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Song of a Supermarket

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PROSI Exotic Supermarket, with imports from more than 150 countries, a taste of home to happy international customers
CYNTHIA PECK
08/02/2011

How shall I sing a song of a supermarket? Shall I write an anthem to my appetite, or a hymn to the inquisitiveness of my tongue?

I enter PROSI Exotic Supermarket, in Vienna's seventh district, and suddenly stand still, with a sharp intake of breath and a smile on my lips. The grandest buildings in the world have never inspired me as much as a room where I smell food. Indeed, in my wanderings into the wide world, *au pif*, following my nose, it has certainly been my sense of smell that has guided me often.

I feel like bursting into song: For some 10 years now, PROSI has taken on the daunting task of bringing the taste of home to the foreign-born people living in Austria, and introducing Austrians to the food of the world.



Owner-manager Prince Pallikunnel missed his favorite food from home in India
Photo: PROSI

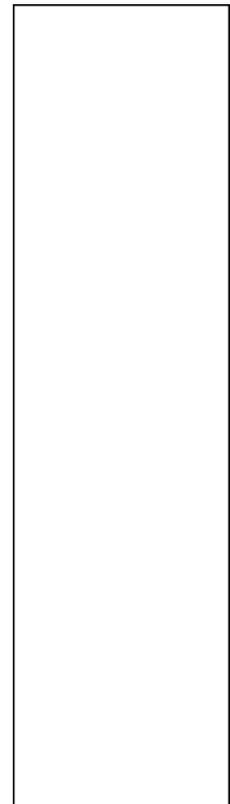
Owner and manager Prince Pallikunnel came to Austria from Kerala, India, to study business and information technology. The lack of food from home led him to open a shop for Indian products. Over the years, customers from many countries began asking him if he could get special foods from home, wherever home was, and soon he was importing more and more. The fifth expansion of the family-run store is planned for this month: a new wing for African cosmetics and Ayurvedic products.

With imports today from more than 50 countries, PROSI describes itself as the "largest and finest Asian, African and Latin American food store in Austria." For anyone curious about food, though, it is more than fine; it is a treasure trove. Five meters of spices, with paprika and garam masala by the kilo. Another fifteen meters with shelves of Indian pickles, chutneys and curry pastes. Then a slow shift to soy and fish sauces. More than 100 different kinds of exotic juices, 300 types of frozen fish and seafood, 80 kinds of noodles. Rice from ten countries, beer from twenty-five. Joyous Peruvian pink puffed rice next to Thai taro fish snacks ("a good source of protein"); South African spice rub ("for West Coast Fish") next to Treacle Syrup from England; purple yam powder from the Philippines next to Golden Curry from Japan. I am dizzy, happy and ravenous.

Just the sight of 200 different hot sauces is enough to make the mouth of a chili lover explode with pleasure. The most potent bottles come from the U.S., with evocative names to match: Ass Kickin' Original Cajun Hot Sauce, Blair's Golden Death Hot Sauce ("over 50 million have survived worldwide"), Hot Mama's Habanero Hot Sauce, and the very hottest, Pain 100%.

Smell and taste linger longest in the memory. PROSI Supermarket awakens a thousand Proustian moments in me, of wonderful meals and remembered revelation. The first savoring of a truly ripe mango, bright yellow and brought by a friend, ever so carefully,

OFID Banner



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all the way from her tree in Cambodia. My first clam, raw and slimy, just dug out of the sand on Long Island Sound, while celebrating my eleventh birthday with my father. A first Ethiopian meal: small piles of different spicy stews on the flat, tingling sourdough bread used to dip them up, bubbling on the tongue. At seven, the realization that hot sauce has a *flavor*, sitting in my grandfather's American-Mexican restaurant in a small town nearly at the southern-most tip of Texas.

All my life, I have been collecting the words to say delicious: *Sabroso* in Spanish, *taim* in Hebrew, *finom* in Hungarian, and in Japanese, *oishii*. I once taught piano to a small girl from Italy. When I asked her what the word *dolce* in the music meant, she leaned back, closed her eyes, waited a moment, and then whispered: "yummy."

In PROSI, I sing a song of Peruvian potatoes (small, smooth and flaxen yellow) and of "garden eggs" from Ghana, tiny white eggplants that finally explain how the eggplant got its name. Of grandmothers and aunts and mamas, who traditionally have been those who set the table: Mama Sita's Tamarind Seasoning, Aunt May's Cajun Pepper Sauce, and Grandma's Kerala Turmeric Powder ("nourished with love").

I find Oxford Sweetened Cabin Biscuits from Nigeria, in a simple two-toned old-fashioned cardboard box printed with two happy children's faces. It transports me to a kitchen shelf somewhere I have never been, but would like to go. And the image of a grandmother giving a gently sweet cracker to a grandchild who is teething.

I even stumble upon a lone can of Campbell's soup. If Andy Warhol had ever come to PROSI, the world of Pop Art might have been completely different.

The most difficult thing about importing food, says Pallikunnel, is the Austrian law that all ingredients be labeled in German. Despite the fact that nearly all his imports list their ingredients in English, and despite the fact that Austria is a member of the EU, where one might imagine English as a quasi official language, food must be labeled in German. For every one of the more than 6,000 products in his store, Pallikunnel has to translate and produce a label in German stating the ingredients, expiration date and product origin.

PROSI stands for Politeness, Respect, Obedience, Service and Intimacy. It is a supermarket with a mission, not only cultural but also political. With regard to integration, PROSI is perhaps the most successful (albeit unofficial) international organization in Vienna. It is a cultural meeting point, not just a business. In mid-June a street party is held in front of the store, with food, music and dancing from 25 countries. On the website are photos of over 150 customers, alphabetized according to their country of origin, from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe, just like the United Nations member states.

In a kitchen at the back of the store, international cooking classes are offered every Saturday. Food from Cameroon to Bhutan, Malaysia to Bolivia, Madagascar to Myanmar. A small sign in the window announces the need for cooking teachers, and the smell of the kitchen wafts through the supermarket, bringing a memory of home, or a dream of adventure.

I pick up a package of fresh water spinach from Thailand with the careful label: "store in a cool and wind-free place." I imagine a calm corner in a hot land, a contemplative moment before cooking leaves so delicate that they must be protected from every breeze, the taste of something soft and mild, cool and quiet.

I am an explorer, a wanderer. And wherever I have gone in the world, food markets have been gateways to discovery, supermarkets places of pleasure and intoxication.

In Vienna, PROSI is my door to delight.

Prosi Exotic Supermarket

Wimberggasse 5, 1070 Vienna

(across from U6-Burggasse/Stadthalle)

Tel.: 01/974 44 44

Open 9am to 8pm, Mon. through Sat.

See: www.prosi.at

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