



How many items of traditional Czech cuisine can you name? Smoked sausages? Dumplings? Er, lager?

For most of us – even those who like to count themselves as epicureans (ahem) – that’s pretty much where our knowledge peters out. Czech cooking is decidedly off the radar – and not exactly highly regarded.

It wasn’t always so. In the 19th century, Prague had a world-beating cuisine. It was one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the Austro-Hungarian Empire and its chefs were at the cutting edge. They even claimed to have invented that Mitteleuropean staple, apple strudel.

It was the Communists who put paid to culinary creativity. For more than 40 years, all restaurants were obliged to serve recipes sourced exclusively from the government-issued cookbook *Recipes for Warm Meals*. Chefs who whipped up their own take on roast pork and stewed cabbage were in danger of being branded bourgeois – and having their chef’s whites confiscated.

Over the past five years – as foreign-trained Czech chefs have returned home, often with a newfound pride for their own history and cuisine – the city’s been re-establishing its identity as a culinary destination. Restaurants are going experimental. Food magazines and blogs are cropping up monthly. Seasonal produce is slipping into the spotlight once again. It’s time to see what’s back on the menu in Prague.

BOHEMIAN BOUNTY

I kicked off my foodie investigation on the banks of the Vltava River, where the colourful **Náplavka Market** (farmarsketrziste.cz) is held each Saturday (8am-2pm). Launched in 2010, Náplavka is the most popular of the half-dozen farmers’ markets that have cropped up around the city recently.

Local blogger Liezel de la Isla (thepraguebasket.wordpress.com) advises an early start. “The best >>

A WEEKEND IN Prague

Cast aside your preconceptions. Globe-trotting food lover Kathryn Tomasetti checks out what’s good to eat and drink in Prague – and discovers tastes and experiences way more enticing than she’d been expecting. Time to book flights?

HEART OF PRAGUE
Charles Bridge,
the Castle
and St Vitus’
Cathedral



BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY (clockwise from top left) Bustling Náplavka Market; butcher-cum-bistro Naše Maso; beer and snacks at Lokal; the Cubist Grand Café Orient; artful food at La Degustation Bohême Bourgeoise; discovering hidden gems on the Eating Prague Food Tour; cellar-restaurant in the U Medvíků brewery; beetroot and goat's cheese open sandwiches at Sisters bistro



of the food goes well before 11am," she says (so go easy on the pilsner the night before). It's a vibrant scene. Spring's first asparagus shoots compete for attention with winter's final parsnips. Smoked meats are stacked high alongside eggs laid out on blankets. Dairy farmers proffer fresh butter and slivers of aged sheep's cheese. During summer, says de la Isla, "thirsty shoppers can retire to Farmářská loď Petra", a

barge moored alongside the market, for chilled beers and sausages. The future is uncertain for the market as the authorities have threatened to move it out of the city centre. Grab it while you can...

IN THE KNOW

Laden with market treats (sour cherry jam, organic crisps, fragrant walnuts and a hefty poppyseed cheesecake), I hopped on one of the city's zippy trams north to Prague's Old Town. **Le Court**, a leafy courtyard café, was my destination, the meeting point for **Eating Prague Food Tours** (eatingprague.com, €65pp – around £48 – for four hours).

Our seven-stop crash course in the city's tucked away foodie hotspots took us from flavoursome beetroot and goat's cheese chlebíčky – open sandwiches – in bistro **Sisters** (chlebicky-praha.cz) to a grilled Přeštice pork chop – it's a heritage, black-spotted breed – at **Naše Maso** (nasemaso.ambi.cz), a butcher's shop with its own bistro. Our small group then snacked on bowls of satisfying sauerkraut soup

in a place so secret, the tour people won't let me reveal it (sorry!). Another highlight was svíčková na smetaně – beef and bread dumplings in a creamy sauce – at **Café Louvre** (cafelouvre.cz), where Einstein used to hang out.

LOCAL EATS

After all that, an evening off was required. But next day a trek up to Prague Castle, followed by a stroll over the iconic Charles Bridge, re-sharpened my appetite. I found typically monstrous Czech portions in **Lokal** (lokal-dlouha.ambi.cz), tucked into a back street of Prague's Old Town. Its vaults have the noisy ambiance of a beer hall, served with a side of accomplished Bohemian dishes – the white pudding sausage with sauerkraut is a hearty belly buster. This is also a place where you can enjoy 'tank beer', served unpasteurised, straight from the tank and, so beer lovers say, imbued with lots of more flavour. The brand served here is spicy, amber-hued Pilsner Urquell, the world's first pilsner beer, from the town of

PHOTOGRAPHS: THINKSTOCK, VOJTECH NEVED, AMBIENTE RESTAURANTS, ARCHIVE LA DEGUSTATION BOHEME BOURGEOISE, PRAGUE FOOD TOURS, MATT SINDELAR & MARIA MICHOPULU

Pilsen (where the word comes from). I found one of the city's great bargains in the hip neighbourhood of Vinohrady, a short tram ride east of Prague's Old Town, where bar-restaurant **Parliament** (vinohradskeyparlament.cz) prides itself on its seasonal ingredients and well-kept Staropramen beer. For lunch there were slices of raw Blatná trout in a lemon and chilli marinade, or roast venison loin served with home-pickled mushrooms and red wine mayonnaise. A blowout lunch here, drinks included, weighs in at an astonishing £5-£10 per head. It's not all stripped-down beer halls in the new Prague food scene – there's fine dining too. Back in Prague's Old Town, chef Jan Punc̄ochář oversees **Grand Cru** (grand-cru.cz), which opened in late 2014. A wine bar and elegant restaurant, its menu glitters with gourmet dishes such as pan-seared venison loin with juniper sauce, or quince cheesecake with dates. Award-winning sommelier Jakub Pířbyl can pluck your perfect wine

from the cellar's 1,300-plus bottles, many of them excellent hearty reds from the Czech Republic's eastern Moravia region. Come at lunchtime, when the daily three-course menu is priced at CZK400 (about £11.50).

CAFÉ CULTURE

Sunday mornings are made for lazy breakfasts at one of Prague's beloved coffeehouses. These cafés offer simple spreads such as eggs, yogurt, cheese and excellent Viennese-style pastries, often in elegant surroundings. For classic Czech cuisine try Old Town landmarks **Grand Café Orient** (grandcafeorient.cz), decked out entirely in Cubist furnishings, and the Unesco-listed **Café Imperial** (cafeimperial.cz), a medley of Moorish décor. More contemporary is the labyrinthine **Café Lounge** (cafe-lounge.cz) in the neighbourhood of Smíchov, which offers smoked salmon bagels and quinoa salad alongside a traditional Czech menu. The sweet-toothed should make a beeline for **Erhart Café** (erhartovacukrarna.cz), in the

WHERE TO STAY

- **The Augustine** Sharing quarters with a functioning Augustinian monastery, this high-end hotel just south of Prague Castle also brews its own St Thomas beer, which follows a 13th-century recipe, on the premises. The spa pampers with its signature St Thomas beer body ritual. *Letenská 12/33; doubles from €250 – about £188; augustinehotel.com*
- **Fusion Hotel** Funky and fun. The modern rooms – all decorated by young Czech designers – range from the open-plan Fusion White (€130 – about £98), with views over Prague Castle from its own terrace, to the playful Xtensive Room (€110 – about £83), which sleeps up to six on one giant bed. *Panska 9, Old Town; doubles from €70 – about £53 – room only; fusionhotels.com*

city's eastern district of Žižkov. This late-1930s bakery is famed for its desserts such as walnut-rich sponges and laskonka (chocolate cream sandwiched by layers of meringue).

However it's the **Café Savoy** (cafesavoy.ambi.cz), also in Smíchov, that I found irresistible. Local families and tourists dine side by side under ornate chandeliers and lofty Neo-Renaissance ceilings. Yet the atmosphere is unpretentious. Redcurrant jam comes with crusty bread (both made on site); omelettes are filled with garlicky spinach; and the ultra-rich Savoy hot chocolate is served in its own tiny jug.

AFTERNOON TIPPLES

Back out in the crisp, cold sunshine, city dwellers were sipping frosty beers in the terrace beer gardens that dot the Vltava's banks. The Czech Republic has the world's highest beer consumption per capita: an incredible 148 litres (that's 261 pints!) per person, per year.

Unsurprisingly, then, Prague is home to a handful of breweries. Many, such as historical **Staropramen** (staropramen.com), offer tours of the premises and tastings. More offbeat venues include the Old Town's petite 15th-century brewery **U Medvídků** (umedvidku.cz), which uses traditional methods to create >>

unpasteurised, caramel-y Oldgott and the darkly fruity X Beer 33, a potent brew at 12.6% abv. In the New Town, microbrewery **Pivovarský dům** (pivovarskydum.com) is Prague's most original, producing speciality brews such as coffee beer, nettle beer and the yeasty šamp, created using the same bottle-fermentation method as champagne.

Oenophile visitors need not feel left out. Prague is also home to **Sklep Grébovka** (sklepregbovka.cz), an off-the-beaten-track wine cellar and tiny 1.6-hectare vineyard in the 19th-century Havlíčkovy Sady park. Eight grape varieties are cultivated on its terraces, and the wines, from light white riesling to the easy red dornfelder, can be tried on site or at **Viniční Altán Gazebo** (vinicni-altan.cz), a wine bar and restaurant set among the vines.

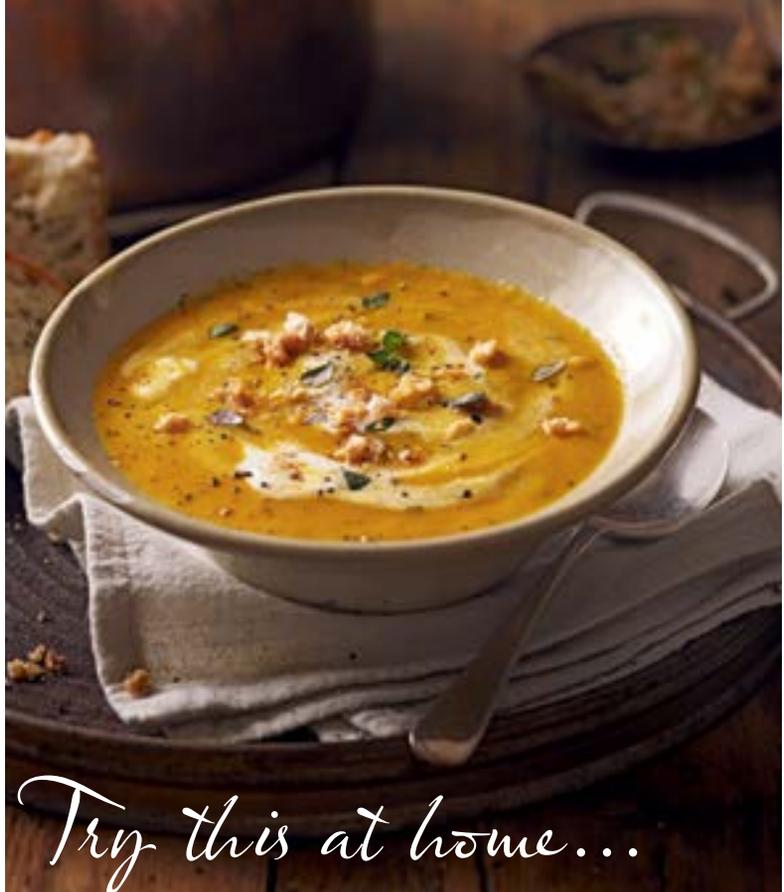
A CONTEMPORARY TWIST

For my final taste of Prague I reserved a table at the city's most avant-garde restaurant, Michelin-starred **La Degustation Bohême Bourgeoise** (ladegustation.cz), on one of the Old Town's atmospheric streets. It's here that head chef Oldřich Sahajdák transforms traditional Bohemian ingredients such as nasturtiums, snails from the Czech mountain town of Lužické Hory, rowanberries and mead into thoroughly 21st-century dishes (multi-course set menus only, CZK2,150-3,150 – about £62-£91 excluding drinks).

"I'm inspired by Marie Svobodová's *Kuchařská Škola* (Cookery School)," Sahajdák told me. This 1894 cookbook details produce and flavour combinations popular during Prague's 19th-century culinary heyday. A wine pairing option is available, but more abstemious souls are catered for as well, with gourmet juice combinations such as apple and walnut, cucumber and gooseberry. It's typical innovation from a city that's reinvented its cuisine from the ground up.

NEXT MONTH

Fiona Beckett checks out some of Bristol's greenest culinary hotspots



Try this at home...

Roast squash soup with pork crackling cream

SERVES 4 AS A STARTER. HANDS-ON TIME 20 MIN, OVEN TIME 1 HOUR

FOOD TEAM'S TIP In Prague, this recipe, adapted from the menu of La Degustation Bohême Bourgeoise (see left), is made with a sweet local port-style wine. It's hard to find in the UK so we've used madeira, which works well.

- 1 medium butternut squash
- 1 large onion, unpeeled
- Drizzle olive oil
- 4 fat garlic cloves, unpeeled
- 500-600ml fresh vegetable stock or fresh chicken stock
- 100ml madeira
- Good grating nutmeg

TO SERVE

- 150ml whipping cream
- Handful good quality pork scratchings
- Small handful fresh thyme leaves

1. Heat the oven to 200°C/fan180°C/gas 6. Cut the squash into quarters lengthways and scoop out the seeds (discard). Halve the

onion through the root (leave the skin on) and put on a baking tray with the squash. Drizzle with olive oil, season, then roast for 1 hour. Add the garlic cloves for the last 30 minutes, tossing them in the oil to coat.

2. Put the squash in a large pan (leave the skin on, but slice off the tops and bottoms). Squeeze the garlic out of the skins and add, then peel the skin off the onion halves and add them too. Pour in the stock and bring to the boil over a high heat, then reduce the heat and simmer for 5-10 minutes. Add the madeira and nutmeg.

3. Blend with a stick blender (or in a food processor) until smooth, then taste and season. Divide among 4 warm soup bowls.

4. Whisk the cream until it just holds a soft peak when the whisk is removed. Crush the pork scratchings and fold half of them through the cream. Spoon the cream onto the soup and scatter with the remaining scratchings and a few thyme leaves.

PER SERVING 330kcal, 21.4g fat (11.1g saturated), 9g protein, 19.7g carbs (11.5g sugars), 1.2g salt, 4.9g fibre **a**