

## What Is Decadence?

By Jay Miutz

On a cold night in February of last year I boarded an 11pm flight out of the District of Columbia and across the pond. I'd brought along a traveling companion and after nine hours, two glasses of complimentary wine and an expired Xanax we awoke to our first stop – Istanbul. A layover, an expensive bottle of water, another two hours, one more glass of wine and we arrived at the destination we had been hoping for and were greeted by the dismally grey but oddly beautiful sky of Budapest, the capital of Hungary.

Now this trip was no fluke, no quarter life crisis booked with a Groupon, or carried out on a whim – it was a well-planned, advance notice trip with a major goal in mind. The research had been done, the directions had been mapped out and the idea had served as motivation for over 1,300 miles. So, as the sun awoke on the second day, so did we. We set off by foot, wearing out our soles with a destination in mind and a map in hand. Past steadily greening statues of long dead Huns, through stone streets speckled with thatched roofs and painted doors, up grassy knolls, across the Danube and down a rather unforgiving hill. We stopped at the postcard-esque castles, marveled at the gardens, admired the baths and gazed at the broad expanse of the grand cathedrals – but when we finally arrived at the warm glass windows, we had truly found our monastery.

A huge arching entrance gave birth to an open door and one after the other we entered into its belly. Dressed in our Sunday best, scarves and sweaters melted away to reveal neatly collared shirts, leather shoes with tightly tied laces and pants absent of stains. We matched the other audience members as we took our seats. The entire hall was grand. Gilded ceilings, delicately painted with biblical scenes that seamlessly intertwined with ancient imagery and natural elements. Hand carved vines that twisted their leaves and branches around the Corinthian columns that supported the domed ceiling.

Three floors of absolute decadence.

From our cushioned perches we watched servers in pressed white shirts and perfectly parted hair dance around the room – gracefully dodging between tables, delivering good news with each step. The air smelled as surreal as the environment felt – sweet and savory, warm and inviting, wafting across each patron's upper lip.

Gentle music played over the otherwise silent crowd – or perhaps it wasn't silent – it's impossible to tell as the *entire* experience required my *entire* focus.

A tunnel vision on what lay ahead.

Our waiter was a tintype man who carried two fragile plates on either hand; they were ivory white, with elegant patterns scrolled along their edges. He floated across the room, his feet knowing every step as they fell upon the well-worn hardwood floor.

He delivered his parcels as if they were a royal decree – lifting each high above his head before dramatically lowering it onto the soft linen tablecloth.

And there they were.

Two delicate slivers cut from the clouds themselves. Each placed with purpose on an exact coordinate upon the plate, dusted with sugar and cocoa. They embodied an unexplainable yet purely scientific mixture of egg, butter, flour, sugar and salt. One seemed dark and omniscient, secrets folded into its layers, oozing out onto itself and yet perfectly in place. Its edges were smooth, its interior was dense, and what lay within was a culinary testament to the very idea of chocolate.

Its counterpart was quite the contrary, a blindingly white sponge that stood haughty and arrogant with flavor – yet innocent and approachable. It was cut with precision, as if it had been carved of a block of marble, heavy cream and powdered sugar. Its royal peak was topped with a berry that sat with such grace and poise upon the top, that one might mistake it for a starlet from the golden age of film.

We descended upon them – hesitant at first, afraid to challenge the grain of creation, but once we began any premonition of stoppage was useless. Each morsel melted within us like an ethereal liquid. Sweet, savory, decadent, delicious, unimaginably edible, unbelievably enjoyable – an event that made one truly wonder if all of one's life experiences had simply taken place to arrive in this moment.

Our mission had been made complete.

Almost a year later I was huddled outside a bodega on 33<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> in the 11 degree cold wearing a down jacket with a hole in the armpit - I had haggled my way down to a dollar for a leftover piece of Dominican wedding cake, and as I polished it off and wiped the icing from my fingers onto the socks I'd worn for the second day in a row I thought to myself:

This is the best fucking cake I've ever had.