

# Viennese Coffee House Culture

Vienna



The Austrian writer Stefan Zweig described the Viennese coffee house in his 1943 memoir as “A democratic club,” , claiming it to be “the best place to keep up with everything new.”

If I were to select the one thing that signifies Vienna, where you could get an understanding for the people and culture, it would unquestionably be the Viennese Coffee house.

In Vienna, coffee is a way of life- the sweet nectar is made to be enjoyed, not gulped down quickly from disposable paper cups. Nowhere else in the world can you sit and watch the day go by while enjoying a cup of perfectly brewed coffee served to you on a silver platter by a tuxedoed waiter.

The Viennese Coffeehouse culture differs from all other café scenes- whether it is Rome, Paris or London. It is a tradition as unique as the city itself and impossible to replicate anywhere else. Outside the world rushes ahead but inside the Vienna coffeehouse, time stands still.

In fact, UNESCO named the Viennese Coffee house on their list of the “National Agency for the Intangible Cultural Heritage”.

## **Spend the day in a Viennese Coffee house- soak up the ambiance**

By purchasing a cup of the delicious brew, your table becomes your own private space, and no waiter will urge you to order more. You are a guest who should feel welcomed and not pressured

to leave for another patron. The tradition of staying all day in the coffee house dates back to a time when homes were usually overcrowded and lacked central heating. Once described as “the city’s public living rooms”, the Viennese would leave their cold apartments to keep warm in the local coffeehouse for the price of a coffee.

## Enjoy Viennese Coffee House Gemutlichkeit

“*Gemutlich*” – one of those great German words that does not exactly translate into English.

*Gemutlichkeit* meaning the idea of a state or feeling of warmth, friendliness and good cheer.

The Viennese Coffee House epitomise “*Gemutlich*”- a warm, pleasant, cosy locale where you feel at ease. Viennese Coffee Houses are not just for places to enjoy a quick coffee. They are designed as a refuge- a place for reflection, where people come to read and write, meet friends, gossip, play games, contemplate, dream and watch the world go by.

Coffee Houses dot the city landscape and every Viennese will have their favourite. They are frequented by young and old, men and women.



Interior of Café Hawelka

Each Viennese Coffee House has its own ambiance- from ritzy glamour with dimmed golden chandeliers in palatial surroundings to dark bohemian nightspots. The decor of a Viennese Coffee House can vary from opulent with plush chairs and gilt stucco reminiscent of ballrooms to coldly modern and stylish. The classic look includes Thonet chairs and marble tabletops. Some coffee houses still have billiard tables, a throwback to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In fact it was known that Mozart spent many hours in Viennese Coffee Houses playing and losing copious money at

billiards.

## War brings Coffee to Vienna

The Viennese Coffee House and how we enjoy coffee today owes their existence to the Ottoman-Habsburg wars. In the 1600's, Vienna was a cultural capital of Europe, the last stronghold to the invading Turkish barbarians from the east. For 2 long months in 1683, the seemingly unstoppable Turkish Army had besieged Vienna, camped just beyond the gates prepared to invade and pillage.

Luckily a young Polish-Habsburg army officer, Franz Kolschitzky, who had lived in Constantinople and spoke Turkish, managed to escape the besieged city. He clandestinely crossed enemy lines, dressed in a Turkish disguise, to alert the reinforcements. The subsequent defeat of the Turkish forces was so decisive that the Turks quickly fled Vienna. In their haste, they left behind their tents, oxen, camels, Gold and 500 sacks of green coffee beans. No one wanted the sacks of beans, believing the beans were worthless camel feed or dung. But Kolschitzky knew their value.

After the ‘Battle of Vienna’, Kolschitzky was considered a hero and was awarded money and a house. As the story continues, Kolschitzky used his reward to buy a roasting machine and opened a coffee house, named the Hof zur Blauen Flasche (‘House under the Blue Bottle’), near the Graben in 1686.

## Viennese Coffee houses and their unique brew.



Kolschitzky Street.

The Arabian method of brewing coffee, still used today, was by boiling finely powdered roast coffee beans in a pot and serving it into a cup, where the dregs settle. This bitter sludgy Arabian method of brewing coffee was extremely unpopular to the Viennese. Although Kolschitzky first brewed the coffee as he had learned in Constantinople, he soon began experimenting and devised the method of straining off the sediment, adding a spoonful of cream and sweetening with sugar and/or honey- thus inventing the Viennese coffee.

Whether or not the Kolschitzky myth is true, he is honoured in Vienna as the patron saint of coffee houses and is memorialized with a statue on Vienna's

## Stolen by the French

Not only does the Viennese Coffee house owe its beginnings to the besieging Turkish forces, but also the croissant. It is 1529, the first time (of many) that the Ottoman Empire tried to capture the city. According to legend, after several months of trying to starve the city into submission, the Turkish army attempted to tunnel underneath the fortified walls of Vienna. But the diligent Viennese bakers, who were busy at work in their underground kitchens, alerted the city's defenders and prevented the siege of Vienna. To celebrate their victory over the Turkish Army, the Viennese bakers were commissioned to make a pastry in the shape representing the Turkish crescents seen on the enemy's flags.... and the kipferl was born.

Legend also credits the Austrian Princess Marie Antoinette, who was homesick for her native Vienna, to have introduced the kipferl to the high society of France. But historians agree that the kipfel, became popular in France after an Austrian artillery officer founded the Boulangerie Viennoise in Paris in 1840, which served Viennese specialties including the kipferl. The French bakers prepared the kipferl, which they called initially *viennoiserie* (roughly translatable into "Viennish"). Soon the French started to make the kipferl out of puff pastry- and the croissant was born.



## The Fin de Siècle Viennese Coffee house

Vienna was at the epicentre of the Fin de Siècle Europe and there was no better place to debate the cultural and social changes happening than in the Vienna Coffee Houses. Restrictions on the expressions of political opinion were over and now it was possible to read international uncensored newspapers.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century many famous artists, writers, scientists and politicians were constant Coffee House patrons. Sigmund Freund frequented Café Landtmann



located across from the University.

Lenin, Trotsky and Joseph Stalin reportedly planned the Russian Revolution over cups of coffee at Café Central. In response to news that the Communist were planning to revolt against Czarist Russia, Victor Adler, a Austrian politician, reportedly laughed “And who will lead this revolution? Perhaps Mr. Bronstein (Leon Trotsky) sitting over there at the Café Central?”

Writers and poets were writing their masterpieces from the Viennese Coffee houses, which became known as Coffeehouse literature. Gustav Klimt, Egon Schiele and architects Adolf Loos and Otto Wagner frequented Café Museum near the Succession. And even Adolf Hitler who had repeatedly been unsuccessful in gaining admission to the Vienna Art School, attempted to sell his paintings to patrons of Café Central.

## Find your perfect Viennese Coffee house

In every city you visit, there is always one thing that is typical. Somewhere you can soak up the ambiance and see life through the eyes of the city’s inhabitants. There are over 1000 coffee houses scattered throughout the city- each with its own ambiance, traditions and specialities. Don’t worry if you do not like coffee (a sacrilege, but excusable), you will still feel welcome in a Viennese Coffee house and find plenty of alternatives to enjoy- delectable cake and pastries, authentic Austrian cuisine.



Ready to plan your visit to a Viennese Coffee house? Here is my list of the [10 Best Viennese Coffee houses](#).

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