

Haute Czech: Cooking to Rival the Sightseeing



Pavel Horejsi for The New York Times

La Degustation, a Prague restaurant that only serves seven-course tasting menus, with no à la carte.

By EVAN RAIL

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IT'S never been terribly hard to convince travelers of [Prague's](#) appeal, at least not when it comes to its [architecture](#), [music](#) and history. Czech cooking, however, has long been viewed as the lone downside, as if Prague's delicious buffet of castles, concerts and cobblestones simply had to have a counterbalance. Locals and tourists alike have gotten by on high-end French, Italian and Japanese restaurants since the mid-90s. But recently, some restaurants here have begun taking traditional Czech cooking into new territory, treating hearty Bohemian fare with the same respect afforded classic haute cuisine.

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Take [La Degustation](http://www.ladegustation.cz) (Hastalska 18; +420-222-311-234; www.ladegustation.cz), a sleek, loungelike restaurant that opened in Prague's Old Town last November. As the name implies, there is no à la carte menu. Instead, there are just three seven-course tasting menus: one featuring Continental recipes, one composed of daily market specials and one designed around traditional Czech dishes.

When I called to reserve a table, I was told that the Czech menu, *Bohème traditionnelle*, came primarily from an obscure 1880 cookbook by Marie Svobodova, and was warned that I should probably cancel my after-dinner plans, as the meal itself would take around three hours. Indeed it was a full 180-minute performance of unusual (and unusually fantastic) Central European fare, starting with an over-easy “lost egg,” pan-fried with the meaty, aromatic bolete mushrooms called *hriby* in Czech, listed on the English menu as *cèpes*. After this, the procession of small dishes began with a light, clear bouillon of wild poultry, spring carrots and a rich, chicken-liver dumpling, continuing with a single ravioli, stuffed with diced beef lungs, poached in a buttery cream sauce and served with a marjoram-scented demi-glace. Beefy, sticky-sweet and sharply sour, it seemed to connect old Czech cooking with the contemporary global lust for offal.

Though the set menu comprises seven courses, there's an even greater number of amuse-bouches staggered throughout, including a savory anchovy-and-root-vegetable escabeche; a silver-dollar-size sandwich

filled with garlicky beef tartare; and a shockingly white tomato meringue, topped with honey and aged balsamic vinegar. (This raises the question: just how amused can your bouche really be after eight or nine such creations?) Among all the hors d'oeuvres were more meats, mushrooms and herbs: cubes of tender smoked calf tongue with chanterelles, a slow-braised rack of lamb in sweet thyme sauce and a grilled pork belly with red cabbage (organic, no less). The dessert was a palacinka, the traditional Czech crepe, but fluffier than the standard version, made of quark, a type of cream cheese, and served with fresh strawberries and vanilla ice cream.

What was most startling was how light it all seemed, especially after three hours of constant consumption: instead of heavy starches and rich sauces, the dishes seemed to focus on building intense flavors, but presenting them in delicate portions. The staff was similarly refined, easily describing oddball Czech grape varietals while dropping off the many new dishes and refilling glasses. About the only thing that wasn't terribly light was the check, which came to about 5,000 korunas for two (or nearly \$250 at 20.8 korunas to the dollar).