

EATING

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EATING

Much has been written about Hungarian food over the years – some of it true, an equal part downright false. It certainly is the bright point among the cuisines of Eastern Europe, but it is decidedly not one of the world's three essential styles of cooking (after French and Chinese) that many here would have you believe. Hungarian cooking has had many outside influences but has changed relatively little over the centuries. And while the cuisine makes great use of paprika, even the spice's hottest variety (called *csípős*) is pretty tame stuff; a taco with salsa or chicken vindaloo will taste a lot more 'fiery' to you.

In spite of all this, Budapest has been currently undergoing something of a restaurant revolution in recent years. Stodgy and heavy main dishes are being 'enlightened', brought up to date and rechristened as *kortárs magyar konyha* (modern Hungarian cuisine) at many midrange and upmarket restaurants. Just as important, a number of vegetarian (or partially meatless) restaurants have opened up and more 'regular' restaurants have a greater selection of 'real' vegetarian dishes – not just fried cheese and stuffed mushroom caps. And ethnic food – from Middle Eastern and Greek to Indian and Chinese – has become very popular. It all makes a very nice change from the not-too-distant days when munching on a cheeseburger at McDonald's was an attractive alternative to tussling with an overcooked Wiener schnitzel (*bécsiszelet*) in yet another smoky *vendéglő* (small restaurant).

You'll find branches of all the international fast-food places in Budapest; Oktogon is full of them. But when looking for something cheap and cheerful, try an old-style *önkiszolgáló* (self-service restaurant), the mainstay of workers in the old regime and fast disappearing.

Even more interesting places for local colour and better value in the long run are the wonderful little restaurants called *étkezdék*, canteens not unlike British 'cafs' that serve simple but very tasty Hungarian dishes that change daily.

Traditional coffee houses and newly popular teahouses are primarily known for hot drinks, but they also serve cakes and other sweets, and sometimes light meals as well. These are listed in the Drinking chapter (p144).

HISTORY

Budapest's reputation as a food capital dates largely from the late 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries. During the heady period following the promulgation of the Dual Monarchy in 1867 and right up until WWII, food became a passion among well-to-do Budapesters, and writers and poets were generous in their praise of it. This was the 'gilded age' of the famous chef Károly Gundel and the confectioner József Dobos, and of Gypsy violinists such as Jancsi Rigo and Gyula Benczi, when nothing was too extravagant. The world took note and Hungarian restaurants sprouted up in cities across the world – including a 'Café Budapest' in Boston, Massachusetts – complete with imported Gypsy bands and waiters who sounded like Béla Lugosi.

Budapest's gastronomic reputation lived on during the chilly days of Communism, most notably because the food was so bad everywhere else in the region. Indeed, Hungarian cuisine was, as one observer noted, 'a bright spot in a culinary black hole'. But most of

the best chefs, including Gundel himself, had voted with their feet and left the country in the 1950s, when restaurants were put under state control. The reputation and the reality of food in Budapest had diverged.

Although still relatively inexpensive by European standards, and served in huge portions, Hungarian food today remains heavy and, at times, it can be unhealthy. Meat, sour cream and animal fat abound and, except in season, *saláta* (salad) means a plate of pickled vegetables. Things are changing in the Hungarian capital, however, with more and more vegetarian and ethnic choices available.

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

Bread & Noodles

It is said that people here will 'eat bread with bread', and leftover bread (*kenyér*) has been used to thicken soups and stews since at least the reign of the 15th-century medieval king Matthias, while *kifli* (crescent-shaped rolls) gained popularity during the Turkish occupa-