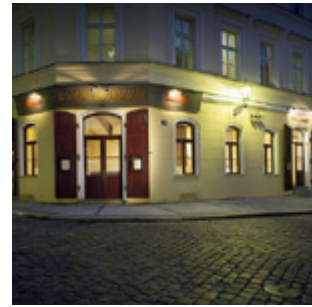
 [Articles](#) › [Dining](#) › La Degustation - Boheme Bourgeoise

La Degustation - Boheme Bourgeoise



by Scott Van Wagenen

Good things sometimes come in small portions, and that's certainly the case at Prague's first restaurant focused on tasting menus

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Filip Trčka, the main manager at La Degustation, Prague's first, exclusively *dégustation*-focused restaurant, describes the menu and the concept with a passion that indicates you're in good hands.

With a menu that changes every day, the restaurant offers three seven-course tasting menus, accompanied by an excellent selection of wines paired with each of the dishes.

You can order the wines à la carte or from the other menus, but on our visit each of the wines was so nicely matched that we recommend leaving the selection in the hands of the extremely capable sommeliers.

Each day the menus change, but the concept remains the same.

There is the Bohême Bourgeoise, which is a rich and varied set of ingredients and flavors taking its inspiration from both classic and modern European cooking; The Bohême Continentale, which offers simpler dishes but with equally far-ranging ingredients; and the Bohême Traditionnelle, which showcases some fantastic interpretations of Bohemian cooking that tragically have been largely forgotten.

To recommend one over the other would be difficult, but the Bohemian Traditionnelle had the most consistent execution on every dish and, interestingly for visitors and residents alike, an excellent assortment of Czech wines that one would never normally have a chance to taste.

The sommeliers have done a wonderful job of locating local wineries that can deliver wines up to the standards the food demands.

And really, it's all about the food.

The décor features subdued earth tones with a noted lack of anything extra. The lighting focuses squarely on each diner's plate, and this is where the emphasis is meant to be.

Diners can watch the chefs preparing the dishes from the open kitchen, and it is evident in each course that they are sourcing the best local and foreign ingredients.

This doesn't mean every dish is a home run.

On our visit, two dishes on the Bourgeoise menu were rather disappointing. A *crème de clovise* with smoked black Avruga caviar was served tepid, and the broth was lacking in the strong fish flavor one would expect.

Another disappointment was the halibut *velouté de laitue romaine*, with tomato seeds. The fish was cooked perfectly, and very fresh, but the romaine lettuce foam was an experiment gone wrong and the "tomato seed" was the inner part of a tomato encrusted in a candy glaze. Both were unsuccessful, but you had to admire the attempt.

Our party sampled all three menus and of these 21 courses only about three we found to be lacking in execution. The *braisé du jour*, a 24-hour-roasted veal cheek with polenta, fresh peas and carrots, and a périgourdine sauce was exceptional, as was a smoked beef tongue with chickpea mash, roasted onions, fresh marjoram, and pickled forest mushrooms.

Trčka talks openly about the restaurant's ambition of attaining a Michelin star. No restaurant in the Czech Republic has received one yet, but the quality here continues to improve and it's surely only a matter of time.

La Degustation is not of Michelin caliber yet, but the effort is apparent, and like any new restaurant a period of "working out the kinks" is to be expected.

One of their distinct differences, which is a great plus, is that the service is exceptional without being fussy or pretentious.

The sommeliers know the wines and the food, and the waiters are keen to strike up a conversation and discuss some of the things they may have tried before service.

Of the wines, there wasn't a single disappointment; each was expertly chosen and the pairings were equally good.

A 2005 Czech Chardonnay from the Hort winery was a beautiful, oaky white, which complimented the rabbit dish it was served with perfectly.

Another fantastic Czech wine was a 2004 Pinot noir from Michal Robek. This had a deepness and complexity none of us had ever experienced in a Czech wine before.

Another plus was the staff's generosity with the wine. If you like one in particular, they might come and top up your glass.

The sommeliers assessed the general knowledge at the table and adjusted their comments about the wines accordingly, in both Czech and English.

Most interesting for us was the restaurant's interest in the cuisine of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the First Republic.

The waiter produced a beautiful, dog-eared cookbook from the 1880s, which the kitchen had looked to for inspiration when making their cucumber salad.

This, accompanying a breaded veal entrecote with potato puree, was green, square, jellied cubes, which exploded on the tongue and tasted exactly like a classic *babička's* cucumber salad.

The restaurant's management has been scouring the antique bookshops of Prague looking for such books and the effort is commendable. So much has been lost since the Communist takeover in 1948.

When one sees the recipes in these books and the richness of the ingredients used, it makes tucking into your umpteenth fried cheese, at another *hospoda* that relies on Podravka and MSG for flavor all the sadder.

La Degustation is certainly worth the visit. The prices are high, but for the quality and quantity of what you receive, we considered them quite fair.

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