

At Szimpla Kért, a “ruin pub” in an old apartment building.

► *Hot Spot (continued)*

The Best of Budapest

BEST SCENE Packed every night, **Café Kör** is the in crowd’s bistro of choice, with a home-style menu of goose liver, garlicky pike perch, and perfect *Somlói galuska* (chocolate-and-cream sponge cake). The owner has a free hand with champagne and *palinka*, a strong fruit brandy (Sas utca 17; 36-1-311-0053; entrées from \$9).

BEST GOURMET STEAL Hungarian cuisine is gaining a reputation as one of the world’s finest, and the newly Michelin-starred **Onyx** serves classic dishes refined for the modern palate. The restaurant’s lunch menu—three courses for \$18—is a gastronomic bargain (Vörösmarty tér 7-8; 36-30-508-0622).

BEST WINE The country’s wine is enjoying a renaissance. Stop by the **Budapest Wine Society’s** flagship to buy the Heimann cabernet franc, a rich and complex red (Vécsey utca 5; 36-1-269-3286). Or taste different wines at **Doblo**, a downtown wine bar. You’ll get guidance from David, the knowledgeable owner (Dob utca 20).

BEST NIGHTLIFE Take a dilapidated former apartment building and add several bars and lounges and a live music venue and you have **Szimpla Kért**. The first and biggest *romkért*, or ruin pub, has spawned a dozen imitators, but it’s still the granddaddy of the scene (Kazinczy utca 14). Start here, then walk a few minutes to **Doboz**, the newest bar complex, in the heart of the old Jewish quarter (Klauzál utca 10).

PRIMER

A Taste of Egypt

Even as Egypt readies for a new political climate, its countrymen are honoring their rich culinary heritage: Cairo’s **Backpacker Concierge** has just begun offering the first culinary tours of the country and tutelage in its ancient, exotically spiced dishes. Co-founder Eric Monkaba shares his five essential ingredients

| | THE BACKSTORY | THE USE | THE TIP |
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|  MULUKHIYA | Pharaohs slurped a broth made with this jute-like leafy vegetable. Presidential candidate Amr Moussa is a known fanatic. | It’s boiled to create a robust, sticky, garlicky soup made with broth from rabbit or goose, with the meat served on the side. | If using frozen <i>mulukhiya</i> , thaw it and pat dry, then chop fine with a mezzaluna. If using dried leaves, enrich with tomato sauce. |
|  LENTILS | Whether brown, red, or black and tiny, these work their way into many Egyptian dishes. The use of lentils dates to ancient times. | For <i>shorbet adas</i> (lentil soup), lemon, cumin, and fried garlic add zest to pureed red lentils. Monkaba puts in pumpkin too. | For the silkiest texture of soup, “don’t add salt to the water,” counsels Monkaba. Instead, season just before pureeing the lentils. |
|  BAHARAT | Arabic for “spices,” this is a seasoning mix tailored to specific dishes; it’s ordered at an <i>attar</i> (spice shop) and ground as needed. | Veggies get cumin, pepper, coriander, cinnamon, ginger, cardamom, clove; fish get the first three plus marjoram, garlic, and cayenne. | “Ideally, make your own mixture fresh at home,” says Monkaba. If you must buy <i>baharat</i> , the color and smell should be strong. |
|  CUMIN | The main part of <i>baharat</i> (in a four-to-one ratio with the other spices) is so important in Egyptian cuisine that it stands alone. | “Cumin is good with fish,” says Monkaba, “but it also complements garlic.” Given Egyptians’ love of garlic, it’s found in nearly everything. | Buy fresh whole seeds, toast in a pan (“no oil or butter, just roast them naturally”), crush, and sprinkle on the finished dish. |
|  TAHINI | “People don’t realize how versatile tahini is,” Monkaba says of the rich ground sesame paste that most cooks associate with hummus. | Thin tahini with lemon juice to make a sauce for grilled fish, or spread it on bread and drizzle with molasses—a popular Egyptian snack. | Get a midday boost from halva—tahini cooked with sugar. The dense, crumbly sweet is Egypt’s version of the energy bar. |

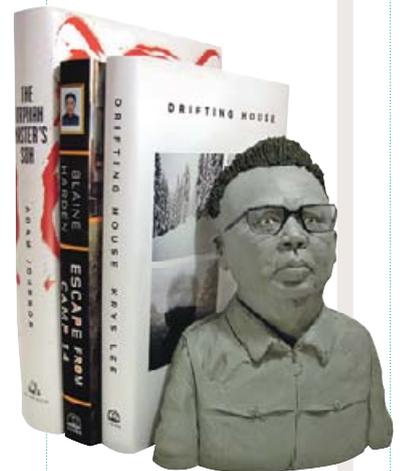
FYI

Artist Martin Creed has transformed the restaurant **Gallery by Night**, in London’s Sketch museum, with a zigzag floor created from 96 types of marble; a hodgepodge of chairs, cutlery, and tables; and an artist-inspired menu by Parisian chef Pierre Gagnaire (9 Conduit St.; 44-20-7659-4500; entrées from \$33).

UNDER COVER

Notes on the Final Frontier

North Korea is slowly opening up to international tourism, but since trips there currently require an official entourage, one can turn instead to three new books for a glimpse of the late Dear Leader’s mysterious land. The thrilling **Orphan Master’s Son**, by Adam Johnson, follows a young man



who is a tunnel soldier, pro kidnapper, and—most dangerously—lover of Kim Jong-il’s crush (Random House; \$26). Former *Washington Post* Asian Bureau Chief Blaine Harden’s **Escape from Camp 14** tells the story of the only one of 200,000 political prisoners to flee a concentration camp (Viking, \$27). And though the stories in Krys Lee’s **Drifting House** are mostly set in L.A., many focus on North Koreans escaping famine and now struggling to survive in Koreatown strip malls (Viking, \$26).

RIGHT: SCULPTURE AND PHOTOGRAPH BY KAREN CALDICOTT. LEFT: ILLUSTRATIONS BY OLIVER JEFFERS