



The New Bohemia



**PRAGUE IS EUROPE'S
NEXT GREAT FOOD
DESTINATION.
DAVID FARLEY
EATS IN THE CITY'S
MOST INNOVATIVE
RESTAURANTS
AND TALKS TO THE
MAVERICK CHEFS WHO
ARE DEFINING MODERN
CZECH CUISINE.**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **JOÃO CANZIANI**

FIFTEEN YEARS AGO, YOU NEVER WOULD HAVE HEARD THE WORDS “CELEBRITY” AND “CHEF” UTTERED IN SUCCESSION IN A DISCUSSION OF CZECH CUISINE.

W

HEN I LIVED IN PRAGUE for three years in the mid-1990s, it was a golden age of sorts for the Czech capital, at least if you were one of the expat writers and artists who flocked to the city for its beauty, affordability, and general anything-goes vibe. I spent my days teaching English and my evenings consuming a local product the Czechs have always made well: beer. When

I stumbled out of a pub, I would traipse down winding cobblestone streets flanked by plus-size Baroque churches, burgher houses dating from Habsburg times, and the occasional socialist realist sculpture of brawny workers looking to the horizon with optimism. With my stomach rumbling for something to absorb all that hoppy liquid, I would go in search of food. More often than not, I ended up staring at a barely edible pizza, squiggly red lines of ketchup spat atop heat lamp-baked cheese on a crust resembling cardboard.

If, as historians are wont to say, the past is a different country, the Prague I knew back then seems, in retrospect, like Siberia. The Soviet monuments and debauchery-seeking expats are long gone, and now one can say it's the locals themselves who are experiencing something of a golden age. Particularly when it comes to what they're eating.

A decade and a half ago, the city's dining landscape was made up of a few decent foreign restaurants (French or Italian) and a miasma of bad pub grub (goulash and dumplings, anyone? fried cheese?) consumed only to extend a night of drinking. Prague 2012 really is like a different country, thanks in part to a number of young Czech chefs who, after traveling—and cooking—around the world, have come back to Prague to reinvent Czech cuisine. They are digging up lost

cookbooks from the 19th and early 20th centuries and serving long-forgotten dishes at their restaurants. In the process, they are recovering a national Czech identity and asserting it through their food.

These chefs are part of an intriguing Czech culinary revitalization in this landlocked Central European nation: New food magazines are rolling off the presses, a small army of bloggers waxes enthusiastic about the dining scene, and farmers' markets are cropping up all over.

Hearing about these surprising developments, I decided to go back to Prague as, perhaps, one of the first outsiders to travel there just to eat, to see if I really could dine well in a city that hadn't cooked well for more than half a century.

I FOUND THE EPICENTER of the culinary renaissance tucked away on a backstreet in Old Town. At La Degustation Bohême Bourgeoise, chef Oldřich Sahajdák serves dishes that might have gotten him arrested, or assigned to a work camp, prior to 1989. Why? Because he cooks from recipes that were not approved by the government back then. During four decades of Communist rule, Czech chefs were expected to use a state-issued 500-page cookbook titled *Recipes for Warm Meals*. If you strayed from that bible, you were defying the authorities.

I met with Sahajdák at La Degustation the day after I arrived in Prague. It was 1 p.m., and the staff was casually setting up for the evening rush. The chef and I sat at one of the tables in the dining area, our faces bathed in the tepid autumn sunlight filtering through the windows facing Haštalská Street. It is important to put the current movement into historical context, Sahajdák said, and then he gave me a brief history lesson.

At La Degustation Bohême Bourgeoise, chef Oldřich Sahajdák, below, prepares artful dishes such as smoked beef tongue, opposite.







At Prague's Mandarin Oriental Hotel, Essensia chef Jiří Štíft prepares pan-fried sturgeon with red wine-glazed onions and barley oats ragu, opposite page.

In the 19th century, Prague, then the capital of the kingdom of Bohemia, was a great dining center, on a par with Paris and Vienna. French chefs came to Prague to cook, he explained, and many of the best chefs in Vienna were from Bohemia. That peak culinary era continued through the founding of Czechoslovakia in 1918 and into the prosperous First Republic. The Nazi annexation of the largely ethnic German Sudetenland border regions in 1938, and the subsequent German occupation, put a damper on innovation; the Soviet takeover, 10 years later, snuffed it out completely.

"After 1948, during the Socialist period, it all came down to that book," Sahajdák said, referring to *Recipes for Warm Meals*. "If you deviated from the book, it was a crime. That really limited a chef's creativity."

Even once the Berlin Wall had fallen in 1989 and Soviet troops were sent packing in 1991, Czech food remained uninspired. A gastropub trend emerged in the early 2000s and helped chip away at the frost. Many of the drab, seedy pubs of the past were transformed into gleaming drinking spots that served the classic pub dishes in somewhat more palate-tingling preparations. But only in the past decade did Czech cuisine begin a sustained upward progression. One spark was Chef Sahajdák's discovery of another book that proved the perfect corrective to *Recipes for Warm Meals*. Written by one Marie B. Svobodová and published in 1894, *Kuchařská Škola (Culinary School)* was a revelation: It contained long-lost recipes calling for ingredients that had disappeared during the Communist reign.

"We'll never be sure exactly what these dishes tasted like," said Sahajdák, who opened La Degustation in 2006, "so it's really the combination of ingredients that is important, rather than trying to recreate the exact flavors."

He has taken that as license to experiment. On a menu at La Degustation (or at Hospoda, the New York City restaurant he launched last year), instead of beef goulash you're more likely to find poached trout with lemon sauce, pungent Olomouc cheese drizzled with caramel, or veal and bone marrow soup. Sahajdák took all these recipes from Svobodová's book and tweaked for the 21st-century palate.

THE NEXT DAY, following up on my chat with Sahajdák, I had lunch with an old friend, Kateřina Pavlitova, who is the gastronomy columnist for the monthly lifestyle magazine *Zen*. I knew she would have a solid grasp of the dynamics of this food revolution, as well as strong opinions about culinary trends in Prague. We dined at Essensia, the in-house restaurant at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel, where 37-year-old chef Jiří Štíft cooks haute cuisine versions of traditional Czech dishes. As we ate pike perch, a freshwater fish found in Bohemia, and tender roast suckling pig accompanied by lentils and dried mushrooms, Kateřina gave me her take on why so many people here are suddenly food fanatics.

"During the Socialist era, dining for pleasure was considered a symptom of bourgeois decadence," she said. I asked why that attitude had started to change. "It's the theory of the tipping point, where there's something brewing, but it takes one or two things to put it over the edge," she said. "In this case there were three: the emergence of food bloggers; chef Zdeněk Pohlreich's reality TV show, *Ano, Šéfe!* [Yes, Boss!], which mimics Gordon Ramsay's *Kitchen Nightmares*; and the new and very popular farmers' markets."

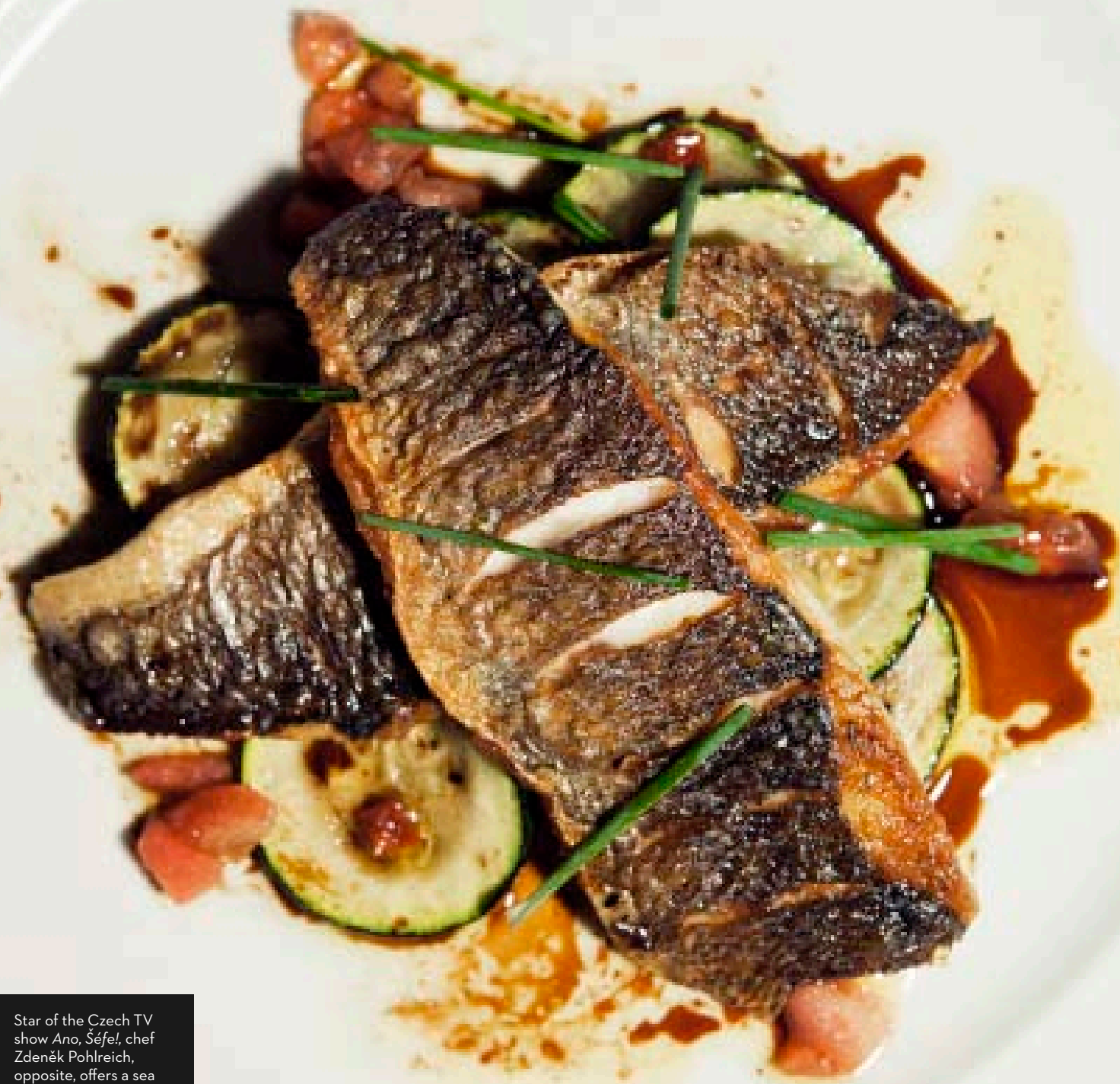
Armed with that information, I scheduled another lunch—with Zdeněk Pohlreich himself—for the following day. If I needed any more evidence that a serious transformation of the restaurant scene was under way, I found it at Pohlreich's Café Imperial. Fifteen years ago, you never would have heard the words "celebrity" and "chef" uttered in succession during a discussion of Czech cuisine. But as I conversed with Pohlreich over lunch in the main dining room, it became clear to me that I was sitting in front of the country's most famous chef. We were continually interrupted by diners who wanted to shake his hand or have their picture taken with him. The restaurant, set in a high-ceilinged art deco space on the same street where Franz Kafka once worked at an insurance office, has been a hit since Pohlreich first fired up the ovens in 2007. But Pohlreich owes his fame less to Café Imperial than to the popularity of *Ano, Šéfe!*



**DURING FOUR
DECADES OF
COMMUNIST RULE,
CZECH CHEFS
WERE EXPECTED
TO USE A STATE-
ISSUED 500-PAGE
COOKBOOK
TITLED RECIPES
FOR WARM MEALS.**



THANKS TO CHEF ZDENĚK
POHLREICH, CZECHS REALIZE
THAT THEIR NATIONAL CUISINE
NEEDN'T BE LIMITED TO
GOULASH AND FRIED CHEESE.



Star of the Czech TV show *Ano, Šéfe!*, chef Zdeněk Pohlreich, opposite, offers a sea bass fillet with lime and ginger glaze, this page, at his Café Imperial.



Pohlreich sat with me as a procession of his dishes was brought out, including ultra-tender beef cheeks and *kulajda*, a creamy, mushroom-spiked dill and potato soup that was popular in the Bohemian countryside until the mid-20th century. I mentioned what Kateřina had told me: that Pohlreich's 3-year-old TV show is educating the populace about what a good restaurant should be, and has given ordinary people the confidence to demand better food. Thanks to him, she'd said, Czechs realize that their national cuisine needn't be limited to goulash and fried cheese. "I always wanted to do elevated Czech fare," Pohlreich responded. "But when I was working at a big hotel restaurant here in Prague during the last decade, they wouldn't let me. I had to do more international cooking. So I had to wait until I could open my own restaurant."

The country back then just wasn't ready for Czech cuisine with a modern twist. "After '89, all you could find here was fake French, fake Italian, fake Greek," Pohlreich continued. "But we finally realized that you don't have to be another nationality to be a good chef, and you don't need to cook another country's food to get respect."

EVEN AFTER three lunches of the new cuisine in Prague, it still wasn't all that clear to me what was uniquely Czech about its heritage.

So I got in touch with Florentýna Zatloukalová, the chef-owner of the recently shuttered Bistro Florentýna, where, as Sahajdák had done at La Degustation, she used old Czech cookbooks for inspiration. "Those recipes call for a lot of spices that we rarely had in dishes growing up: star anise,

thyme, fresh herbs," Zatloukalová said, counting them off on her fingers at Galerie Café in Old Town, where we met for coffee. Zatloukalová went on to name primary ingredients that had disappeared from the Czech lands after the 1948 Communist coup: asparagus, fennel, pigeon, and various kinds of lettuce. "For years we used only one type of lettuce—something similar to butter lettuce," she said. "Nowadays we have rediscovered romaine, endive, arugula, and iceberg."

All these seemingly lost ingredients beg the question: Was Czech cuisine much more diverse than anyone knew? "It's almost impossible to say," said Zatloukalová. "Because we were part of the Habsburg Empire—which included Hungary, Italy, and parts of Croatia, for example—it's difficult to separate one cuisine from the other." With such fluid boundaries within the old empire, ingredients circulated, becoming infused in the local dishes of what would become separate countries. Once borders were established, then closed off, under Communist rule, entire societies were kept in the dark about certain foods their recent ancestors had taken for granted.

SOME OF THE OLD CZECH DISHES, however, did remain alive in the private sphere, usually cooked by someone's grandmother. In fact, most of the Czechs I talked to about food said something strikingly similar—that they remember eating well at their grandmother's house, but that their mother's cooking was vastly different. That is, Grandma learned how to cook in the pre-Socialist days, but by the time Mom ruled the kitchen, Grandma's cooking knowledge hadn't necessarily been passed down, probably because the same ingredients weren't available in the grim economy.

"When I was young, my grandfather used to tell me about eating bananas," said chef Roman Paulus when I visited him at his restaurant, Alcron, in the Radisson Blu Hotel. But few imported foods made it through closed borders during Paulus's youth. "I rarely had a banana during the Communist era," he said. "And besides the sudden lack of ingredients, the Communists collectivized the farms. When you don't own your farm, you don't really care about the product you're putting out. This was one of the biggest

PRAGUE'S TOP RESTAURANTS

LA DEGUSTATION BOHÈME BOURGEOISE

Chef Oldřich Sahajdák's multicourse tasting menu isn't cheap—about \$170 with wine pairings—but it might be the most "Czech" meal you will eat in Prague. Riffing off late-19th-century cookbooks, Sahajdák has revived such dishes as truffle-spiked quail eggs. *Haštalská 18, 420/2-22-311-234, ladegustation.cz*

ESSENSIA

In addition to modern Asian dishes, chef Jiří Štíft's menu includes *kulajda*, a creamy dill-laced soup, and roasted pork belly, both inspired by the Czech Republic's early 20th-century food landscape. *Mandarin Oriental Hotel, Nebovická 459/1, Malá Strana, 420/2-33-088-888, mandarinoriental.com*

CAFÉ IMPERIAL

This high-ceilinged restaurant is routinely packed with hungry gawkers who come to spot TV celebrity chef Zdeněk Pohlreich, as well as to get a taste of his signature braised veal cheeks or roasted quail. Imperial is a cornerstone of the Czech food revival that is gradually taking command of the dining scene in Prague. *Na Poříčí 15, 420/2-46-011-440, cafeimperial.cz*

ALCRON

Chef Roman Paulus infuses a lot of French technique into the cooking at his newly Michelin-starred 24-seat restaurant. Dishes such as organic beef carpaccio with smoked eel, roasted duck foie gras with rhubarb and strawberries, confit of rabbit, and poached sea bass are the stars of his innovative menu. *Radisson Blu Alcron Hotel, Štěpánská 40, 420/2-22-820-410, alcron.cz*

With ornate décor that complements its name, Café Imperial, this page, has become one of Prague's haute-cuisine dining destinations.



ONLY A FEW PEOPLE TURNED UP THE FIRST WEEK. BY THE SECOND WEEK, IT WAS PACKED. BY THE FOLLOWING SPRING, FARMERS' MARKETS BEGAN POPPING UP ALL OVER PRAGUE.



crimes against food during the Socialist period.” Today, Paulus regularly travels around the country forging relationships with farmers who are producing quality ingredients such as artisanal cheeses and well-bred, well-raised lamb.

By introducing a farm-to-table sensibility, Paulus is blazing a trail that other local chefs will certainly follow. Some consumers have already found that path. On my penultimate day in Prague, I took the train out to an upscale suburb called Klánovice to visit a local market. It was here on the periphery of Prague that the new food movement really gained momentum. Hana Michopulu was a journalist who had been writing about the food industry in the Czech Republic. “One day I realized that I could be more effective if I started a farmers’ market,” she said to me above the voices of merchants hawking organic vegetables, craft beer, and goat cheese. So, in November 2009, she did just that, using a school playground space in Klánovice, the neighborhood where she lives. Only a few people turned up the first week. But by the second week, it was packed. By the following spring, farmers’ markets began popping up all over Prague. Now nearly every neighborhood has one. While perusing a display of fresh leafy greens, one Czech couple in their 30s told me they drive across the city to come to the Klánovice market because of the quality of its produce. When I asked why they started to shop here, the man looked down at his 4-year-old daughter and said, “It wasn’t until she was born that we began thinking we should eat better.”

Michopulu has since given up her position as the Klánovice farmers’ market organizer and is writing cookbooks—her latest is a collection of recipes based on what one can find at Czech farmers’ markets. Now that ordinary citizens have an interest in the food movement, she’s hoping more people in the restaurant industry will too. “When Anthony Bourdain came to town,” she said, “I took him here, and he said I should connect the chefs to the farmers’ markets, because that is how the farmers’ markets in New York City became such a success.” The chefs at La Degustation now buy produce in Klánovice.

On my last night in Prague, I sat with my old friend Martin Scheuch at La Degustation’s chef’s table. We watched the busy kitchen crew plating food. This was the meal I’d anticipated since I arrived. We sampled once-*verboten* fare. The smoked beef tongue, so tender it fell apart when my fork touched it, was paired with pickled chanterelles and white bean purée seasoned with marjoram and yarrow. The Bohemian rabbit was served with horseradish sauce, savoy cabbage, cranberries, and dried apples. Martin, who is Czech, 42 years old, and very well traveled, had never been to La Degustation before but liked everything we ate. It wasn’t, though, until the dessert came that he had a culinary epiphany. He eyed the pear-flavored cake topped with cottage cheese for a few seconds before finally taking a bite. “I know this,” he said, a heavy dose of surprise in his voice. “My grandma used to make it. My god, I haven’t eaten this since I was a boy.” It was the moment I’d been waiting for all week. Seeing Martin overcome by the experience, I was witnessing the Czech food renaissance right in front of me.

There was just one more thing I was curious about. Before my flight home, I stopped back at La Degustation to say goodbye to Sahajdák. I asked if he thought Czech cuisine could ever win international acclaim. He answered with a question. “Five years ago, had you ever given much thought to Danish cuisine?” He was referring to the recent rise in appreciation for Scandinavian cooking, an international awareness due, in large part, to the success of the Copenhagen restaurant Noma and its celebrated chef, René Redzepi. I shook my head no. “Exactly,” he said. And then repeated it, sotto voce: “Exactly.” **A**

Contributing writer DAVID FARLEY has written about noodles in Vietnam and other subjects for AFAR. Photographer JOÃO CANZIANI shot “Brazil’s Modern Remix” in the July/August 2011 issue of AFAR.



Czech food becomes art on the plate when chef Roman Paulus, above, pairs pan-fried duck foie gras with smoked eel and beets, opposite, at Alcron restaurant.