



WAFER MADNESS

by DAVID SPERANZA

When asked to name products the Czech Republic is known for, the well-informed person will inevitably mention crystal, beer, and Becherovka. If pressed, he might also suggest plastic explosives and dumplings, though even he will admit these are difficult to tell apart, especially when covered in gravy.

The truly discriminating person, however, knows of another highly addictive Bohemian product, one as ubiquitous as it is refined, whose bland designation is woefully unsuited to its sumptuous versatility. Allow me to introduce the Czech wafer.

Known in Czech as *oplatky*, these devilish delicacies come in a variety of shapes and sizes, from round to square-cut to triangular; single- or multi-layered; thin as a crepe to thick as a thumb. They come with

More Than Anyone Needs To Know About *Oplatky*

names like Mila, Manon, Dalida and Horalky, and are sold in wrappers as varied and colorful as their names.

I'm hardly one to judge a wafer by its cover, but in this case, packaging tells a large part of the tale. I discovered this after a 12-hour session taste-testing nearly twenty different brands, an activity I would only recommend after coating one's stomach with two or three large salads and a liter of Dobrá Voda (though you may still end up a bit lightheaded). A surgical mask may also be helpful, as the dust kicked up by so many crumbling wafers is guaranteed to make you long for the clean air of a Moravian coal mine.

Opavia is by far the most visible and well-marketed of the wafers (if the company had a motto, it would be something like "We do wafers," or "Wafers—what of it?"). In the "standard" wafer category,



Opavia rules the roost with its distinctive blue-ribbed package. Its most refined product, in fact, is called Modrá Stuha, which translates to Blue Ribbon. This is a subtle, double-layered concoction available with peanut, coffee, vanilla, and nougat fillings.

By contrast, Meteor's bland packaging holds equally bland contents, while Vlňy's hideous clear wrapper, decorated with brown and white squiggles, offers a unique design but a taste and consistency that aren't far removed from packing material. By the same token, Opavia's attractive but uninspired Radka wrapper disguises a tasteless, cardboard wafer, while the cheap thrills of LU's 1950-ish Cent Wafers shouldn't be overlooked.

Opavia's Tatranky may take top packaging honors in the wafer "bar" division, but they're overwhelmed by Mila's surprisingly subtle chocolate-covered concoction. The generic-looking Horalky, meanwhile, takes a close third, rivaling Tatranky's flavor despite a less-than-inspired wrapper.

Opavia, however, stands alone in the "bite-sized, chocolate-covered" division. Its line of Manon and Minonky offers several impressive variations on a theme, though the Twix-like Leo, imported from Belgium and thus out of competition, knocks both out of the water. Don't be tempted, meanwhile, by the fire-engine-red Dalida. Its baroque inner wrapper is all it has going for it.

For the most sublime wafer experience, however, Kolonáda offers the *pièce de résistance*, with its chocolate spa wafers from Karlovy Vary (although the white, hazelnut version is often stale and far too sweet). When fresh, these delicate, Frisbee-like disks emit a hypnotic aroma of cocoa which can inspire unforeseen heights of gluttony. Keep a lookout, too, for the irresistible green packaging of Kolonáda's Lázenské Trojhránek, two dense triangles of wafer half an inch thick, a concentration of cocoa and paper-thin wafer to make one weep.

Really, I'd love to go on, but I'm feeling a sudden urge for a large salad. Dobrá Voda, anyone? ▣

