



Deák St. Kitchen

The Ritz-Carlton, Budapest

Words: Harry McKinley

When The Ritz-Carlton opened its doors in Budapest in 2016, it quickly set out to establish itself as one of city's foremost luxury hotels. Housed within a protected historic building on Elizabeth Square it benefits from views of St. Stephen's Basilica and a location in the heart of the Hungarian capital's cultural and shopping district.

The new kid on the block, The Ritz-Carlton not only sets itself apart through its thoroughly modern view on luxury, but in its connection to the location. Budapest flows through the concept, design and service as the Danube flows through the city itself. Nowhere is this more evident than in the F&B spaces.

Deák St. Kitchen is the hotel's sole destination restaurant, conceived and developed specifically for The Ritz-Carlton Budapest. Far from an opulent dining room intended to capture well-heeled tourists or snare the city's resident industrialists, it is an informal destination that riffs off Hungarian tradition and provides a space fit for relaxed dining and jocund occasions alike.

The restaurant is, in many ways, an effective example of shifting guest appetites: starched tablecloths, intimidating maître d's and full dinner suits are out; casually arranged tabletops, service with a smile and smart casual is in. As Claudia Venturini, director of marketing, confirms, steering away from classic fine dining was a conscious choice on the part of Ritz-Carlton - a brand keen to keep up with the times and provide F&B destinations that appeal to the modern traveller and local urbanite alike.

It's also a destination that aims to change minds. Hungarians aren't typically known to dip their toes into the hotel sphere when it comes to eating and drinking out, assuming a level of fussiness and formality that doesn't appeal to their straightforward sensibilities, broadly speaking. For every local assumption or negative notion on hotel dining, Deák St. Kitchen provides a counterpoint.

"In the brief, the hotel wanted to achieve a very accessible dining offer that would draw passing patrons in from the street, as opposed to feeling exclusive to guests," explains Gabrielle Vergottini of B3 Designers, the studio tasked with originating the concept and bringing the restaurant to life. "The result was to be a modern, more approachable interpretation of luxury dining."

Part of creating that sense of approachability, whilst also delivering a distinctive experience for Ritz-Carlton guests, was to draw heavily from the surroundings. B3 Designers worked with a local curator to source photography and artwork that connects to Hungary's history and grounds the hotel in the city. Hand drawn maps of different wine regions from Hungary are nestled in deep leather menu covers. In the mix of materials used there is a nod to the robust and honest style associated with the country: "Walnut, marble, velvets and rose gold finishes create an elegant and timeless material palette," says Vergottini. "These features are juxtaposed against more casual, rustic materials like the Hungarian point reclaimed flooring, illustrated chalk on the walls and mottled glazing."

Also responsible for the restaurant's branding, B3



Designers opted for an unpretentious style, the logo inspired by the labeling of wine bottles. Branding materials include textured butcher-like paper, wooden clipboards with heavy metallic clips and embossed leather menus. These elements all instinctively connect to present a concept that feels three-dimensional and consistent – from the broad strokes to the Villeroy & Boch tableware and vintage decanters.

Of course if the branding and design paints a picture, it is the food and wine that ultimately tells the story. Enter Daniel Varga, Deák St. Kitchen's 26-year old sommelier and one of its front-of-house stars. "People come here and realise very quickly we're a wine-focussed restaurant," he says. "We offer unique and very rare vintages, with an emphasis on Hungarian."

Varga, who comes from a family of winemakers and also produces his own, is understandably keen to promote often underappreciated local varieties, but he also insists it's an important point of difference between Deák St. Kitchen and other restaurants in the city. "I want to show the incredible wines we have in Hungary that visitors may not be familiar with, but also regional wines that will be interesting to Hungarian people. 40% of our wine offer is local. We have a Tokai dessert wine for example, a 1993 vintage, which was an extremely good year. But we also keep the offer evolving, so every day I open a new wine, decant it into a carafe and it goes on the bar. Everyday it's two extra red wines and two extra white wines by the glass."

Such is the commitment to wine, that all of the restaurant's decanters

are vintage and were sourced individually. The bar also holds six different types of wine glasses, including a glass for the Hungarian Furmint grape variety, developed specially by Riedel.

The cellars of the hotel currently hold around 176 different wines, although as the restaurant beds-in the aim is to increase this further. "We'd like to upgrade to a maximum of around 225 wines," explains Varga, "but regularly changing and with a very proactive wine cart."

On the cuisine front, the food menu also doesn't stray too regularly beyond Hungary's borders. Staples like goulash and spätzle all make an appearance, while the star – on a menu that is predominantly meat-centric – is arguably the Mangalica steak: the Mangalica being a variety of Hungarian pig noted for its coat of long wooly hair. For those unfamiliar, photos of the breed hang on the walls, attracting bemused looks from non-Hungarian diners.

To repeat an overused description, Deák St. Kitchen manages to capture a sense of authenticity. In the synergy between design and delivery it provides a space that offers a sense of location, without relying on gimmick; its touchpoints are natural enough so as not to be off-putting to a neighbourhood crowd; and, most importantly, it demonstrates an awareness of the changing tide of hotel dining habits, playing little off the Ritz-Carlton name and instead positioning itself as a fully fleshed-out brand in its own right.

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