berlin. Right, three dishes at G-Munich, from top: tandoor-roasted tuna with mango-peperonata chutney; sea bass with chard, veal tail and Chartreuse; and rabbit with black trumpet mushrooms on pearl-barley risotto with herbs and Madeira jus.



GERMAN ENGINEERING From far left: at Silk in Frankfurt, a bucket of liquid nitrogen is used tableside to prepare a sorbet; the restaurant's blutwurst ravioli with sauerkraut and balsamic vinegar; putting the finishing touch on a spring roll at Silk; the chef Holger Stromberg, a leader of the Young Wild Ones, at G-Munich; Stromberg's terrine of salmon with watercress mousse and daikon in soy and saffron vinaigrette.



LEADING LIGHTS From far left: at Das Wirtshaus zum Herrmannsdorfer Schweinsbräu outside Munich, local ingredients reign supreme (including the once-scarce Schwäbisch-Hällisches pork); the Wirtshaus's chef, Thomas Thielemann, on the restaurant's farm; beets and roasted sweetbreads at the Wirtshaus; Vau, a standout for new German cuisine in Berlin; at Restaurant 44, where the country's chef du jour, Tim Raue, runs the kitchen.

