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ON A SHOESTRING Berlin

An influx of well-travelled diners and creative cooks means cheap and delicious gua bao are as common as sausages and schnitzels in the German capital

Words AUDREY GILLAN

I'm jammed between two hipsters and three stout elderly ladies in the queue for a table at **Mogg & Melzer**, a New York-style café and deli in Berlin's über-cool Mitte district. A fat, pastrami-filled reuben sandwich arrives and I can see why the place is rammed. The butter-soft beef has been brined for a month to break down its fat, then smoked with a pepper rub before being slowly cooked on a low heat. Topped with mayonnaise, tabasco, chipotle and sauerkraut, and sandwiched between slices of rye bread, it's a bargain whether you go for a small (€9) or a large (€11). (moggandmelzer.com)

Pastrami is not a German dish but it's fitting that it should be served here. In 1925, Mitte was home to 31,000 Jews and Mogg & Melzer is housed in what was once a Jüdische Mädchenschule, or Jewish Girls' School. When the school closed, in June 1942, the majority of its pupils and teachers were deported to Nazi concentration camps, many to their deaths. As Paul Mogg and his

Jewish partner Oskar Melzer took occupancy of the building, they decided to honour its history, at least in some small, culinary way. Hence a menu that nods towards traditional Jewish foods, including that pastrami, and a matzah ball soup (€6).

The deli's other big influence is New York, which explains the spectacular pulled pork (€9) and merguez sausages served with soft, charred aubergine and salt lemon.

It is this kind of mash-up that makes Berlin's food scene so vibrant. Local guide Claudia Sult explains that the city's food is much more diverse than that of the rest of Germany, simply because there are a lot of people living here, with lots of culinary influences to draw on. 'A few years ago people used to say "Oh, Berlin, it's got cheap food, cool," but the quality was not good. It's not quite as cheap now but the quality and creativity have increased.' Even so, as Mogg & Melzer proves, prices here won't bankrupt you.

Perhaps even more than London, Berlin seems to be a microcosm of the world, with global flavours available on almost every corner. As with so many cities elsewhere, stalls selling kebabs, falafel and the like are being jostled by young guns crafting carefully provenanced burgers, ceviché, pies, gua bao buns and more. In Berlin, many of them gather at **Markthalle Neun** in Kreuzberg for Street Food Thursday (markthalleneun.de/street-food-thursday). On the third Sunday of every month, there's also a dedicated breakfast market on the same site, flogging everything from eggs benedict to Vietnamese porridge and tip-top bloody marys (markthalleneun.de/breakfast-market).

Breakfast is a big thing in Berlin, no more so than in Prenzlauer Berg. I head for **Sowohl Als Auch** – meaning As Well As – for the Brandenburger (€7.60). It turns out to be a massive plate with two kinds of ham, liverwurst, goat's milk cream cheese, salad, fruit, bread and butter. It's perfectly acceptable to share one between two with a couple of coffees, or apple schorles (apple juice with soda). (tortenundkuchen.de)

Later, at a table overlooking the beaver and monkey enclosures at Berlin Zoo, I try a cracking caesar – its grilled hearts of romaine and 'perfect' egg taking the stalwart salad to new heights. This is **Supermarket**, a concept store where you can buy everything, from the seat your bum is parked on, to your knife and fork and even yourself (well, a 3D sculpture of you). There's also a restaurant, where €16.50 buys you two courses and, if you bag a window seat, a slice of zoo-life for free. (supermarket.de)

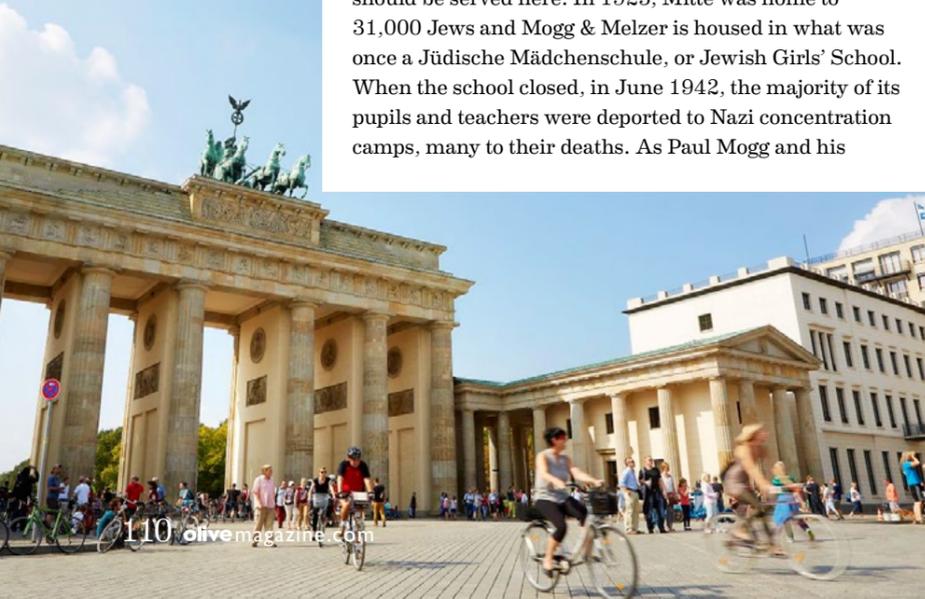
Because Berlin isn't really typical of Germany, I seek a bit of Germany in Berlin and head out to Charlottenberg, just by the River Spree, to cute little **Schnitzelei**. So quietly located you wouldn't ever stumble across it, here each guest is welcomed with a small beer and manager, Christian, recommends a schnapps 'to open the stomach'. I try German tapas (three for €7.50, six for €12.50), including Berlin 'rost' sausages, a creamy mix of cheeses, butter and onions known as 'obatzada' and salty loin of pork. But the main draw is the schnitzel, of many types. I swoon over traditional wiener schnitzel (€11.11 on a Monday night) and gesottnenes schnitzel (€14.50), which is boiled beef covered in a mustard crust. (schnitzelei.de)

My absolute Berlin favourite has to be **Lokal**, which I love for its style, locavore ethos and vibrancy. Chef Gary Hoopengardner butchers almost all of his own meat and follows a nose-to-tail philosophy. 'We buy whole animals and we use a lot of wild game when it is available,' he tells me. 'Our vegetables are from nearby Brandenburg farms and we cook them very lightly. We try to do two or three variations of the one vegetable.'

At a last-minute seat at the zinc bar in this simple, white-painted room, I try a starter of suckling pig chop and pulled pork knuckle (€10), with potato served three different ways – including vinaigrette. It is the perfect balance of bouncy, juicy chop, freshly-picked baby leaves and carrots, and nutty potatoes. Boy is it good. (lokal-berlin.blogspot.co.uk)

HOW TO GET THERE

Audrey Gillan stayed at **Monbijou hotel**, where double rooms cost from €90, room only (monbijouhotel.com). Return flights from several UK airports to Berlin cost from £50 (easyJet.com). More info: visitherlin.de



PHOTOGRAPHS: AUDREY GILLAN, ALINE LIEFELD, DAVID COTSWORTH, LONELY PLANET TRAVELLER, STEVE HERIUD

Clockwise from top left: reuben from Mogg & Melzer, Berlin cathedral, buns at Supermarket, pulled pork roll, bar at Hotel Monbijou, Supermarket, Brandenburg gate, chef at Mogg & Melzer

