

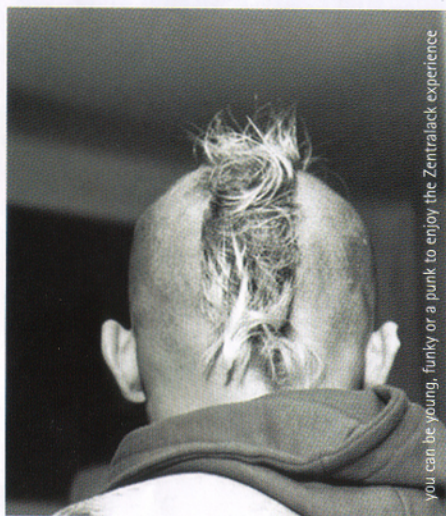
SWISS Conversation

at a Swiss restaurant, eat and drink as the Swiss do. Check out the Swiss wines on the wine list at Restaurant Zentralack

SWISS CUISINE DOES EXIST, WAY BEYOND THE ALPS AND THE APRÈS-SKI CULTURE. ERIC LOW SHARES HIS DINING RENDEZVOUS AT RESTAURANT ZENTRALACK, WHERE QUALITY COOKING AND EXCELLENT PRODUCE SPOKE FOR ITSELF.



if you want a perfect pairing, just look for Stefan Iseli, restaurant manager and sommelier



you can be young, funky or a punk to enjoy the Zentralack experience



chef Jann Hoffman promises a new dining experience

One of the best ways to tease our chef egos is by cooking for another chef. Chefs communicate with one another through food, and opinions, outlook and emotions are expressed through the way food is cooked and presented. A chef can read another chef's character from the dish prepared. Likewise, from observing the way you appreciate his food and cuisine, he knows if you are on the same culinary frequency as him. Great friendships and culinary ideas always take off at this point.

A young Swiss at 28 years old, Chef Jann Hoffman was the one whose chef ego was teased by us – a 20-people team of different nationalities from Asia to Middle East, Europe and America. All of us were culinary experts in our own rights in the foodservice industry. We share one thing in common – we were professional alcoholics and hardcore addicts for gastronomy. It was early winter and already dark when we stepped in, hungry and cold. The restaurant is a youthful-looking hangout that seats about 30 people and looked like a big warm cozy living room with soft lighting. No fancy avant garde design or big gaudy furniture, just simple minimalist surroundings with a touch of modern European style furnishing.

In our honour, Hoffman had closed the one-year-old restaurant for that night. Prior to opening his own restaurant a year ago, Chef Hoffman had worked in several high profile restaurants in Switzerland (such as Restaurant zum Taggenberg, Winterthur, Hotel Schweizerhof, Davos; Parkhotel Vitznau, Luzern; Hotel Meierhof, Davos; Hubli's Landhaus, Davos and Steigenberger Belvedere, Davos from apprentice to sous chef position.

HIS FOOD IS SIMPLE, WITH STRONG FOCUS ON FRESHNESS, CORRECT DONENESS AND TEMPERATURE.

From his galley-sized kitchen, Hoffman was putting together a six-course dégustation menu for us with matching wines. The operation started on the dot with Swiss precision timing. Our group had been cooking for others during the earlier part of the day and looked forward to be served. First, some champagne!

The hot appetiser came on dainty little Chinese porcelain spoons. It was individual ravioli stuffed with spinach and lightly sautéed with truffled butter. The message was clear: Good food does not need much pretense. Our next course was a venison consommé with pan-seared foie gras and dried figs. A rich venison stock formed the base of the consommé which was also lightly perfumed with aromatic winter root vegetables of parsnip, celeriac and carrots. The foie gras blew me away with its melt-in-the-mouth texture and the sweetness of the figs enhanced the consommé with a comforting note. Our sommelier Stefan Iseli had selected a local Riesling for this dish and the wine's crisp acidity cut the richness of the goose liver right through. This was our second course and though we had rich ingredients like butter and foie gras, the well selected wines had left our palates well cleansed and increased our self denial of the calories.

Then again, who talks about calories with true connoisseurs?

The Swiss may not get to enjoy a huge variety of seafood like their neighbours with vast coastal lines, but Mother Nature has been fair in giving them great freshwater seafood harvested through Lake Geneva and Lake Neufchatel plus a winning team for the America's Cup! Our third course was pan-roasted zanderfilet (fresh water perch) on

creamy chanterelles r agout and herb oil. The fresh perch filet came perfectly cooked with a crispy skin and warm, juicy moist meat that paired well with the creamy chanterelle sauce. A drizzle of home-made basil oil brought the sauce to a new level with a wonderful fragrance of fresh basil. It would be culinary injustice to allow your food to get cold by taking your own sweet time to finish such an excellent dish. Chef Hoffman laid a crust of hazelnuts and rosemary over our next course of seared venison filet, which was pan-roasted to perfect doneness. Puy lentils were braised in rich demi glace and the accompanying sauce had given a touch of aged balsamico that gave it a nice balance of acidity and richness. The meat was easily sliced with a lovely reddish hue of juices and the crust was just simple ingredients skillfully orchestrated. Stefan Iseli picked a red Spanish wine varietal, Tempus 2003 by Altavins Viticultors, Terra Alta, Spain to accompany our well-executed main course. This young wine exhibited flavours of red berry fruits with high acidity and young tannins. A slight hint of peppery spice gave it a nice affinity for the deliciously pan-roasted meat.

Instead of serving us a variety of cheese, Chef Hoffman threw us off with one of the most challenging cheeses that I have ever come across in my life as a cook – taglatalie pasta with Stanser 'Chu flade'. According to Hoffman, this is an artisan cheese made in central Switzerland with aromas that point strongly towards the barnyard and cow dung. It's akin to getting people not familiar with shrimp paste or belachan to appreciate the classic Singapore deep-fried chicken with prawn paste. At first bite, the creaminess was without doubt present but the pungency of the cheese really works its way up your nasal passages and you feel that you have had just been to the barnyard. Looking at the facial expressions of my dining compatriots, it was a love-hate relationship with this piece of art. As with tradition, Stefan Iseli, our ever-attentive sommelier got us each a glass of white port from Quinta De La Rosa. The sweetness of the wine provided relief for those who were recovering from the challenge and for those who enjoyed the cheese, this was a perfect liaison.

By this time, we were anticipating a perfect finish to the menu and we were not disappointed. Out came individually baked streusel crusted plum tarts with a scoop of frozen cr me fr iche. One of the greatest pleasures of dessert is to have hot and cold sensations simultaneously and this was a scorer. The warm sweetness of the tart was contrasted by the cold slightly sour melting cr me fr iche where the gentle acidity cuts in.

By now, we had fully understood Chef Hoffman's cooking philosophy of no pretenses with minimalist garnishing and presentation. His food is simple, with strong focus on freshness, correct doneness and temperature. Some chefs try too hard to impress with fancy garnishes that they forget the crucial serving temperature of the dish that affects the senses of our culinary pleasure. Personally I will never trade taste for dramatic visual appeal and fully agree with Hoffman's principle in cooking. There was nothing on the each plate that we could not eat and not many chefs can achieve that when it comes to presentation. To further reinforce his cooking principles, Chef Hoffman does not showcase a wide variety menu. With an armed-to-the-teeth galley size kitchen similar to that of a mega yacht, he is able to work efficiently with a bit of help from his only commis chef. He believes in personalised cooking and thus changes his menus regularly. There are never more than four types of main courses available per night but all skillfully crafted. Staying true to taste is the word for this one-year-old restaurant which is constantly striving to achieve new standards of modern European dining pleasure. EL



from left to right

top row

balsamic vinegar

dried chilli

the indispensable olive oil

middle picture

Switzerland is blessed with lots of quality seafood, such as cod.

bottom row

dried morel mushrooms

the utensils that are indispensable to every chef

pine nuts

