

die Stadt Salzburg in Österreich / Austrian city of Salzburg

Salzburger Nockerln: “Sweet as Love and Tender as a Kiss”

If you think of all dumplings as culinary cannonballs that sit heavily on your stomach, then you’ve never had the pleasure of eating *Salzburger Nockerln*. Although *Nockerln* is an Austrian term for “dumplings,” this specialty from Salzburg is more like a soufflé—subtly sweet mounds of egg-white fluff, light as a pillow, baked until they’re golden on the outside but still soft in the center.

In a 1938 operetta titled *Saison in Salzburg* (also called *Salzburger Nockerln*), Austrian composer Raimund Friedrich Vesely has a character sing the praises of this dish: “*Süß wie die Liebe un zart wie ein Kuss*” (“Sweet as love and tender as a kiss”).

Maybe Vesely was inspired by the local legend attributing the invention of these special soufflé-dumplings to Salome Alt, the mistress of Wolf Dietrich von Raitenau, Prince-Archbishop of Salzburg from 1587 to 1612. She must have been quite a woman, because he built for her the beautiful palace now named Schloss Mirabell. But since Salome bore him fifteen children during their long-lasting affair, I wonder how she ever found time to cook—much less to invent a new dish for her powerful paramour.

Regardless of its roots, *Salzburger Nockerln* are now adored by everyone in that fair city. Robin Howe, in *Cooking from the Heart of Europe*, notes that “These baked dumplings are the culinary pride of Salzburg. The Salzburgers say that those who do not like them have no taste, and they add that Austrian women who cannot make them have no talent for being a housewife or a cook.”

It does take a bit of talent (or training) to make a successful soufflé, but once you’ve got the hang of



Salzburger Nockerln straight from the oven.

it, whipping up *Salzburger Nockerln* is easier than you might think. After all, it’s just an airy assemblage of eggs, sugar, and flour, flavored with a hint of lemon zest, vanilla, and nutmeg, quickly baked in a hot oven.

However, don’t be misled by some of the photos on the Internet showing so-called *Salzburger Nockerln* as flat meringues sitting forlornly in a baking dish. Instead, the egg-white mass should be mounded into three tall peaks symbolizing the three “city mountains” within the municipal boundary of Salzburg: the Mönchsberg, Kapuzinerberg, and Rainberg. The only deflated *Salzburger Nockerln* are ones that failed.

Classic *Salzburger Nockerln* are baked on a thin layer of heated butter, sugar, and milk in a shallow round or oval pan. (Sometimes raspberry or strawberry sauce replaces the but-

ter mixture.) The *Nockerln* are then taken to the table piping hot, straight from the oven, with a sifting of confectioners’ sugar over the top to simulate snow. They can also be accompanied by additional fruit sauce or vanilla custard sauce, or just a bowl of granulated sugar to sprinkle over the puffed peaks.

Always eaten with a spoon, *Salzburger Nockerln* are served as a dessert, as a light luncheon main dish, and as a treat for Sundays and special occasions. That’s why traditional Austrian menus sometimes list them under *Nachspeisen* (desserts) and other times under *Mehlspeisen* (a separate category of flour-based foods, not limited to desserts).

On a recent trip to Salzburg, I had the pleasure of eating these feather-light dumplings at several restaurants. One of my favorites was the classic