

Mann about town: A taste of Berlin for the health conscious

Beverly Mann

Hold the knockwurst, stuffed dumplings, heavy cream sauce and strudel with mounds of whipped cream. Berliners would rather be fit and healthy than plump and sluggish. To my surprise, the health-consciousness and concern about sustainability in both their personal and professional lives seem to take precedence in this young, vibrant and stylish city going through a cultural and ecological metamorphosis.

Berlin is one-third greenery and water. Everywhere I turned I saw lushness, scenic river paths and signs and storefronts advertising organic products. And it didn't stop there. I stayed at a sustainable hotel and visited a green-conscious clothing and gift store, as well as one of Europe's largest organic markets.

My timing was perfect. I arrived just several days before Berlin's yearly Eco Festival during the first week of June. Tents of literature, food and sustainable products, as well as the presence of speakers supporting the green movement, lined Berlin's Tiergarten (equivalent to New York's Central Park) in front of the notorious Brandenburg Gate. It was here that I tasted my first organic knockwurst.

All about the food

But it was the herb-infused, artistic creations that titillated my palate at some moderate to high-end restaurants promoting farm fresh, vegetarian and organic cooking.

Situated just minutes from the Brandenburg Gate off of the grand boulevard of Unter den Linden, Margaux is probably one of Berlin's cr me de la cr me restaurants and one of my most memorable culinary experiences.

Here, award-winning chef Michael Hoffmann, who is

more like an artist stimulating the imagination as well as the palate, creates his magic. He considers himself a gardener who nurtures 200-plus herbs and vegetables from his own private garden in order to produce the most non-traditional flavours and blends.

After four amazing amuse bouche teasers (single bite-size hors d'oeuvres), which included a delicate foam of asparagus in an eggshell lying on a bed of Himalayan salt, I experienced at least 10 other small dishes with vegetables and herbs straight from Mr Hoffman's garden. It was the ribbons of marshmallows infused with fennel, which took me totally by surprise.

The environment was elegant, but comfy. Glass cases of large coloured salt amid the beige tone walls, low lighting and rosewood d cor added to the inviting ambiance.

Berliners seem to love the mystique and kitsch that Cookies Cream, a vegetarian restaurant near



COURTESY OF MARGAUX/BERLIN

Friedrichstrasse, offers its customer. It reminded me of Hernando's hideaway situated as it was in the back of a building near a loading dock, with an unassuming sign leading upstairs along a dark passageway. The restaurant's website showed photos that actually guided me to the location.

Once inside, the place is



GALIMATHIES/FLICKR

bustling with customers. You don't have to be a vegan or vegetarian to appreciate the blend of flavours and tasteful dishes.

I savoured a Parmesan dumpling with braised artichoke coated with pine nuts and the light-crust strudel of pear and barley surrounded by crunchy chanterelles. The seating arrangements are a bit awkward and not the most comfortable, but the friendly service and quality food make up for it.

Owner Cookie, a vegetarian for 30 years, just opened two more vegetarian-style eateries, Chippis 1 and Chippis 2, where the omnivore and herbivore can eat side by side amid an open kitchen.

A great find for the price and presentation is Vapiano, a fresh food chain scattered around the city. The ambiance is also very chic and cheery. I found their Potsdamer Platz location the most spacious, with lots of al fresco dining choices. The thin-crust pizzas, pastas and salads with wholesome herbs and veggies placated my appetite.

Another healthful choice is Bio Company, a popular organic chain market and caf . There was one store located right off the Spree River just walking distance from the Friedrichstrasse

train station.

Exploring the markets

Besides going out to restaurants, visiting Berlin's farmer's markets was an enjoyable way to see the outer neighbourhoods and to sample local food. The Maybachufer, or Turkish Market, in the charming area of Kreuzberg had the best buys.

I particularly enjoyed strolling down the tree-lined canals draped by weeping willows and accented by classical architecture that have kept their charm and grandeur for more than 150 years. The market is open Tuesdays and Fridays from 11am to 6.30pm.

On Wednesdays and Saturdays, locals visit the Winterfeldplatz Market, where produce is more neatly displayed, but a bit pricier. A hat that I bought in Kreuzberg was half the price.

Berlin also houses Europe's largest organic supermarket, the LPG on Kollwitzstrasse. You can choose from 18,000 organic products on two floors.

Even the hotels are going green and organic. The Maritim ProArte has had its organic certification since 2007 and offers organic food daily on their breakfast and lunch menus. Their sensitivity towards sustainability is apparent in their strict separation of recyclables.

Herb of the week

Peppermint – for breathing easy

Luke Hughes

Peppermint (*Mentha piperita*) is a low-growing perennial plant that dies back in the long, cold winters of the northern regions of Europe and North America, where it is believed to have originated. Preferring deep, rich soils that drain freely in temperate, moist climates, it is now cultivated the world over for its medicinal properties and very pleasant taste.

Peppermint is a naturally occurring hybrid, being a cross between spearmint (*Mentha spicata*) and watermint (*Mentha aquatica*). As such, it will not breed true from seed and is propagated by division of the long rooting runners it sends out underground, allowing it to spread and become invasive under the right conditions.

With its pungent aroma and sweet, cooling taste, peppermint tea has become one of the most popular drinks the world over. A freshly brewed cup taken after a meal is a digestive aid second to none that soothes a sore and windy stomach, particularly after you've overeaten.



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Peppermint tea can also provide welcome relief from the symptoms of a head cold or flu, with the cleansing action of menthol clearing blocked and painful sinuses, respiratory passageways and the throat. I have found peppermint tea to be particularly effective for children, who may not require the strength of the oil. Do not use peppermint oil for children under the age of three.

For colds and the flu, the rest of us can use the oil in the same way as eucalyptus oil, by adding a few drops to a bowl of water just off the boil and inhaling with a towel over the head. Avoid contact with the eyes. Peppermint oil is also useful for the relief of rheumatic and muscular pain due to its stimulatory effect on particular parts of the nervous system.

Peppermint is considered by some to be "the world's oldest medicine" and was cultivated as far back as ancient Egypt. We are told by Pliny that peppermint essence (alcohol based) was used by the ancient Greeks and Romans to flavour their sauces and wines. The Romans were known to use it to treat indigestion after feasts that lasted days and some believe it was also one of the two mints used by ancient Greek physicians.

In northern Europe, it is mentioned in the Icelandic Pharmacopeias around the thirteenth century and later came into common usage in Western Europe in the middle of the eighteenth century, with England being the major producer at the time.

Whether or not it is "the world's oldest medicine", peppermint is most certainly one of the most useful herbs we have to date. Try growing some of your own and ensure none of its beneficial qualities are lost before making it into your cup of tea.

Luke Hughes is a classical Western herbalist.



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