





Ghost from a Barrel cocktail with Unicum Riserva, rhubarb bitter and maple syrup

High Note SkyBar

Aria Hotel Budapest

Words: Heleri Rande • Photography: Courtesy of Aria Hotel Budapest

Connecting the once independent cities of Buda and Pest across the dazzling River Danube is the Széchenyi Chain Bridge, a striking symbol of the capital. And only a stone's throw away, next to another landmark in St. Stephen's Basilica, lies an innovative music-themed hotel – Hotel Aria Budapest. Harmonic clues lead the guest through the keyboard-shaped lobby all the way up to the High Note SkyBar, which boasts breathtaking views over the city.

Opened in 2015 after its namesake in Prague, the 49-key boutique hotel is a true gem in the Library Hotel Collection portfolio, which also includes the likes of Hotel Giraffe in New York and Hotel X in Toronto. Although the Aria Hotel Budapest has been operational for a few years, the culinary direction and management was recently taken over by the renowned Gerbeaud brand, paving the way for the development of a new rooftop concept. Gerbeaud, named after the celebrated Swiss confectionery family, also operates the 160-year-old Gerbeaud Café and the double-Michelin-starred Onyx Restaurant.

The idea driving High Note SkyBar is to give Budapest, which still shows some traces of a Soviet hangover, a gastronomic nudge by putting mixology first, or 'cocktail fine-dining' as the team refers to



Persephoné cocktail with gin, violet, Campari and Chambord

it. Admittedly, if you were asked to name somewhere in the world that is leading on food and drink innovation, Budapest might not be the first place that springs to mind. But the group's vision to create a harmonious ensemble between chef, pastry chef and bartender, with the latter as the lead singer, is testament to the creativity and culinary boundary-pushing that's now taking place here. The boldness of this particular project is clearly shown by the fact that Borbála Anger, the Head Mixologist who spearheaded the concept, was only 21 when she was hired. The reins have since been handed over to two other members of her team – Péter Gózon and Richárd Mihály.

"The emphasis and spotlight is on the cocktails, and all the dishes and desserts are tuned to complement them. Our goal is to create a symbiosis – a visually outstanding, cutting-edge quality based on sophisticated synergy," remarks Executive Chef Gergely Kövér, whose résumé includes stints in Relais & Châteaux properties in both Spain and the UK, as well as many acclaimed kitchens in Ireland and the Netherlands. Having previously run the group's highly successful Émile restaurant on the Buda side of town, Kövér was offered a degree of freedom in building the entire F&B team at Aria, which he admits had its challenges. "Food is actually a small part of what I do. But still, you have to be interesting and change all the time, otherwise you just disappear."

The ambitious chef is all about using native ingredients with techniques learnt from his travels. "I pay a visit to the local market every single week to get the best and freshest vegetables and fruits I can," he says. "I don't really want to create a signature dish. I rather believe in constant development." The menu therefore changes frequently, with the team of four working together on a daily basis to challenge and learn from one another. "I constantly search the internet for new ideas and look for the latest trends. I am the one who's bombarding Péter, Richárd and Gergely with ideas and project proposals," adds Pastry Chef Zsuzsanna Szabó.

Since the opening of High Note SkyBar, which started



with a cocktail menu reaching back to the classics, the concept has grown and evolved. The winter season inspired the team to create Taste the Forest, a nod to Hungarian wildlife and edible plants. The spring and summer menu, meanwhile, features cocktails such as Ginmaicha – gin stirred with matcha and roasted brown rice – and Garden of Secrets – chamomile-infused Martini Ambrato with elderflower liqueur and egg white. All of this creativity seems to go down well with the thirsty guests queuing up to get a glimpse of the views from the vast terrace.

To complement the various spirit flavours, there's a bar menu that draws inspiration from street food with servings of soy-glazed chicken wings, pulled-pork steamed buns and duck-stuffed gyoza, leaving just enough room for cheesecake with wild fruits and mango mousse with coriander. "The menu is like a system, it has to be connected and reflect our collaboration. Hence we need to help each other and leverage the fact that we all think differently," explains Kövér, who as a young boy

was fascinated by computers and programs. Indeed, it's clear from Kövér's meticulous approach towards his craft that technology and systematic thinking are there right at the very core. He even goes so far as to dream that all products should eventually be made in-house, including the tacos.

SkyBar is by no means the limit for this creative ensemble. Future plans to build a show kitchen on the ground floor for the hotel's main restaurant and offer banqueting services for the residences to be built next door will see the team take on a new set of concepts and challenges in the ever-growing food scene of Hungary's capital. As Gerbeaud gets ready to give full control of the F&B operation to Kövér and his colleagues in the near future, there's no doubt that the property will be in solid culinary hands.

www.highnoteskybar.hu

IN A BITE Covers: 150 • Owner: Library Hotel Collection • Operator: Gerbeaud Gasztronómia • Architecture: Zsolt Szécsi • Interior Design: Zoltán Varró • Executive Chef: Gergely Kövér • Pastry Chef: Zsuzsanna Szabó • Head Bartenders: Péter Gózon and Richárd Mihály