

# Coffee and the Comfort of Strangers

By Duncan J. D. Smith

Since 2011 Vienna's world famous coffee house culture has been designated and protected as "Intangible Cultural Heritage" by UNESCO making it every bit as important as the Argentine Tango, the Mediterranean diet, and the Panama hat. According to the listing the Viennese coffee house is a place "where time and space are consumed, but only the coffee is found on the bill."

## Armenian Traders

The Vienna coffee house tradition goes back to the late 17th century when Armenian traders were allowed to roast and sell coffee beans by royal decree (see no. 16). The new beverage was well received and coffee



houses sprang up rapidly throughout the city. In the early days, however, the various varieties of coffee had no official names and customers would make their selection using a colour chart! These days popular varieties include *Schwarzer Brauner* (espresso), *Mélange* (espresso with milk and foam), *Verlängerter* (espresso diluted with water), and *Einspänner* (black coffee served in a glass with whipped cream). The latter was traditionally popular with Vienna's fiacre drivers as they waiting for clients outside coffee houses and named after the one-horse cabs common when fodder was short after the First World War.

## Bentwood Chairs

The traditional Viennese coffee house has a distinctive atmosphere and a specific protocol dating back to its *fin de siècle* heyday. Against a backdrop of dark wood, cream coloured walls, and golden lights coffee is served by waiters dressed in black suits and bow ties (it always arrives on

a silver tray accompanied by a glass of water). Customers sit at marbled-topped tables on either Thonet bentwood chairs or sturdily-upholstered banquettes. Once settled they can read from a selection of daily international papers for as long as they wish. Indeed if they remain for several hours the chances are that they will take lunch or an evening meal in the coffee house, and probably succumb to a slice of Apfelstrudel, Millirahmstrudel, or Gugelhupf, too. With only discreet attention from the waiter it has been said that the Viennese coffee house is the best place to be alone in company!

### **Individual Charm**

Whilst all traditional Viennese coffee houses share a similar atmosphere each offers its own individual charm. The grandest include the beautifully vaulted Café Central in the Palais Ferstel at Herrengasse 14, Sigmund Freud's beloved Café Landtmann at Universitätsring 4, and Cafe Griensteidl at Michaelerplatz 2, once frequented by Trotsky (together with other leading writers and artists of the day including Arthur Schnitzler and Stefan Zweig he was drawn by the conversation and cosmopolitan air that only the coffee house offered). Tucked away in the backstreets is the charmingly down at heel Café Hawelka at Dorotheergasse 6, where the house speciality is jam-filled *Buchteln* served daily at 9pm. In the suburbs is Café Sperl at Gumpendorferstrasse 11, once the favourite of Adolf Hitler, Café Goldegg at Argentinierstrasse 49, with its billiard tables, and Café Weimar at Währinger Strasse 68, with its clientele from the nearby Volksoper.

### **Author's Favourite**

This author's favourite is Café Bräunerhof at Stallburggasse 2 behind the stables of the Spanish Riding School. It was the writer Thomas Bernhard's favourite and little has changed since his day. Come here on a weekday mid-morning and the atmosphere can be almost studious, with just a few customers thumbing the day's papers. Visit on a Saturday and the atmosphere is positively riotous as a quartet belts out waltzes and classical music. To maintain the traditional feel mobile telephones are only permitted in a special booth and the toilets haven't been upgraded in decades.

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