



# The coolest boy in Belgium

**Why dance  
sensation  
Stromae is a  
symbol of hope**



**T**he Vienna coffee house scene is conducting an experiment, giving people the chance to get together and dance around a big idea conceived 1,000 miles away in Oxford, England: can a conversation with a stranger have the potential to change the world?

Not small talk, you understand, but serious debate on the kinds of topics most people tend to avoid in social situations. Like how big a part money plays in the way we choose to live, where the limits of our compassion lie, and other aspects of our personal philosophy we don't generally pull out and examine in public.

These topics certainly aren't dinner party chit-chat, but the kind of subjects often considered too close to the bone, too personal or too 'heavy'. Discussing them may make us feel vulnerable. But put us with someone we never expect to see again and suddenly we're expounding the deepest principles on which we base our daily lives.

## Viennese waltz

"I'm constantly astounded by the way people talk so openly to someone they don't know," says Theodore Zeldin, the academic and philosopher who originally devised these menus of meaningful conversation topics for world economic leaders in Davos.

"I find the conversations help people clarify in their own minds what is important to them; then they discover that another

person has similar views or issues, and it creates trust. The aim is to stop us being strangers – to my mind, the great adventure of this century is to discover who inhabits the world."

Zeldin's conversation dinners have trickled down over the years from Davos to special events held the world over. But Vienna is the first place to have made these soul-searching evenings a regular happening, translated to the coffee-house, an institution where patrons have always been invited to linger and air their views as Freud, Herzl and Mahler once did within their walls.

Barbara Cacao of Vienna Unwrapped presents monthly Vienna Coffeehouse Conversations evenings, where a visitor is paired with a local. Having pre-ordered their food and drink, they need only make their choice of topic from the conversation menu.

Questions up for debate might include: "How important is money to you?" "Which parts of your life do you consider were a waste of time?" and "Which ideas have you encountered while travelling and brought back to your life at home?"

The conversations take place, mostly in English, at Café Ministerium off the Ringstrasse, voted Vienna's most popular coffee-house last year. The experience costs €15, €19 or €22, depending on whether you want a plate of pasta or are happy with a salad or slice of sachertorte. As space is limited, it's necessary to register for the upcoming sessions, which start again this month after a winter break. Then all you have to do is shake someone's hand, say hello, sit down and put the world to rights.

**📍 The next Vienna Coffeehouse Conversation will be held at Café Landtmann, Universitaetsring 4, 20 February. [vienna-unwrapped.com](http://vienna-unwrapped.com)**