

Young gun fast earning a reputation

Interview:
Áron Barka,
Chef de Cuisine at
the ARAZ Restaurant

What was around the turn of the century one of the biggest public baths in the capital has reborn into a four-star superior Continental Hotel Zara and its ARAZ restaurant where the luxurious Tom Dixon and Catellani chandeliers shed light on a menu including a mixture of French and Hungarian gastronomy. *The Budapest Times* sat down for a chat with ARAZ Restaurant's young and rising Chef de Cuisine Áron Barka.



BZT/Amor (top) (9)

After having spent many years abroad you are back in Hungary. For good?

Hopefully for a long time. After the school years I began my training in Budapest's Kempinski, where I returned after my military service. Then the years abroad began and I only returned to Budapest not long before I was offered to head the hotel's restaurant.

You must have been doing something right. When your first head chef left for a job in Germany, he asked you to go with him.

I wanted to build my experience in various fields and when they invited me to be the vegetable cook at a river ship I figured that it was a good chance to learn new things. I never regretted it, since only after three months I became the sauce cook, was later responsible for the bakery and the confectionery and eventually I was promoted to Chef Cook of the ship Luma, which was also known as the Gourmet Ship. On one of my last trips I actually prepared dishes with Michelin Star chefs Thomas Martin and Mario Corti.

And yet, Zara called and you came back...

The last thing you did before ARAZ Restaurant was being the assistant corporate chef of six ships, where your tasks ranged from menu planning, HACCP lectures as well as various administrative duties. How is this a challenge for you?

Every new job is somewhat of a challenge. This is a restaurant of a four star hotel, where guests expect a certain level of gastronomy, but we are also trying to bring cuisine closer to the average person.

I doubt the average person has the money to enjoy French cuisine...

This is where my extensive experience throughout the kitchen and in the office comes in handy. For the price of a fast food menu, we are able to offer a two (HUF 990 or EUR 3.60) or three (HUF 1,190 or EUR 4.30) course meal with service which one can enjoy in beautiful surroundings. I think that is affordable even for the thrifty. And why wouldn't someone spend a little more time to taste our fennel soup with vermouth and anchovy toast, the roasted pork fillet with dill pumpkin ragout and potatoes and then top it off with our walnut cake with chilli chocolate sauce?

How many days do I have to come for that?

That's our menu today and we hope that when people understand that it is worth it to spend some more money on culinary pleasures they will come back in the evening and check out our à la carte offers.

Do they?

Yes, and I'm really happy that many of our returning guests are locals. Slowly but surely Hungarians are beginning to put quality before quantity and start to appreciate the art of food.

What do you mean?

A lot of creativity goes into not only coming up and preparing a certain dish, but also into how it is presented for the guest. I believe that if all of this is done right, the chef becomes somewhat of an artist. Some of my talent for this profession probably comes from my father who is a sculptor. I could never carve anything into a shape – well, maybe food – but I think the creativity necessary for being good in this is there.

Your creativity and experience, the state-of-the-art equipment and methods used to prepare the dishes, ambience and good location... is there anything else missing from the recipe of success?

A good team and the good quality of the ingredients is a must. We use fresh and natural ingredients of excellent quality and offer locally produced wines and juices that are handcrafted or made in small-scale production. The simple, back-to-basics approach to cooking also means appropriately sized portions, because while gastronomic pleasures are important, we wouldn't want our guests to leave our restaurant feeling hungry.

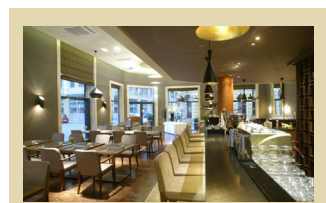
– Attila Leitner



That's exactly how I ended up in the Vier Jahreszeiten Hotel in the Black Forest, where I spent nearly two years preparing five-course menus in the Italian bistro then eventually cooking à la carte at a different restaurant of the hotel.

It seems that things were going good for you in Germany. Why did you decide to switch?

That's not entirely true. I actually came back to Hungary despite not having any job offers. I was fortunate enough to be able to come home and wait for the proposal I could not refuse. In the end Continental Hotel Zara made that offer. What the owners wanted to do coincided with what I had in mind about what a restaurant should be like. It was also a professional challenge.



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