

Consciously, but Not Knowingly

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There is deeply rooted lack of regional awareness among restaurateurs and chefs in the northern Alpine region, like an innate inferiority complex with regard to any culinary influences from elsewhere. Be it in Switzerland, Austria, or southern Germany. It is so deep that at best they dare to offer domestic Tyrolean gray cattle as a *carpaccio*, and faintheartedly put on the menu as *panna cotta* the cream sourced from cattle that graze freely in meadows. They might well wrap domestic zander in some wooly pig fat from the neighboring organic farm, but on the menu they call it *fish saltimbocca*. They then at best naively put a geographical allocation in front of the dishes, so as to pretend to guests from the area as well as tourists that there is something regional about them. This takes the form of: *Allgäu brassato*

with olive tapenade or Aargau Châteaubriand with curry and orange-flavored butter.

That said, they have long since been aware of the fact that guests and tourists not only long for genuine regional specialties in the mountains at home, in pretty Alpine inns and in shady beer gardens, but are also increasingly looking for them on their plates and on menus. This is something that up and down the country gastronomic circles, chefs' federations, and tourism associations have been eagerly discussing for years on panels, and at seminars and symposiums. However, pure laziness and wrong regional awareness then frequently result in nothing more than ridiculous pseudo-regional strategies, whose regional character is mostly limited to a few images of the local countryside on the menu. In fact, particularly shrewd restaurateurs think they are doing justice to regionality by buying New Zealand lamb and Argentinian beef loins from the local butcher and then plugging them as "chef's-style".

Awareness alone is not enough if there is a lack of knowledge. Or if one does not have the courage to adapt obsolete and long since outdated chefs' teaching curricula to new circumstances, to offer chefs further training, and to strengthen collaboration between regional agriculture and domestic restaurateurs. And this way to stand up to the ineffable campaigns staged by tourism bureaucrats aimed at elevating supposedly national cuisines to a leading position. There is, however, no "Swiss" cuisine, just as much as there is no Austrian cuisine and no German cuisine. What there is are regional cuisines, which for all their overlapping are clearly different from one another in terms of diversity and range.

Not that this knowledge has not long since been available: over the past two decades innumerable organizations put enormous efforts into systematically and thoroughly putting the necessary foundations in place; knowledge which, through the globalization and industrialization of the food industry, in particular in the second half of the 20th century, had to a large extent had disappeared. Through their work, organic organizations, the slow food movement, fruit and vegetable growers and associations dedicated to the preservation of bio-diversity such as *Pro Specie Rara* in Switzerland and *Arche Noah* in Austria have played a major role in revitalizing the existing, regionally so different diversity. Botanists and chefs who are enthusiastic about natural produce have made us aware of the unique diversity of edible wild plants again. And for years now books about patios at home, crop plants, the range of cheeses and the abundance of fish have been at the top of bestseller lists. Markets specializing in regional produce are springing up all over the place, attracting thousands, at times tens of thousands of visitors; leading the way slow food fairs, *Pro Specie Rara* markets, *Bio Marché* and *Authentica* trade fairs, cherry and chestnut markets, Alpine cheese markets and fruit fairs.

Although the large retailers and discounters have long since recognized the re-emergence of regional foodstuffs and cuisine, their nationwide strategies make it difficult for them to adopt a credible approach to it. Only produce that as it were is available all year round and is consistently

good quality finds its way to the supermarket shelves. Lots of hospitality and hotel chains that operate across the country are using 'Swissness' campaigns to try and jump on the regional cuisine bandwagon. Even at the breakfast buffet though, this regional image is limited for the most part to bread and at best marmalades, while visually slices of Leerdammer cheese, packets of Kellogg's cereals and Nutella sachets are still dominant.

Especially in Austria and Switzerland, but also, for example, in German-speaking northern Italy and Germany's Baden-Württemberg region, top chefs have assumed a leading and important role in the rediscovery of regional diversity, not least because for a culinary elite, top-class regionally defined cuisine has emerged as a new status symbol. Nowadays top chefs are increasingly acquiring modern kitchen popstar status, and they enjoy a lot of media attention, which very much accelerates the revival of regional diversity.

Heinz Reitbauer, for years now the undisputed no.1 among Austrian chefs, successfully puts this regionality into practice with his unique creativity but without determined dogmatism: although he only works with regional ingredients from producers he knows, he does not shy away from using new sorts of chili from his vegetable farmer for his culinary creations, not to mention the citrus fruits from his Viennese orangery. Thanks not least of all to Reitbauer, Austria's cooking elite has long since come together under the umbrella of the country's Chef Campus. Together the top chefs are very successfully adopting an approach that gives their fare a diverse regional image.

In Switzerland too, a handful of young chefs has recognized the benefits of a regional focus. With increasing success, and Nenad Mlinarevic, for example, showing the way; he works in the Park Hotel in Vitznau on Lake Lucerne, and since 2015 has only been using domestic produce, which in 2016 earned him the title of Swiss Chef of the Year. At first sight Mlinarevic may well seem more radical than comparable fellow chefs, because with the exception of coffee and cocoa he does without exotic spices such as pepper, nutmeg, and cloves. In exchange he is helping local traditions and those that were thought to have been lost along the way, find their place in cooking again, from Cornelian cherries to rosehip oil and whey caramel to whitefish roe.

And nonetheless Mlinarevic pursues an undogmatic approach, is curious and cosmopolitan. And proves in the process that regional awareness is anything but restrictive: Like Reitbauer he too works with curious local farmers who above all are eager to try something new, and who sometimes supply him with Amaranth flour or with South American herbs, with which they experiment; as, two hundred years ago farmers in these parts began experimenting with potatoes from the New World or one hundred years ago local vegetable farmers began growing tomatoes.

The fact that gastronomy – and this by no means applies only to top cuisine – makes its mark primarily through regionality, is not only due to a traditional or indeed new variety of produce. Rather, it is primarily due to the faces and the stories behind this diversity. And only those who ignore

the history of our diet fear allegiance to traditional dishes and produce, because like never before, innovative producers and farmers are ensuring not only that the old diversity is preserved, but that a growing diversity that is for ever renewing itself emerges. Put in more simple terms: only thanks to old apples do new varieties appear.

The elite of young Swiss chefs has recognized this principle: Fabian Fuchs from L'Equitable in Zurich prepares the regional organic produce he uses precisely and accurately, such that his restaurant is now almost always full booked. And with cookery that focuses exclusively on home-grown produce and her unbridled curiosity about regional discoveries Rebecca Clopath, a chef from the Graubünden region of Switzerland has emerged as a guest chef who is much in demand. In Austria, polished concepts and the skillful use of the bio and product diversity in their respective regions have long since put chefs such as Andreas Döllerer in Gölling in the Salzburg region and Josef Floh in Langenlebern in Lower Austria very much in the top flight.

In the aspiring luxury hotel business in new Swiss tourist spots, Swiss chefs were once the first outside France to learn and indeed advance the sophisticated craft of erstwhile French top chefs. During the culinary globalization stage as well, chefs from the Alpine region have long played an important role worldwide. But since, with the molecular renewal of cooking techniques, the Spanish in particular have laid the foundations for a new awareness and with a concept geared to sustainability and biodynamics involving only regional cuisine the Scandinavians are admittedly now in a leading role, the attention Alpine cuisine attracts has dwindled. Not least of all because the, by comparison, great economic success of mass Alpine tourism has made the hospitality trade sleepy and induced a comatose state as far as its will for renewal is concerned. That said, of all European regions it is this diverse cultural area in particular that in the future has the greatest chance of positioning itself as a culinary stronghold, because nowhere is there greater diversity than here at the heart of Europe, where for centuries influences from the north and south, from the west and east have all come together. Influences that have become blended, that have remained here and yet have advanced individually from valley to valley. There are still thousands of varieties of fruit, hundreds of wild plants that are suitable for cooking but for the most part still not used, dozens of unique animal breeds, innumerable sorts of bread from incalculably diverse Alpine grain traditions. And not least of all, of course, a wide variety of processing and finishing techniques still nurtured by an almost unfathomable range of butchers, distillers, cheese makers and confectioners.

In order to assume a leading role here, the hospitality trade, like agriculture, must continue to concentrate on the existent diversity. And it must do everything it can in order, together with all the powers that be in regional tourism marketing, to focus on its peculiarities instead of getting entangled in an interchangeability competition on the level of a rating wrangle. By, to repeat yet again, banking more on faces and stories.

In future, menus will then read something like this: Rampion salad with roast beechnuts and a pine shoot and vinegar vinaigrette with camelina oil. Or: Lake Zurich zander marinated in barberry juice with crispy Jack-by-the-Hedge seeds. Or perhaps: Fillet of Murnau-Werdenfelser beef on a wood sorrel jus with spelt dumplings and 'Haferbirne' pear slices.

Because despite all our wanderlust, all our curiosity about foreign cuisine and all our belief in the fact that anything can be globalized *ad infinitum*, there is one thing we should not lose sight of: Almost everything can be exported or imported – skills, commodities, talent, and technology. But not regionality. Because it can only be experienced in a credible, sensual manner, where the countryside and agriculture, people, culture and cuisine interact. We cannot for eternity just abandon this finding to cheese fondue served in Alpine inns by staff wearing traditional costume and to the sound of cowbells and Alpine horns.

