



# Hotel am Brillantengrund

Fashion, Art and Culinary Diplomacy in Vienna

words by Jennifer Fergesen | Iceland

The seventh district of Vienna hides many strange and beautiful things behind its pastel facades. Turn into one of the neighborhood's 19th-century row houses, once home to the laborers who powered Austria's silk industry, and you might discover anything from a workshop transforming leaves and buttons into high-end jewelry (Schmuckladen) to a shop specializing in vintage classroom posters — anatomy, botany, maps — up to 200 years old (Irenaeus Kraus). Come sunset, some shops shape-shift with the change in light, like the wholesome breakfast cafes Figar and Liebling that spend their nights as cocktail bars throbbing with house music.

Even the places that disclose their purposes may hold something unexpected. Outside Hotel am Brillantengrund, a mid-century placard announces the yellow building as a "HOTEL," like the neon "EAT" and "SLEEP" billboards that punctuate old American highways. But inside there's far more than a place to sleep. The hotel houses a showcase for art and design, a meeting place for creators and — most surprising of all — one of the most remarkable Filipino restaurants I've ever encountered.

## A platform for passionate people

The project is the brainchild of Marvin Mangalino, who took over the then-aging hotel in 2010. An Austrian-born transmedia artist with family ties in Laguna and the Visayas, Marvin fits seamlessly into the design-focused seventh district. During my August visit, I only ever saw him in a white v-neck, impeccably fitted shorts and Common Project sneakers like the summer uniform of

a hipster academy — that is, when he wasn't wearing the house-branded cycling kit that he helped design. He speaks English with a Germanic lilt that lends an extra cachet to words like "cool" and "art." "I'm the most European of my siblings," he admitted.

Marvin has remade the hotel in his own image, shaping it around his love of art, fashion and community while paying homage to his Filipino roots. With an in-house gallery, a curated shop and space for events, it has become "a platform for artists, cyclists, passionate people generally," Marvin said during a conversation in the hotel's courtyard, lush with potted palms and bougainvilleas.

The hotel restaurant, set in and around that verdant courtyard, hasn't always served Filipino food. In its first years under the current ownership, the kitchen turned out Austrian staples like *schnitzel* and *spätzle*, which filled stomachs but "had no identity," said Mangalino. "So I said, why not just sell what I really like, which is Mama's food?" He called in his mother Frezida, who grew up cooking in her father's Laguna carinderia, to helm the kitchen. At 71, she still rules over the restaurant, which would most likely be Austria's best Filipino spot even if it weren't the only one in the country.

## "What even is Filipino cuisine?"

The Mangalinos have embraced their role as culinary ambassadors. Their menu is structured like a textbook for Filipino Food 101, a survey course for the uninitiated. There's even an





introduction on the first page titled “*Was ist eigentlich Philippinische Küche?*” (“What really is Filipino cooking?”) that explains the cuisine’s Spanish, Mexican, Chinese and American influences and assures diners that it’s rarely spicy.

That’s not to say that anything kowtows to Western tastes. The adobo and bistek, made with locally-sourced meat cooked to yielding tenderness, strike that elusive balance between savory, sweet and sour — the syzygy that defines so much of Filipino cuisine. Despite the menu disclaimer, the sisig bangus and Bicol Express prickle with more spice (from both birds-eye chiles and red peppercorns) than you’ll usually find even in the Philippines.

The restaurant makes only one allowance for the tastes of the seventh district: you can order almost anything vegan. Many of the meatless variations are worth trying in their own right. The vegan siopao, branded with a green “V” like the red dots that separate bola-bola from asado, comes stuffed with a ratatouille-like stew of eggplant and tomato, the long-simmered essence of late summer. The monggo guisado, high-protein mung beans as smooth and rich as risotto, makes you wonder why monggo isn’t vegan by default.

If there’s a vegan jewel in Brillantengrund’s crown, it’s the seitan bistek — marked “*die Spezialität des Hauses*” on the menu. Frezida and her staff make

the seitan in-house, a labor-intensive process that takes more than a day. To infuse the blank canvas of wheat gluten with flavor, the kitchen collects all their vegetable trimmings — carrot peels, celery leaves, the root ends of onions — and simmers the seitan in the brew for a full 24 hours. The result is a supple, deeply umami product that holds its own against anything that comes from an animal.

#### A matriarch in the kitchen

“I did not copy this from any book,” said Frezida of the seitan bistek, when I managed to lure her away from the kitchen long enough to tell me her story. “This is my own invention.” Frezida developed all of the dishes at Hotel am Brillantengrund, with input from Marvin and food & beverage manager Javier Mancilla, and she guards her recipes like family secrets. Even her staff aren’t privy; she completes critical stages of each process away from prying eyes.

I asked if she could share just one small, inconsequential recipe with me, and Frezida countered with a cautionary tale. Two years ago, she hired a promising line cook who blandished her with attention. “One time, he told me, ‘Mother, give me all your recipes, and you can take a rest,’” said Frezida, “and I laughed at him.” Three months later, he left the restaurant. “If I had given them, goodbye!” finished Frezida, with a toss of her hand. “We wouldn’t have any identity.”

Frezida has worked to preserve her identity through decades of turbulence. She followed her husband to Vienna with her two older children in 1978, after a devastating fire destroyed her family’s compound in the Philippines. (Marvin was born the following year.) While raising her three children, she found odd jobs around the city — pressing medals in a factory, supervising an apartment building, managing an alterations shop, then pulling long shifts as a hospital nursing aide. She refused even government-mandated maternity leave, and found a job cleaning in a hotel one day into her official “retirement” from

the hospital. “I’m not the type of woman to stay at home,” she said, raising one eyebrow as if to judge any woman who would.

An exacting perfectionist, Frezida expects the same tireless work ethic from her staff. I watched her scold a server for looking at her phone, severe as any lola at a dinner table. Still, the staff betray a familial fondness for her, calling her “Mama” and speaking in awe of her driving passion — something she has in common with her son.

#### A neutral zone

Don’t let the craft cocktails, Eames chairs and fiddle leaf fig trees fool you — Marvin doesn’t want his hotel to be the hippest address on the block. “At most of these trendy and fancy places, it’s almost like a battle,” he said, evoking the silent contest that passes among the Beautiful People in some of the seventh district’s favorite hangouts. Elsewhere in the neighborhood, walking into a bar or restaurant can feel like entering a hipster pageant, with points for those who can dress the best, emote the least, exude the most Euro-chic aloofness.

“Here, you have the young hipster generation, but you also have normal old people, and over there a grandma sitting with her grandchild who’s studying in Vienna,” Marvin continued, gesturing to the umbrella-shaded tables around us. “It’s a neutral zone.”

In territorial terms, a neutral zone is somewhere that belongs to no one and to everyone, outside of nations and their rules. Hotel am Brillantengrund functions like that kind of non-territory. In a city governed by tradition, a district obsessed with style, this is the rare place that refuses to categorize either itself or its customers.

“The atmosphere, it’s like you’re visiting your family,” said Marvin, and he was correct — I felt right at home.