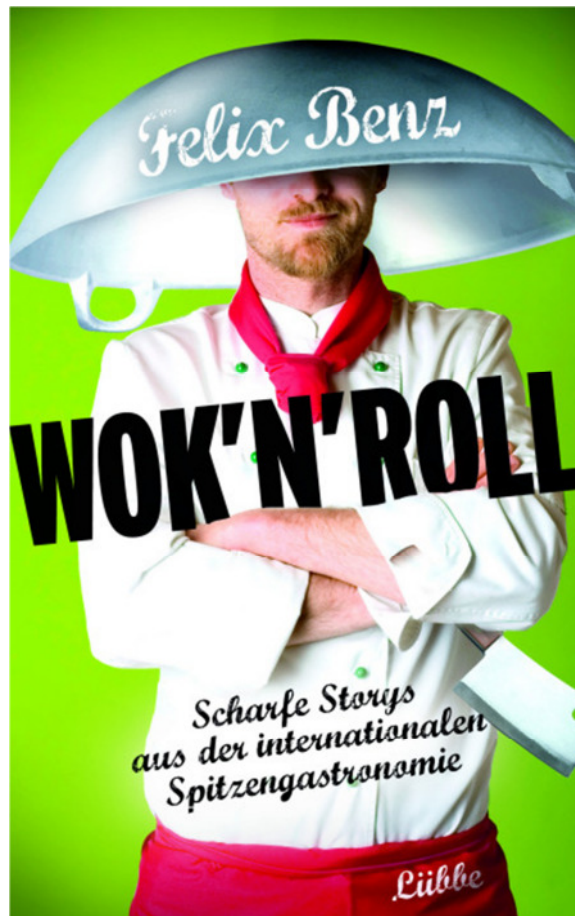


Felix Benz

**WOK'N'ROLL**

Spicy stories from the epicentres of the world's haute cuisine



Infotainment  
208 pages  
978-3-7857-6043-7  
Hardcover  
November 2010

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For my wife Marion. And for Ria.

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## PROLOGUE

Chefs are tolerant, except when it concerns their cooking!

“Where did you learn how to cook, you stupid idiot? Unbelievable! I’ve never seen anything like this before! A shame to the profession! Stupid, gay, ugly, addicted to drugs, dirty, lazy – that’s acceptable. But how can you chuck my Demi Glace Sauce into the sink...?”

Phrases like these are more common than not in the Restaurant and Hotel business. If you want to be a chef, you’ve got to be able to handle rough language. And much more than that.

My name is Felix Benz and I’m a chef. I’ve been one for ages. Actually, since I was a teenager. I started at the age of eleven, before my first erection.

My job back then: frying chips. That wasn’t easy, I can tell you that! Not for an adult and certainly not for an eleven year old. How complicated it can get I realised when I stood in front of the fryers in a makeshift tent by the side of a road during a cycle race. I was put in charge of three fryers without having the faintest clue of how to fry chips. But apparently no one else did either. A girl much older than me, probably around seventeen, showed me how the fryers worked. I fully concentrated on her well visible boobs under the BAD Sweatshirt and the first basket of chips went straight into the bin.

After that bad start I ended up being quiet the professional by the end of the day. Five hours and hundreds of portions of chips later, my hair and my clothes smelling of oil, I was the luckiest boy in the world! A fantastic job, a great day!

Back then I thought chips come delivered frozen and pre-fried and the enthusiastic chef’s only job is to dump them into the hot fryer and finish them off. Later I realised that being a chef also meant peeling and slicing chips out of dirty, fresh potatoes.

For me that Sunday Race Day was the moment of truth: I wanted to become a chef. When I told my parents about my decision they smiled and patted my back. Not because they were happy about my decision. No, they thought it was just another ‘phase’, as they liked to call my weekly changing ideas of what I wanted to become in my adult life.

Months later I still insisted on becoming a chef. Now, that worried my parents and my dad wanted a word with me.

“You have to think very seriously about your future. With your intelligence you could easily do something decent! Being a chef is not a profession, it’s a hobby!” He repeated that sentence whenever talk around the dinner table tended to go in the direction of me becoming a chef.

Back in those days, towards the end of the seventies, beginning of the eighties, nobody trained to become a chef. The profession was frowned upon. Irregular working hours, bad pay and stress related illnesses enhanced its bad reputation. Those unfortunate enough not to find anything else were sent off into some Hotel or Restaurant by their job coach to find out whether they would be able to do an apprenticeship in such an environment. To just peel carrots or stir a pot of tomato sauce you didn’t have to be intelligent, most people thought. And the Restaurants were glad to find cheap labour.

The Swiss schools didn’t do much to promote the profession either. The business economy demanded office workers and the Banks in Zurich had thousands of vacancies for apprentices and were not shy of advertising that fact.

After not having changed my mind in two years my family and most of my teachers, who had been keen on sending me to University, got used to the idea.

During my second Senior High School year I attended cooking classes. I was not the only boy sharing the stove with the fourteen girls there, but probably the only one interested in cooking. The other boys had different agendas. Like picking up birds. To be honest, I didn’t mind working next to those giggling and sexy apron clad girls either.

The teacher was also very happy to notice that some boys had found their way into her classes. Her happiness didn’t last for very long though.

Us boys needed a lot of courage to move into, what was then considered, a woman’s domain.

I obviously didn’t have a clue of the female/male ratio in percentage at Restaurant kitchens when I was that age. It was the opposite of our cooking class: out of seventeen chefs one was female. At Hotel kitchens it was even worse: not counting the pastry kitchen, out of 21 chefs one was female. But that’s not all: experience shows that out of those 21 chefs six are gay, four have got an alcohol problem, seven consume illegal substances regularly, twelve are overweight, eight suffer from bad skin or athlete’s foot, three have foul teeth (the smell coming out of their mouths nearly making one faint), two are divorced, five have illegitimate children and all 21 are absolute egoists.

I almost forgot: every third chef did suffer, or still suffers, of sexual transmitted diseases.

These points were never mentioned by our cooking teacher. She probably didn’t know either. Instead she presented us with an enormous challenge: she asked us to cook a simple three course

menu in groups of four. And she made us eat the results. This turned out to be horrifying! We confused Cayenne Pepper with Paprika, the sugar bowl was filled with salt and instead of taking the brandy for cooking we drank it secretly.

The day our cooking teacher tasted my Goulash and, at first, got tomato red in the face and was later half choking to death whilst running off to the bathroom, I will always remember. I discovered my passion for hot food. Well, to put it right: my passion of cooking hot food and watching others eat it!

One thing you have to know: Chefs are not nice. Chefs are ruthless to others but weaklings when it concerns themselves.

A chef cries behind closed doors inside the smelly changing room after the lunch service when the Head Chef chose him to unload his daily pile of shit onto his head in front of the other chefs. Hurt, offended and smelling of stale sweat and old frying oil, red eyed and beaten he spends his afternoon break at the favourite smoky watering hole, knocking back one pint after the other. He swears revenge! He wants to pay it back to the old bastard! He hates his colleagues for laughing in his face after the old man had finished his tirade.

After his break he drunkenly rushes back into the kitchen. Ready for a fight he storms into the chef's office. Standing there, swaying slightly, he finds out that the man has already left a couple of hours ago.

Disappointed and tired from the drinking he gets back to his post in the kitchen and works quietly until the end of his shift. After work he and his best mates, the other chefs, hit the pub. Laughing and patting each others shoulders they drink round after round. They gossip about the Head Chef and philosophize on food and new recipes.

It's so beautiful to be a chef!

1

Stand your man

At the sweet age of fourteen- I had just experienced my first sex adventures on clammy forest grounds or in smelly cellars- my culinary awakening dawned. I went ahead to discover the universe of the professional chefs! My mission: a week long working experience at a famous Brasserie in Zurich.

At eight o'clock on the dot on a Monday morning, my heart beating heavily in my chest, I stood on the doormat of said Restaurant. What was I to expect? Well, the first thing that happened was that some slimy waiter pulled me through the door and pushed me down some greasy steps calling out to me in broken German:

'You go down, boss waiting!'

I slowly went down the old dirty concrete steps. The smell of onions, meat stock and evaporating alcohol engulfed me. At the bottom of the stairs was a door. The sign behind the door read: 'Kitchen/ Hygienic Zone'

Hesitantly I opened the door. A different world unfolded itself in front of my eyes.

This was the heart of the famous Gourmet restaurant! If it would have been the heart of a human being, I thought to myself, the funeral preparation would already have been in full swing.

A mixture of oil and water was dripping down from the ceiling. The ancient, in their previous lives probably white floor tiles, were covered with sauce and food residue. The steaming, smoking, hissing, sizzling and rattling pots and pans on the stove and the steamers and other machines, screwed to the steel tables, their electric cables glued into the sockets on the wall, were all ancient too. The handles of the cast iron sauté pans must have been welded back on a hundred times already. The door of the combo-steamer/oven was held to its hinges by rubber seals of sterilising jars.

A hand operated service elevator screeched noisily on its way up to... the restaurant I suppose. Its security doors had probably been missing for years.

The floor in the kitchen was wet and slippery. Vegetable crates were scattered on it. Somebody swore. It was warm, if not hot.

In the middle of the chaos stood the head chef: big, fat and very scary looking. His beady eyes drilled into mine. The smell coming out of his mouth made me feel sick: at this time of the day anyhow. A melee of stale beer, stomach acid, garlic and coffee descended on me.

'Aha, the boy who wants to become a chef!' he grunted and whacked my shoulders.

Grumpily he introduced me to the other chefs as 'the boy'. My name didn't interest him at all. Quickly, without turning around he showed me his empire. He mumbled to himself instead of talking to me.

For the first time I heard words like: *mise en place*, *pass*, *remouillage*, *tourner* and some strange swearwords that my parents didn't like at all when I used them at home during our dinner.

'Brain amputated Assfucker' or 'Salami blower' were some of the harmless ones. My dad sent me off to bed and I wasn't aloud to watch my favourite TV Program, 'The Fall Guy', for days to come.

Well, back to the kitchen. They dressed me in a much too large chef's jacket and gave me one of the most important jobs in the kitchen: slicing onions. I had already practised at home, so I was quiet

good at it already. At least I thought so. The chef's had a good laugh anyhow. I soon realised that there was a certain hierarchy in the kitchen. I was at the bottom of it, even below the Casserolier, the man who rinses the pans and not, as I thought, worked at the checkout.

Above him was the Salad lady. (Yes, a woman in the kitchen!) Then there was the apprentice, the Commis-Entremetier, the Commis-Saucier and the Pâtissier or Pastry Chef. (Again a woman! Very nice, very blond, very sexy! A miracle!) Above them was the Chef Garde-Manger, this time without a Commis, the Chef Entremetier, also without a Commis, and the Chef Saucier. The latter also acted as the Sous Chef, the right hand of the Head Chef. Then there was the Chef Tournant, who was off on Mondays. A Tournant, I was explained, replaces the other chefs on their day off. In my later life I realised very quickly that as a Tournant one was always the idiot, the cleaner, the maid and the slave of the other chefs.

Just an example: When the cooks left the station late at night it usually was completely plundered and dirty. However, when they stumbled back into the kitchen after one or two wild days off with tear sacs under the eyes they expected everything perfectly clean on their return. The drawers should be filled to bursting with freshly prepared food; the mise-en-place-list with the information of the work still to be done should be ready on the squeaky clean stainless steel table. And who was supposed to have done all that? The Tournant of course.

My first morning in the Brasserie went quickly, because during the onion slicing business I was able to watch the others cooking and getting on with their exciting work!

Lunch for the staff was on the table at eleven sharp. One of the cooks ladled generously directly out of the big black pot: boiled veal head with potatoes. Not my favourite food. But I did not say anything, because I knew that the others were watching me. Reluctantly I ate what they fed me.

The talk around the table circled around a single theme: how to have sex when one was drunk. The cooks probably wanted to impress me, or test me on how tough I was.

"Hey, my new chick came twice last night, even after I slugged a crate of beer with her! And her twin sister was joining the party too and getting her bit on the side!" claimed one of the cooks.

"Your chick has no twin sister, man," noted another Chef gravely. "I know her. She's only got a brother."

"Hey, you must have been more wasted than you thought! Was the brother more pretty than the sister? Anyway, with her looks you have to be pissed to get a boner, man! ", called the Sous Chef.

The Salad lady was quietly reading a Spanish newspaper.

The Pastry chef joined in and said that most men couldn't even get it up after ten beers. The cooks thought quite differently. It would depend on the mood and on how long you previously had no sex, they argued.

"And what the partner looks like!" called the Sous Chef grinning.

"The longer you have had no sex, the drunker you can be and still be able to get it up." Explained a fat, shaven headed chef.

"And, the more you drink, the better the sex." He added on.

He bragged that even after fifteen beers and a few Schnaps he was still able to perform. The others agreed noisily. The Pastry chef - Nancy - smiled at me sweetly. I blushed.

"And what is your opinion, boy? „ she asked.

"Fifteen beers cannot stop me.", I whispered. Roaring laughter from the other chefs.

The Commis-Entremetier waved at me.

"We should go for an after work drink, boy!" he said and with a well trained Miss Piggy gesture he wiped the dyed blond hair from his face.

"Beware he is still a minor! „ joked the Sous Chef.

"But so am I! „ smiled the Commis-Entremetier. Now the other chefs were clapping each other's shoulders and went back to work still laughing.

And then it got serious. The lunch service was about to begin. The last preparations had to be made and the mise- en-place to be controlled. Each Chef grabbed his favourite pots, whisks and ladles. Torchons, the thick heatproof towels that each chef has either hanging haphazardly or neatly folded on his apron strings plus some clean rags were hidden in secret places. Knives were sharpened, Sauteuse pans, Sautoirs and Cast Iron Pots were warmed up, the sauces seasoned. Why the Torchons and rags were hidden was a mystery to me. Therefore I shyly asked for the reason. The answer was actually logical: there were always too little of them. The restaurant was trying to save money. The Laundry bill for the kitchen had once again been too high, and there was no money for new material.

The Head Chef tasted everything, giving noisy comments and instructions.

"More seasoning, Entremetier! „ he shouted, or:

"What's that supposed to be, Mr Zgraggen?" this to a fat, baldy chef who mumbled an apology and looked ashamed at the stuffed Cabbages in front of him. They looked like moles killed on a highway. Flat and black.

"Such kind of crap I don't want to see in my kitchen! Mr Zgraggen, man!"

Seconds later he screamed at someone else:



"Pull your finger out of your ass and cook! Man!"

I stayed in the background, busy with my onions. Suddenly the Head Chef called out to me.

"Know how to fry? „ he grunted.

I nodded.

„Okay! During the announcing of the orders I first shout: 'New Order, Table whatever!' When you hear, *frits*' you can start pre-frying. As soon as I scream: ‚*Envoyer* Table whatever!' it means that this table is now ready to go out to the Restaurant and you have to have your chips ready. Hot and salted in the chip bowl! Is that clear? “

I nodded, even though it was not clear at all.

At 11:46 am the printer in the kitchen started to spit out dockets. It didn't stop until 1:50 pm. To understand this one has to know that in Switzerland almost everyone eats lunch at twelve o'clock sharp! A daily nightmare for every Restaurant. The customers all turn up at once. Even offering specials like ‚Early bird lunch' or ‚11 30 Menu' and ‚late lunch special' didn't help at all. They wouldn't change their eating habits.

With the lunch service chaos began. The Head Chef screamed. Pots were banged onto the stove. Breast of duckling, Filet of beef, Goose liver, Veal chops, Spring onions, chopped apples, salmon, prawns, scallops and much more was thrown into the hot pans. I heard ‚avec frits' and chucked the chips into the hot fryer.

The rubber seals holding the doors of the steamer ripped. A cloud of hot steam descended onto the already sauna like kitchen. Quickly one of the chefs fixed the door with new seals. Rice, potatoes, whitefish, turbot, broccoli, cauliflower, turned carrots, couscous and pre seasoned spinach disappeared into the steamer. All nicely portioned on stainless steel trays.

‚*Envoyer* table twelve, *emplace* rice one chips for the breast of duck! Come on, Entremetier, finger out of your ass! “, the Chef screamed.

I pulled the chip basket out of the fryer, shook it hard once or twice and dumped the hot chips into the bowl. I seasoned the chips with some salt. The Entremetier banged a pre heated silver dish with doilies in front of me. I arranged the chips on it and passed it on to the chef. A grunt. He tasted one chip, nodded and went on screaming and announcing the new orders.

„Mister Zraggen, could we please have something out of your corner up hear ON TIME! Damned, I called out table twenty-four three times already! If you want to sleep you can do that under your bridge! Man! “

Vol-au-Vents stuffed with chicken and sausage meat served with rice and seasonal vegetables was the daily special. It was the apprentice's job to cook and arrange the special on a plate. He did his job with grim determination and a very bent back. Definitely not a nice sight! The acne pimples in his

pale face were bright red. The first signs of facial hair, a mere fluff, showed on his cheeks. With his left hand he swiped at a greasy lock of hair hanging into his face, with his right he ladled the sauce into the Vol-au-Vents, concentrating on his job. My future? I looked away.

On the other side of the kitchen behind a greasy glass partition, in the cooler section of the kitchen Nancy created the desserts and sweets. Sculptures of spun sugar, ice-cream, fruit sauces, crèmes, puddings, cakes, tartlets, fresh fruit, chocolate shavings, marzipan decorations, powdered sugar, cacao and whipped cream. What a sight! And not just the sweets. The contours of Nancy's well formed backside showed through the blue and white chef's trousers as she bent forward. When she got up and turned around she caught me staring at her butt. Smiling she blew me a kiss across the kitchen. I turned bright red.

„Hey boy, where are the *frits*? “

Rapidly I was pulled out of my daydreaming by the Head Chef. Sighing heavily I turned back to my fryers.

As suddenly as it had started, as quickly it was over. At once it was dead quiet in the kitchen that now resembled a battlefield.

Around and on the sink dirty pots, pans and bowls were piling up at precarious angles. Little service trolleys full of dirty plates were parked next to the sink. The floor was even wetter and more slippery than before the lunch service and also covered with discarded foodstuff and rubbish. Not very enthusiastically but looking forward to the afternoon break the chefs began cleaning up their stations. Before leaving the kitchen they wrote up a *mise-en-place* list with small jobs to be done by the afternoon chef.

That turned out to be me. The Head Chef showed me the afternoon menu and asked me whether I had any questions concerning the preparation of the listed dishes. Without waiting for an answer he handed me the to-do-list. I was supposed to do some vegetable prep work. I looked at the list. Slicing Vichy carrots, kohlrabi Batonnettes, leek Julienne and celery Brunoise.

Nancy was going to stay and show me how to slice what, he said. And off he went.

Nancy showed me much more than that. As soon as we were alone in the kitchen she offered me a beer. She needed something stronger, she said. Like a brandy. She got the drinks from downstairs, which was forbidden but didn't stop anyone from doing so anyway and knocked back her glass of brandy in one go. She went and got the veges out of the cooler and placed a cutting board on the table in front of me. Below the board she put four rubber seals. The ones they use for sterilising jars or, sometimes, to fasten doors of broken steamers.

“To make sure the board doesn't move when you are slicing.” She explained. Then she asked: “Would you like another beer? I need another brandy. “

Without waiting for an answer she went to get the drinks. When she got back I noticed that she had taken off her chef's jacket and was now only wearing a tank top.

"Cheers! As you can see, it's pretty slack around here in the afternoons."

I dry-swallowed once, drank my beer and tried not to stare at her pretty well visible boobs below the tank top. She knocked back her second brandy and showed me how to slice the veges. Kohlrabi Batonets are supposed to be approximately four centimetres long and five millimetres thick, she explained. I tried to slice them as she did. And failed.

„Wait, I'll help you“, she said and stepped behind me. She took my hands in hers, placed the knife in my right hand and introduced me to the art of slicing: her head was resting on my shoulders, her breasts pressed against my back. Suddenly her hands let go of mine, moved down my back over my ass, around my hips toward the front of my trousers. There they started fiddling with the zipper. Small wonder that the Kohlrabi turned out to be a messy pile of uneven lumps! I certainly hadn't imagined that my first day in a kitchen would turn out like that! But if this was a preview of things to come I was looking forward to my life as a chef!

The afternoon took its course. I learned some of the slicing methods for vegetables and got a slight cold whilst having sex in the walk-in fridge.

Nancy drank several more brandies and after the fifth she started to cry and told me that her boyfriend had left her for a gay waiter and was now working on a cruise ship in the Caribbean. Just before the other chefs returned from their break at half past five Nancy went home. She asked me to tell the Head Chef that she had her period and didn't feel well. A hug and a kiss on my mouth later she was gone.

The Chef eyed my vegetables without further comment when he got back to the kitchen at six. Four little piles on the cutting board was the yield of one afternoons work. He looked at me enquiringly. He didn't seem to notice my glassy eyes. I chewed on a clove of garlic to hide the fact that my breath smelt of booze whilst I told him Nancy's fairy tale. He nodded and turned away.

The evening service was much less hectic than the lunch service had been. According to the other chefs the reason was that it was Monday. Generally always a quiet day, they said. I was sent to one corner of the kitchen to go on peeling onions. At 8pm the Chef looked at me surly and told me to go home. I was confused about the reason why he had sent me away early.

After having changed into my civvies and standing on the streets outside I mused whether he had been pissed off because of the little work I had managed to do all afternoon. Or may be it didn't have to do anything with me and I took his behaviour towards me too seriously. In any case, it had been an eventful day! As I stood there thinking, mainly of Nancy, I watched the busy comings and goings in the Restaurant through the large plate glass windows. The waiters in their starched white shirts and

black tailcoats resembling penguins were busy pampering the well dressed customers. The flickering candles, the piano man, the large oil paintings on the walls, the silver tableware, what an exciting world!

Each time the doorman opened the antique brass doors to let customers in or out of the restaurant I heard muffled laughter. As I turned to walk away I asked myself whether it had really been these people that had eaten my chips. Did they know what went on in the kitchen below? I doubted it very much!

How different the real world outside the posh interior of the Brasserie really was I realised as I walked down the street to the main station to catch my train. Several druggies begged for money and further on at the *Bahnhofquai* some old men were hitting on teenage male prostitutes - heroin addicts who needed the money to buy drugs. Some drunks were staggering across the temporary wooden bridge that led over the S-Bahn building site. The inside of the station resembled a beehive. The ABC Cinema stood at its centre. They still played the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* starring Tim Curry and Meatloaf every Saturday at 11pm – non-stop for the past eight hundred weeks, a poster proudly announced behind the grubby window.

I stayed at the Brasserie for one week and learned a lot. On my second day I helped Mr. Zraggen with his stuffed cabbages and this time they did not resemble dead moles. To Mr. Zraggens displeasure the Head Chef praised my work in front of the whole brigade. I cooked some sauces with the Sous-Chef and during lunch service I was in charge of the daily special: Chicken Curry, Basmati Rice and Broccoli with Almonds in Butter. I didn't have to fry anymore. Instead they made me clean the fryers after work at night, an even shittier job!

From Nancy I also learnt a lot. Her being twenty six, almost double my age, she knew almost everything to do with life in and around the kitchen. And not just that. Her talent extended way beyond the kitchen life! And she wasn't shy about sharing her experiences with a bloke still wet behind both ears.

I definitely wanted to become a chef now. The trial week at the Brasserie was not the only week I spent working in a Restaurant. My mom got me a job in one of the eleven Restaurants inside the Zurich main station. These places all belonged to one company and I immediately liked it there. The kitchen where I was going to work was situated on the fourth floor with a beautiful view of the surrounding city. And, more importantly, all the equipment was brand-new. From the first day on I was aloud to cook and even though my knowledge was minimal the friendly and very calm Head Chef was impressed by my work and informed me at the end of my week that he would be pleased to have me as his new apprentice. There was nothing that I wanted more!

The company policy was different to other Restaurants and Hotels. The apprenticeships they offered lasted four instead of three years. Usually a chef has to be trained for three years. In their case the apprentices were trained to be waiters for the first two years and after that only needed an extra two years to be a fully trained chef. I applied for the job and got it! Only later I found out that most of my time in the kitchen would be spent three stories below ground level in the production kitchen, a fifty year old relic resembling the roman catacombs.

At the mere age of fifteen, on a wet April morning, my heart banging in my chest, big plans in my head, I boarded the train to Zurich. It was the first step into a life that would later lead me once around the globe. Had I known what lay ahead of me, would I have changed my mind? I don't think so. Probably the opposite. The kitchen adventure was out there! The world was awaiting my cooking! Let's do it!

**OLD HANDS KNOW ALL THE TRICKS**

In those days I thought that Switzerland was the centre of the universe. And Zurich the city that everything around revolves. Some people today probably still think along those lines. It was partly true though. Zurich was the capital of the drug world. I knew from my first trial week at the Brasserie that the so called *Heroinpark* was just around the corner from the main station. Tens of thousands of junkies frequented the park each day. My parents at home had given me the whole litany and warned me not to have any contact whatsoever with these people.

Bla, bla, bla and yes, yes, yes, I thought and had nodded.

Directly next to the station the male prostitutes strutted back and forth along the River *Limmat*, the sex cinemas and the brothels just around the corner in the infamous *Niederdorf* quarter of the city.

Then there was what was commonly called the *youth troubles*. The city of Zurich had spent millions for the refurbishing of the opera house but wouldn't give a penny for the youth centre that the young people of Zurich desperately wanted. After some peaceful demonstrating that didn't produce any results the Zurich youth became more violent. They fought various street battles with the police that led to destruction of prestigious shops along the *Bahnhofstrasse*, Europe's most expensive shopping mile. Whenever there was a chance they sprayed and smeared red paint on buildings all over town resulting in the temporary closing of various shops.

As I started my apprenticeship some of the shop windows were boarded up and every week there was fighting going on just around the corner. And I, a country boy, was going to work in the middle of it! How exciting! I found out soon enough that not only was it exciting, it was also very hard work! As was written in my contract my first two years I spent working as a waiter trainee. Not slicing vegetables but serving at the frontline in direct contact with the customers. It was much harder work than expected. Every day had its new challenges. My teachers, some very austere and some pretty slack, showed me the ropes. Naturally they didn't let me work in front of the customers at first. I had to stay in the background. I worked with an old Spanish lady behind the buffet who, even after being in Switzerland for over a decade, still could or would not speak any Swiss. I was put in charge for the freshly pressed orange juice and the refilling of the drinks fridge. And I had to polish all the restaurants silver ware, together with my new mates.

Then there was the room at the back of the restaurant. In there they kept the brass letters to inscribe the doors to the eighteen banqueting halls, and stored the spare chairs for the restaurant.

Sometimes I sat in that room for hours and slid those brass letters onto the rails of the banqueting plaques. One of my bosses handed me the list with the names of the events that the organisers wanted to have written above the door and in the staircase. Sometimes the list was incorrect. There were spelling mistakes. Instead of *Clapping&Sipp Inc* I wrote *Crapping&Piss Inc*. When I was in a good mood and the boss had been friendly I showed him the spelling mistakes on the banqueting sheet. On other occasions I let it slide, which turned out not to be a good idea. Pay back time was coming sooner or later. Suddenly the weekend shifts would increase dramatically and the timesheets were being changed daily just to make sure I could not plan anything private in advance, like playing pool with my mates. Once a week I had to go to the culinary college, studying French, German, maths, and Wine and Service rules and so on. In Swiss schools the teaching language was the so called High German. Even at the Zurich Culinary School we had to talk that language. For me it was not such a big problem, but for my Sicilian friend it was. He absolutely hated it. He spoke perfect Swiss and Italian, but he had big trouble with High German. When one of our teachers called him *Chestnuttreeshaker* and *Spaghettimuncher* the whole class broke out into roaring laughter. The Italian was pretty pissed off with the teacher and quietly swore Sicilian revenge. But he was not the only one being called funny names by that particular teacher. My bench neighbour was from Schaffhausen and the teacher knew that every afternoon he went fishing by the river *Rhine*. So he asked him every week in front of the whole class, how last weeks fishing had been and always called the poor guy the *Rhine fisher*.

It was pretty hard to work on weekends at first, especially because I used to play Ice hockey almost every Saturday and Sunday. I had to give up that sport and lost almost all of my previous former friends from school. But after a while I got used to working weekends and it became some sort of routine. Tables had to be set, glasses polished, customers served. We had to prepare banquets for hundreds of people and do mise-en-place for the Chef de Rang in the Restaurant.

And we had to make love to the female apprentices. A lot of energy and effort was wasted in that direction! Opposed to numbers in the kitchen, male apprentices were definitely the minority in the service trade. And the girls were all so pretty and friendly and open for new experiences. Even though my approaches were sometimes very clumsy the girls didn't really take anything very seriously and partners were swapped and exchanged all the time. After all, we were young and for the first time away from moms watchful eye.

But the new freedom wasn't easy for everyone. Some of my mates drifted off the straight path and ended up with drugs or on alcohol binges. Overdoses of sex and drugs didn't go well with studying and unexcused absences at school and increasing late arrivals at work really did not sit well with teachers at school or at work.

Loans from friends that were never repaid and missing money in the till were sooner or later noticed even by the most ignorant boss. Some of my friends were fired. Others moved to different Restaurants. One gave up his apprenticeship to accompany his sugar daddy touring Switzerland in a vintage Rolls Royce until the police, pressured by the parents of the boy, caught up with them and returned the boy back home. The two love turtles managed to see each other despite all efforts by the parents and the police.

I stayed on and managed to learn one hell of a lot from the old timers. These waiters, after having been in the trade for over forty years, mostly widely travelled but physically and mentally near the end had seen it all and knew every trick in the book. There was no cheat, no lie they didn't know or hadn't used themselves in the years gone by. Their teaching methods were accordingly: they pushed me when I cut a corner carrying four plates of soup just to see whether I managed to balance the plates. They didn't worry about my freshly washed and ironed shirt being splashed with cream of tomato soup or whether I scalded my hands. Or they purposely sent me over to some old regulars table, pushing the dessert cart close to the customers table, very well aware that the old farts mongrel dog was hiding under the table. And whilst I was busy arranging a fancy dessert plate the dog started slurping away the Crème Caramel that was usually on the bottom tray of the trolley. I had to pretend not to notice, the customer being a very important person. The Restaurant was, after all, a very posh institution. Later I watched the apprentices in the kitchen devour the left over Crème Caramel, dog slobber and all.

One cross-eyed waiter always pricked little holes into the bottom of the small plastic milk containers. Why, I asked him once. He explained it to me. It was very simple. Most of his customers in the afternoon were very old and when they tried to open the containers with their gnarly old fingers, the milk ran out through the tiny holes in the container and ended up in their hands. That was the waiter's chance. Showing some pity and helping the customers to open another one he made sure they would later tip him generously.

The chefs also liked to have a good laugh on our account. They heated up the silver hash brown platters on the gas stove before setting them on the pass for us to take. Just to watch the dumb waiters burn their fingers and get decent blisters in the process. Or they crumbed some old smelly rag and fried it in butter. One couldn't tell the difference to a *Schnitzel Viennoise* just by looking at it.

„Here you go, there's a little treat for you. We've made a few too many today.“, one of the chefs mumbled. Myself, clueless, with little time and lots of stress, wrapped the hot Schnitzel in a paper napkin and bit into it.

Laughter all around. The smelly juices of the dirty rag ran down the corners of my mouth. A mixture of watery blood, soap and mildew, I could have vomited all over the kitchen. But what doesn't kill you makes you strong, I thought.



So I was pretty tough by the time I reached the age of sixteen.

And I was already well used to booze. After all, there were few nights we didn't have a party. There was always a reason. And money was not an issue, thanks to our monthly pay check and the tip money. We even had enough to go on holiday to Spain three times in two years, naturally by coach and staying at some cheap hotel. But still, we did it.

Our main goals in Spain were to pick up chicks, and to get pissed. The first was rarely reached because the second usually got in the way. Girls just don't like drunken, babbling and pimply faced teenage boys.

After one week of action we got back home totally knackered and completely burned out. But getting off the coach at the Zurich Bus Terminal we agreed on one subject: fantastic vacation, we'll be going to Spain again. After our first Spanish experience we got an extra week off work because one of our mates was sent to the hospital on suspicion of salmonella poisoning. The restaurant management panicked and the rest of us weren't aloud anywhere close to the restaurant. They even banned us from the staff canteen. We were labelled 'persona non grata' until the results from the hospital laboratory returned. Our bosses were very scared of salmonella. To everyone's relief the results were negative, none of us was contaminated.

We returned to work but not before having been ordered by the owner of the company personally to keep our mouths shut about the reasons why we hadn't been to work for the past week.

In my second year at the restaurant fresh and young apprentices arrived. Naturally we dropped them into the cold water and treated them like slaves, like it was done to us the year before. They had to do all the shitty jobs. We, the second year apprentices were already running our own service station during the mostly quiet afternoon. I had my own key to the ancient *National Cash Registrar* till. And my large waiter wallet was used daily. And not like the year before, just sporadically at large functions to collect the money for coffee and mineral water at the door of the function rooms.

During the first year we were often sent to collect the money for the drinks at some lunch party when the customers had a set prepaid menu that did not include the prize of the beverages, usually large groups of tourists from France or Germany. Nothing was written down. I had the prizes of all the beverages in my head. Without a calculator I was able to add, multiply and deduct in front of the customer, change from one currency to the other and calculate how much change I had to count out of my wallet. It all had to happen very fast, the tourist didn't have time to wait.

So I was very good at mental arithmetic's after the first year at work. It helped a lot with the old till. It was one of those mechanical ones that made a huge racket when one pressed the keys. And the bill it spit out at the end was not added up automatically. Each item we had typed in was listed on the thick

cardboard slip we had to insert in to the till separately for every table in the restaurant. Mix up of table numbers resulted in chaos!

When the customer wanted to pay, all items consumed were supposed to be on the bill, logically. But we had to add them up by hand. It was not unusual to have tables seating ten customers belonging to one group or a large family. To make matters complicated for us, not intentionally I suppose, they sometimes decided that one of them was going to pay for all the drinks, another for all the desserts and everything else each one paid separately. It was not easy for me to pick apart some guest check in the middle of service, the other customers shooting furtive glances in my direction or waving their hands in the air nervously to get my attention. It took some time to do. But they were always very generous with the tipping after having watched me doing my mental arithmetic's in front of them in the middle of chaos.

I especially liked foreigners when they paid in their own currency. I could use our own daily preordained exchange rate, and already made a good profit by changing the foreign currency back to Swiss Francs at the bank without depending on the tip.

I was overjoyed by the arrival of the three female newcomers to our gang of apprentices. My friends and I gave them a free welcome introduction into the everyday sex life of juvenile waiters. Well, at least we tried to. We felt like little gods and the girls treated us that way to. I think this was partly because we always had plenty of money to spend and because we often invited them out. We bragged and they were glued to our lips.

Two of the girls got a room next to the laundry just above the Restaurant. Up there we partied at night after work.

And suddenly there was AIDS. But the news of that new sickness didn't really interfere much with our sex life. Even though half of Europe panicked, the new illness apparently only struck homosexuals. The AIDS posters were all over town. We stacked up on condoms as advertised and went on with life. The only thing that really scared us was that no one exactly knew how the sickness was transmitted. Before AIDS we didn't worry when we used the public pissoir in the main station where all the homosexuals and the prostitutes went for a piss. Now we were not so sure. Naturally we also had queer friends at the culinary college and knew that some apprentices and even some teachers were gay. Before AIDS that had not been an issue, but now it led to some minor quarrelling. Even the newspapers claimed that the sickness originated from homosexuals. What a pile of crap!

The company I worked for also employed trainees from other colleges and from various hotel schools. The pretty girls out of a bakery college from northern England were my favourites. Not much

older than I and really cute. They worked in the bakery and at the pastry shop downstairs. Their living quarters were just around the corner from the main station. My hormones were constantly playing up! The only thing in my head was girls. I didn't really care about my original goal anymore. I badly neglected work and training.

When I woke up once more in a strange room, with a huge headache and feeling sick lying next to a snoring girl with enormous tits and an even more enormous smell drifting up from under the bed covers, I swore to change my life immediately.

I began to study and concentrated on getting ready for my final exams. I had been really slack in the past few months. I missed out on a lot at school because I had been napping during the lessons, or, in some instances hadn't turned up at all.

My teachers were positively surprised by my sudden change of direction. I turned up on time and wore less provoking clothes. I decided not to wear my punk outfit anymore. The girls from the UK had taught me how to style my hair with ordinary soap, like the punks back home did. Lately I had been wearing ripped denims, black leather boots, had chains around my neck and the only music I would listen to had been by *Angelic Upstarts*.

At work I obviously had to leave my punkish behaviour behind anyway. And I had to rinse the soapy spikes off my head.

„Well, Mister Benz, does the shower work again? I couldn't smell you when you walked in today“, my German teacher teased me when I marched into the classroom with a fresh haircut.

Even though I didn't run after girls anymore, they still interested me a lot. My best mate and I found a less energy consuming replacement for chasing girls: the Sex Cinemas. Martin, my mate never had any chances with real girls anyway. He was too ugly and he had found out personally that all the talk that girls don't care about the looks of a man, is complete crap.

The girls on the screen didn't care about looks. The Sex Cinema turned out to be a much cleaner and cheaper method to get rid of the excessive hormones. And we didn't have to invent new excuses for forgotten dates or stay out all night just to get one girl pissed enough to jump into bed with us on the first date. Unfortunately not everyone was like Nancy...

I concentrated on my original goal: to become a chef. I studied English to be able to work abroad as soon as my second apprenticeship was over. I even took night lessons in the evenings after culinary college.

But first of all I had to get through the final exams as a waiter. I had put a lot of effort into studying lately, as mentioned before.

I was pretty sure that because I worked in an excellent restaurant I was going to get through the practical part of the test without too much trouble. I was well practised and able to de-bone fish in front of customers, prepare Beefsteak Tatar and flambé a Crêpe Suzette and so on. During the wine lessons at the college I had often been asleep so I was a little worried about that part of the practical test. But I got lucky at the test and only had to decant some old Bordeaux and the tester just asked me about the different wine regions of Bordeaux. He didn't want to know how many Grand Crus, Premier Grand Crus and so on each region had.

Several weeks before the exams we once again went to Spain, a last break before the final stress. This time we behaved and instead of being pissed all the time, we frequented the local beaches and even went to Barcelona by train to check out the building site of the *Sagrada Familia* Church and visited the replica of the *Santa Maria*, Columbus's tiny ship that took him to discover the Americas. Even though some street vendor on the *Ramblas* managed to steal five hundred Pesetas of me, the mood was very good.

But one night I had a little argument and my best mate pushed another guy right into a group of girls in front of us. They were then having a go at us and to calm things down we invited them for a drink into a Disco. It turned out to be a wonderful evening. My friends were dancing and I sat and talked to Marion, a girl with blond curly hair, blue eyes and blue glasses. She wore typical shapeless eighties cloths that made it impossible to see her figure. We laughed and talked, nodding and gesturing to one another. Later on the street we realised that we hadn't really heard a word the other had been saying because the music had been too noisy, so we decided to meet again the following evening. We arranged with the others that we would visit a Hacienda further inland where they performed medieval knight's games and served food like in the middle ages to amuse the tourists.

The ancient bus, our transport to the Hacienda, unloaded us in front of a Sangria fountain where we could drink as much as we liked.

Inside the vast building long medieval tables stood around a fenced in Arena. Huge jugs filled with wine and platters of food were served by people wearing gowns and headdresses like in the olden days. The table manners were medieval too: we ate with our bare hands and threw the bones of the chicken and the left over food onto the sandy ground behind us whilst the staff encouraged us to make as much noise as possible. Similar to real medieval feasts, I suppose. At the same time Knights in full body armour were fighting inside the Arena. They rode on donkey's masquerading as horses. It was ridiculous, really.

At midnight Marion and I slipped away without telling the others. The whole medieval circus was too primitive for us, we decided in unison. Even though later we had to admit: it had been quiet some fun after all.

We found the way to the main road and after we had walked in the wrong direction for a couple of hours we discovered a track along the shoreline that lead us directly back to Pineda de Mar, where my mates and I stayed. It took us five hours and the sun already went up when we saw the first *Frankfurts* advertisement at the town's entrance. By then we were holding hands and we were in love.

Even though we lived seven hundred kilometres apart, Marion in Paderborn and I in Zurich, our romance went on for many months. I bought a trampers ticket from the *Deutsche Bahn* and visited my new found love as much as I could. Sometimes just for a couple of days, sometimes longer. Had anyone told me then that I would meet Marion again seven years later on a South Seas island and marry her on a white sandy beach, I probably would have told that person to get lost. How could I have known?

After that vacation in Spain it was harder to get ready for the final exams, all tanned and, more importantly, being very lovesick. My mates and I did our best because our head instructor at work had warned us that if we should fail the tests he would personally look after us to make sure that we would not fail again when we had to repeat the exams half a year later. None of us were prepared to take that risk. We definitely didn't want to wait on customers for another half year! It would have been depressing to endure further insults from the kitchen brigade and to let the queer banqueting manager fondle our backside whilst setting the tables. No thanks to that.

Nervous and tense after a restless night I made my way to the Hotel in Bulach where the tests took place. It turned out to be much easier than I thought. I had to slice a Chateau Briand, a large filet of beef, and do a flambé right at the table for two examiners. They were really friendly and encouraged me as good as they could. The practical test took half the day. I soon realised that my teachers and lecturers at college and at work had done a good job. They had me well prepared for all the subjects tested on that day.

The theoretical exam was nothing to worry about either. I passed with flying colours. And so did my mates, which came as a bit of a surprise, considering the way we had tackled the project. But that was it.

**GOING UNDERGROUND**

I worked as a fully trained and certified waiter for several weeks at MY restaurant. I was totally relaxed and proud of my newly achieved status. There had been several parties with my mates. When Stefan, who was supposed to join us doing the apprenticeship for chefs, informed us, that he was going to leave and already had a new job as waiter in some other restaurant, I was jealous. He was independent and grownup. Where else I stood at the beginning, once more as a small apprentice.

So there I sat, one day after my last working day as a waiter. It was again a wet morning in April. I wore a brand-new chef's jacket, black and white chef's trousers, and white Birkenstock loafers and had my own set of knives in a small case next to me. I looked at the clock on the wall of our canteen. It was six thirty. Uncertainly I observed myself in the reflecting glass of the window. A trained chef wore black buttons on his jacket. Mine were white. Again I had to start at the bottom. Studying and learning for another two years! What for? On that particular morning I couldn't remember the reason. Even though I had waited for that day to arrive for such a long time, it all seemed so pointless.

And indeed the apprenticeship began as a real shock to me and to all my mates as well. Nor more tip money, no chances on extra jobs to make some money, like the out of house functions we used to work at and where we got paid in cash on the same day. And no females as far as the eye could see.

I was separated from my mates. Only two of us could work together in one section of the kitchen. The other guys were allocated to different satellite kitchens or to the bakery, pastry kitchen, the fish kitchen or went missing somewhere in the vast underground production kitchen. All of a sudden we didn't have similar working hours and didn't have to go to college on the same day anymore.

I was lucky, even though I didn't think so to start with. Together with my best mate I was sent into the underground, to the production kitchen. A place with no natural light, way below the surface, where the discarded specimens of the kitchen trade worked. Losers, alcoholics and cripples.

That's how I looked at them at first. I was frustrated and ready to give up. But I was also pretty tough and stubborn, so I stayed on. I had my girlfriend far up north to which I wrote letters daily. That really helped me getting over the depressing time at the beginning of my apprenticeship. I even carved little hearts out of potatoes, vacuum sealed them and sent them to her together with the letters.

Slowly Martin and I got used to our new circumstances. The ceiling in our kitchen was very low, so we could not wear chef's hats like the guys upstairs. Everyone in the catacombs wore little paper caps. That meant we were immediately recognised as soon as we got upstairs. They called us the sewer rats.

The machines, the appliances, the pots and pans were all very old but well maintained. But the owner of the place had also invested some money in new steamers and even a computerised smoking oven for homemade sausages and smoked salmon.

One of the apprentice's jobs was to keep the kitchen spotless. Each day at 3.45 pm we started to clean. We hosed down the walls and the floor and scrubbed them with soap. Then we rinsed everything off with buckets of hot water out of the huge cooking boiler. In the production kitchen work ended at 4.15 pm, a new experience for us. But then again, we had to start at seven am, which wasn't always easy, especially after a night out.

After the initial few weeks we changed our perception of the other chefs. We started to respect them. They knew a lot, had lots of experience, were well travelled and open minded. Some of them were broken, who couldn't handle their lives any longer. Others couldn't take the stress and hectic of an a la carte kitchen anymore. They were not able to do two services each day behind a hot stove preparing food, listening to the Head Chef screaming order after order and being creative at the same time. Some were burnt out and as soon as there was the slightest sign of stress they forgot everything and just stood there, eyes wide open, staring into space. I could not understand such behaviour then, but I was young and what did I know?

Some other chefs were married with kids and liked to see their families. And therefore they worked in the production kitchen, the working hours perfect for them. After cooking the stocks, the sauces, the soups and the vegetables for the satellite kitchens they could pack up and go home to join the family.

Some of the men wore signs of a rough (cooking) life. One chef was missing three fingers on one hand. A masticator had ripped them off when he tried to fish out a lost pen. On the other hand he was missing two fingers. He never told us how he lost those.

Another chef always talked enthusiastically about Africa, about the black girls. They were so pretty, their ebony body, so full of grace and pride- but sometimes so very sick. He had already picked up Gonorrhoea several times. Urethra infections, fungi, lice and fleas he also knew from personal experience. But he still visited Africa twice a year.

„I still treat myself to that. It is well worth it. “, he said and sighed at the thought of AIDS and all the other dangers. Then he went back to the large tilting kettle where the 180 litres of tomato concassé cooked away slowly, stuck his finger inside, put it into his mouth and pulled a face.

„Salt and pepper“, he mumbled and dumped one kilo packet of salt and one sachet of crushed black pepper into the sauce, and, after some more tasting, one half litre bottle of garlic essence.

One fat and baldy chef told us about the Far East. When he had his good moments, that is. Unlike the other chefs he always wore white rubber boots and often mumbled incomprehensively to himself. Sometimes he shot wild glances in our direction.

When he talked about his travels he dreamily mentioned the young men with the almond shaped eyes, and told us excitingly of the weed. He used to smoke daily back in the day, he explained. But he couldn't afford to do that any longer. It was way too expensive in Switzerland. Even though, he invited us occasionally into his favourite watering hole. We knew that he was gay, but as he had explained, he preferred young Asians. There was no danger in him trying to seduce us. After all, he was one of our mentors.

After the first month in the catacombs we had gotten used to the daily grind. At seven AM I usually shoved a tray of frozen chicken thighs into the pre- heated oven. Then I snuck down to the bakery and got two croissants. One for me and one for Martin.

Almost always at this hour Urs, my other mate from the olden days up above ground level, was busy preparing the fifty kg's of our famous *Birchermuesli*, made with fresh berries and fruit, yoghurt, oat bran, raisins and nuts.

One day he told me that he had vomited into the muesli after having just gotten back from a night on the binge. The big mixer had already been running so he had just added the other ingredients to the muesli and went on mixing as if nothing had happened. I didn't really believe his story but, just to be on the safe side, didn't eat any of his muesli for the rest of his stay in the bakery.

Urs always had the hang to exaggerate. Once he told me that he had thrown living mice into the bread grating machine. He just wanted to find out whether one was able to tell the difference between bread crumbs and squashed mice. In a very serious voice he explained that, if one puts enough dry



bread into the grater and mixed it very well at the end, one was not able to tell the difference between crumbs and mice.

Later, when Urs moved to the sauce section of the kitchen, it was once again thanks to him that we started experimenting with the vacuum machine. We watched intently as he vacuumed live trout.

I don't want to know what he is up to now. He works for some large instant soup and sauce producer as a tester and inventor of new recipes.

Anyway, I went back to my section and Martin and I enjoyed eating the Croissants hiding inside the walk in fridge. After that I had to heat up ten litres of onion sauce, sauce Bolognese, tomato concassé, demi glace and curry sauce. I distributed the hot sauces to the different restaurants via the service elevator.

After that the chicken thighs were usually ready. So I called the chef at the Fast-food Restaurant to come and pick them up as long as they were hot. Then I started with the daily *mise-en-place*-jobs: peeling onions and mincing them in the big cutter, slicing vegetables and vacuuming sauces.

Sooner or later it was lunchtime. In our canteen it was not just the chefs eating, but all the other staff of the restaurants and offices in the main station as well. We apprentices only paid two hundred fifty Francs per month and could eat there as often and as much as we liked, even on our days off and on college days. I considered it a very fair deal compared to other places, where they charged three hundred or more per month and only served leftovers and cheap food.

After lunch I mostly cooked huge amounts of sauces or pressed potato mash through the croquette press. After those jobs it was usually time to start cleaning already.

Despite all the work we did I sometimes wondered how on earth we were going to walk out of this place after two years with a chef's certificate in our pockets. There was everything that a real production kitchen was supposed to have; the pastry kitchen, the bakery, the butcher shop, the fish kitchen, the sauce section, the larder and the vegetable kitchen. But there were no ordinary devices or normal pots or pans, no Sautoir, no Sauteuse. Only monstrosities like huge boilers and fryers where we cooked big quantities of food. The tilting kettles were bolted to the walls and were heated with hot water from within, so one could boil and cook two hundred litres of soup or sauce in one go. Because their double steel walls were heated with hot water, nothing cooked within ever burned. With a crank, or nowadays electronically it was possible to lower the tilting kettle and to pour the contents into buckets, bowls, pots or other kitchenware. Below the kettle was a drain, usually. After having cooked one was able to hose the kettle down and clean it properly. Then there were the tilting frying pans; they worked almost similar to the tilting kettles. The big difference was that they were flat bottomed and could be heated up to three hundred degrees. So it was possible to fry fifty schnitzel or a hundred sausages or even fish at the same time. These „big fryers“, as they are commonly called, are also lowered either by

hand crank or electronically, this again to make it easier for the chef to take the food out and to clean them afterwards.

To puree sauces and soups we didn't just have an ordinary blender. No, we had an elephant. The name was pretty accurate. It was a huge size blender, on two wheels with a motor the size of a two stroke engine. The diameter of the mixing blade was twenty centimetres. The Elephant chopped and blended everything. Making Mayonnaise? No problem! One just needed sixty whole eggs, half kilo mustard, and one litre of vinegar, salt and pepper. It all went into a big bucket or a pot. Then we sank the head of the blender, the so called trunk, into the mixture and let it run in low gear. Then we added 20 litres of sunflower oil and let the motor run on full speed for ten minutes. Voila, twenty five kilos of mayonnaise, ready and fresh!

You need to cook French dressing? But please, not less than sixty litres, otherwise it is not worth it. Simply throw water, eggs, vinegar, oil, spices and mustard into the tilting kettle, turn on the heat, sink the trunk of the elephant inside and let it run. Now you just have to stand next to it and occasionally check the temperature until the mixture has reached the sixty degree mark. Then just turn off the kettle, add a large bucket of ice cubes to the dressing and let the elephant do a final run to cool the mixture down.

At last the dressing is filled into buckets and moved on into the fridge for the satellite kitchen chef's convenience.

Naturally all the recipes in the production kitchen were different to the ones at home in mamas kitchen or at an ordinary restaurant. For instance, the Bolognese sauce recipe was for five hundred portions. It took an apprentice all day to just prepare the mise-en-place and to collect all the ingredients from the various storerooms.

I arranged all the ingredients on a large stainless steel trolley before I started to cook. Two point five litres of peanut oil, forty five kg's of lean beef mince, seven point five kg's of chopped onions, one hundred cloves of garlic, peeled and chopped, four kg's each of leek-, carrots- and celery Brunoise, two point five kg's of tomato paste, ten kg's of chopped tomatoes, two kg's of finely cut fresh herbs like thyme, rosemary and oregano, ten litres of red cooking wine, usually from Algeria because of the nice dark colour, and fifty litres of veal stock.

After cooking the sauce it had to simmer for at least twenty four hours. On the second day it was put into the shock-cooler and on the third day it was portioned into vacuum bags and put into the fridge. It was usually used up within a week.

The recipes for the onion sauce, tomato concassé sauce, cream sauce and the mushroom sauce were for similar quantities. (We used only fresh ingredients and no powdered sauces or artificial aromas)

What I had done for the first time during my weeks training at the Brasserie under Nancy's watchful eye I now did almost daily. Peeling bags of carrots and potatoes, cleaning boxes of cauliflower and celery. The chefs showed us how to slice and chop onions, and how vegetables and fruits were cut into macedoine, chiffonade, julienne, brunoise, batonnettes or mirepoix. And so I stood there bent over my cutting board and cut large cubes, small cubes, tiny cubes, thick stripes, fine stripes, very fine stripes. I carved carrots and kohlrabi into even sided sticks. Big job for me and my knives. To make work a bit more interesting, Martin and I set up little cutting competitions. After a while we became real cutting and slicing artists, not without having some little accidents and injuries in between.

The cut-offs from our knife orgies we dumped into the 220 litre boiler. Every second day they were cooked up with roasted bones to make bouillon. Besides the bouillon we cooked one hundred litres of soup and fifty litres of consommé each day.

Every third day we had to hand press twenty kg's of Croquettes. Up to 1000 pieces of those wonderful little things. I hated that job. It was always us apprentices who had to do it. The weekly mise-en-place time table was written by the bosses and the Croquettes were never on it when we were in college or on our days off. When it was busy at the restaurants and they ran out of them on the days we were not there, the bosses had to stand behind the press themselves. And when we got back into the kitchen after the college day or our days off they gave us shit because we hadn't produced enough the previous time. And we had to start on the press immediately because they themselves had only produced just enough to last until we returned. It wasn't fair!

It was impossible for me to just hang around in the kitchen and do nothing. The Head Chef marched through every now and then several times per day, checking on me. So when there was nothing to do, which hardly ever happened, and I was chatting to Martin, I always held on to either a ladle, a knife or a cleaning rag prepared to pretend to work as soon as the Head Chef came rushing into the kitchen.

He knew me better than the others because I used to work at out of house functions on my days off during my waiter apprenticeship. He had been the boss at those functions and I had helped him out on several occasions. Since then he had always been very friendly towards me.

Those functions had always been a highlight and very exciting for me. We did the catering when Francois Mitterand, the French president, was in Zurich. I served the food at the next table and was able

to observe the man closely. Back then I could not have imagined that in the future I would cook for the likes of Prince Albert of Monaco, Phil Collins or the President of the Republic of Bophuthatswana.

The city of Zurich often asked us to do the catering for VIPs. More than once we were completely in the shit during those events. Once, a driver forgot to bring a box of silver platters along from the store room. The Head Chef was close to a nervous breakdown. He didn't have enough staff to send someone to pick them up and none of them knew where to find the silver platters anyway. So he begged the Chef de Service to send me instead. I knew where to find the platters and, what was more important, who had the keys to that storage room. We were running out of time and the event took place inside the old city of Zurich. There were no cars aloud in that area and the driver of the van had already returned to the restaurant. So I had to run wearing my waiters' uniform.

Sweating like a pig I arrived at the main station, scrambled down the iron steps to the controllers office, got the keys for the storage room and went to collect the box of silver platters. It was bloody heavy and it nearly killed me dragging it to the next tram stop.

I got lucky and the first tram rattling into the station was the one I had to take to the old town. I just about made it without having a heart attack. But I was completely drenched in sweat and could hardly work in front of the illustrious guests like that. The Chef de service told me to go into the kitchen and find a job there. I did as I was told. The Head Chef grabbed me and I worked next to him all evening placing snails onto silver platters and covering them with garlic and herb butter. Ever since that evening the Head Chef seemed to have been fond of me.

I was the only apprentice to get away with things all others would have been shouted and screamed at. Like also wearing black trousers, black buttons on the chef's jacket and a large chef's hat in his kitchen. Usually it was only him wearing such an outfit. When he caught me strutting around in one of the satellite kitchens pretending to be him he just laughed. Martin probably would have been fired.

He protected me from the other chef's and always greeted me by name and usually we had a friendly chat as well.

Towards the other chef's and apprentices he was very harsh and professional. Sometimes he screamed at his staff when something went wrong. But everybody respected him. The hierarchy in the kitchen was like in almost any professional kitchen. The Head Chef passed his orders on to the Sous-Chef and from there they moved down the ranks to the Chef de partie, the Commis and then to the apprentices. Most kitchens are organised military like. That is where the ranking system actually originates.

Sometimes the Head Chef waltzed into the kitchen at nine am and invited the entire kitchen staff into his office for morning tea. The bakers provided the food and he the coffee and tea.

Even though he was very tough, he watched out for his staff.

The day I cooked Osso Bucco Cremolata for the first time in my life he personally turned up to taste it. One of the other chef's had called him because my sauce apparently tasted heavenly. To be honest, I had followed each step written on the recipe sheet. I hadn't added or left out any ingredients. So I don't really know why the sauce turned out that way. May be I'm simply a very gifted chef...

Sometimes things also went wrong, obviously. On one occasion I was pouring the liquid butter into the hollandaise sauce a little to fast. The sauce split. Instead of thickening the sauce, the butter swam on top of it. I had to start again. I was in the process of dumping the useless sauce into the sink when the Head Chef walked by. The other chef's were quickly hiding behind doors or disappearing into fridges. I was ready. But instead of starting the usual tirade about wasting his money, swearing and giving me shit, he just said:

„Learning by doing, Felix. “ And he patted my back.

Learning by doing! The other chefs liked that one! After I finished the hollandaise they sent me off to do the Croquettes. My favourite job!

I collected a big stainless steel bowl and first mixed the cold potato mash, the eggs, some flour and the spices. Then I went to get Martin. He filled the large funnel of the press with the potato mix and I pulled down the lever. The potato mix was squeezed through five holes at the bottom of the funnel and eased out on a thin wooden board on the kitchen table, looking like long white, sausages. I needed all my strength to pull down the lever. If the potato mix was too thick I had to put my whole body weight, sixty two kg's in those days, onto the lever. Martin couldn't do that job. He was too heavy. At first he had tried, but the lever had come off and had to be welded back onto the press. The Head Chef had decided that I was to be the lever man and Martin the harp man. The harp was the device to cut up the potato Croquettes after they were pressed through the holes.

The Croquettes were then dumped into a bowl with flour and after that into a bowl with beaten eggs. Then they were crumbed with our very own homemade breadcrumbs. Urs from the bakery provided the, what we jokingly called, *micecrumbs*. The finished Croquettes we placed on trays and put them into the deep freezer. When they were frozen we filled them into plastic containers. From there the a la carte chef's just had to collect their mise- en-place.

The weight I put on when I worked at the Restaurant during my apprenticeship as a waiter I lost after several weeks slaving away down in the catacombs.

The chefs always chased us around the kitchen.

„Hey, Felix, you lazy bugger! Heat up fifteen litres of onion sauce, but presto! And don't fall asleep peeling that garlic!“, they screamed across the kitchen. Or: „Get forty chicken thighs out of the freezer, quickly! And separate those frozen veal knuckles with your meat fork, you idiot! But subito! “

When something went wrong the chefs usually reacted noisily. When I slipped with my meat fork separating the veal knuckles and ended up with the fork pinning my finger to the cutting board, the Chef de partie just shouted at me angrily:

„Man, you useless piece of shit! Don't even think of going home because of that little injury! I'm not doing your shitty job for you! “

He then pulled the fork out of my finger and dragged me to the sink. My blood was all over the place. He got a jar of Curry powder and stuck my finger inside. He ordered me to leave that finger inside the powder until the bleeding stopped. It stopped indeed. Just after a few minutes. And I was surprised that it didn't hurt. I had been lucky. The fork had gone through my finger, along the bone without hitting any nerves. Even today I still take Curry powder to stop bleeding or to disinfect burns. It really helps!

Down in the production kitchen I was never aloud to cook a real meal on a plate! Martin and I often sat together lamenting and complaining about that fact. We wanted to become real chefs and not just be treated like slaves by the others and doing their dirty work, cooking and preparing for the chefs upstairs! We usually got rid of our anger by pressing Croquettes or hitting the dead pigs hanging on hooks in the meat fridge. The pigs didn't complain when we hit them, on the account of them being dead. But the knuckles on our hands were sore and bloody. One of the chefs noticed our bleeding knuckles and laughed. He told us that some other weirdo they had working in the kitchen once was caught fucking a dead pig in the meat fridge. We had been working with these people long enough not to believe everything they said. But this guy assured us that his story was true. Well, whatever. I was not that desperate and, anyway, I had my girlfriend in Paderborn. She looked much better than the pigs in the fridge, being alive and all. Thank god for that.

As soon as we got used to one section of the kitchen and routine set in they moved us to the next section. Again we had to start from scratch. But sooner or later it all became routine!

I had to prepare sauce béarnaise out of forty egg yolks. Made with a whisk and not in the blender!

“That's very good for the upper arm muscles and to get rid of excess energy!” the Head Chef would say.

I had to fry sausages, a few hundred Parisian schnitzels or frozen chicken thighs. I loved those jobs, especially in the winter months when it was freezing outside. But most of the time the first thing to

do in the morning was to go into the walk-in deep freezer and dig for sausages and chicken thighs. I almost froze my hands off doing that whilst the other chefs stood around the hot stove, drinking coffee and discussing the mise-en-place sheet.

My arms were always full of recent burns, my fingers covered in band aids, my face full of pimples and my skin chalk white and I smelled like a fried onion day and night. It was very frustrating! Not just once I was on the brink of giving up. The only reason why I continued was the thought of far away countries and a future in the sun.

To get away from the kitchen I boarded the train to visit Marion once every month or so. Finally! A few days without having to descend into the underground!

Marion noticed my unhealthy complexion too.

„Oh Felix, don't smoke too much and eat a little more“, she begged me.

„The boy looks like he is starving. Just skin and bones.“, Marion's mother said, shaking her head and looking worried. She immediately went into the kitchen and started to cook real westphalian food for me. Schnitzel of pork with potato and cabbage mash and butter mustard sauce. I loved her food and after a couple of days in Paderborn I had usually put on a few pounds.

Unfortunately my relationship with Marion broke up towards the end of my first year in the kitchen. The reason was not the distance between us but another chef. A female chef: Kelly from northern England.

It was very difficult for me to tell Marion. I called her from a phone booth in Zurich. We both cried and at the end Marion hung up on me. That was the end of our teenage love story. For the time being anyway.

My English wasn't too bad because of the lessons I still attended in the evenings after college. The dialect my new girlfriend spoke was not really hard to understand either. Kelly taught me something else though. The *English Body Language*. The lessons took place at night in her bed.

Sometimes on our days off she prepared some typical English food for me: *Fish 'n' Chips*, *Pies* and *Toad in a hole*. Her favourite dish was the *Chip Buttie*: two slices of white bread, mayonnaise and chips. Well, basically a chip sandwich. Years later, in Africa, I had the same sandwich on the menu in our Bophuthatswana restaurant. There it was called *Djibouti Sandwich*. The chefs down there claimed that the Djibouti Sandwich originated in the city of Djibouti. I didn't share their opinion. I think that some Brits brought it down to South Africa and the name mutated from *Chip Buttie* to *Djibouti*.

Anyway, Kelly loved her Chip Buttie. She munched several a day. And Swiss Chocolate she couldn't get enough of! To start with one couldn't tell, but later it became pretty obvious: she was getting bigger.

Shortly after we met I moved in with her, more or less. We shared the room with a nymphomaniac, a girl from Scotland. Every night she had different guys sleeping over. Kelly and I, just two metres away from her, in our own bed, heard and saw everything that happened in the bed next to ours. Live entertainment every night, in colour and for free. I definitely didn't have to go to the sex cinemas with Martin anymore!

At the beginning it turned me on, but after a few months the grunting and screaming got on my nerves. I didn't feel like cooking when I got up in the mornings and our room constantly smelled of stale body fluids, sweat and dirty socks.

When we complained about the noise our roommate informed us that she really didn't give a shit. She even suggested that we buy earplugs or moved to some other room. In due course Kelly's and my sex life only took place during the times the Scottish girl was at work.

Our relationship started to crumble. I didn't really like that Kelly was always following me around everywhere. She wanted me to give up my mates, namely Martin, control my alcohol consumption and even reduce what remained of our sex life too. More rules, less fun seemed to have become her motto.

It took me some time to notice the changes in Kelly. Mainly because at work they kept me very busy and according to the latest gossip, the Head Chef had organised internal tests resembling the real final exams for us apprentices. He had apparently done that because he doubted that we were prepared for the final exams coming up soon.

The dates of the internal tests were kept secret. And so were the menus to be cooked. Martin and I tried everything to find out more. We searched the Head Chef's office and bribed the Sous Chef. The Sous Chef told the Head Chef what we had done. The punishment was severe. We had to clean out the drain below the deep fryers after work. Definitely not a nice job.

Two days before the tests took place they told us. I almost had a nervous breakdown. I wasn't ready! On the day of the test I awoke soaking wet with a huge headache. The plan the night before had been to get pissed and go to bed early. To get pissed had taken a bit longer than intended. My stomach rumbled. I felt sick.

The test took place in the A la carte Restaurant. I had been moved up there from the production kitchen several months earlier. The working hours were shit and I had to do split shifts. But I loved the job! The kitchen was above ground, small, neat and tidy. I was the assistant of the Entremetier and in charge of the whole section when my boss was off. During service I was cooking all the vegetables and the side dishes- including the chips. The circle was closing.

In my opinion I was now a chef and able to cook. The other chefs treated me as an equal and showed me their secrets. Mainly the secrets of the French Haute Cuisine. The saucier showed me how



to prepare a perfect *Glace de viande*. Or he tested my knowledge, asking me questions about names of dishes and French cooking styles. I really learnt a lot in that kitchen. And the team was working together perfectly. It was the first time in my life that I noticed the amazing spirit of a professional kitchen, the perfect plates of food that went out in time, the hand in hand work of the different chefs and the calmness of the Head Chef announcing order after order without raising his voice once. He even told jokes in-between the orders!

But on that morning I was sure that I would fail the test.

I arrived on time still feeling sick. Eight hours of full concentration lay ahead of me. During the first four hours I had to do all the prep work a chef has to be able to do. The Head Chef watched as I did all the different vegetable cuts, the potato varieties, the soups, the cooking methods for meats, the different cuts for poultry and meat, the sauces, and the fourteen basic cooking methods . I blanched, poached, boiled, steamed, fried, sautéed, grilled, gratinated, baked, pan-fried, braised, glazed, poêled and stewed. The Head Chef was standing next to me all the time. He made me bloody nervous!

After these initial four hours I was already completely exhausted and sure that things could only get easier. I was wrong. After a short break the Head Chef handed me the test menu. As a starter I had to prepare a *Crème à la Reine*, a Cream of chicken soup, made with fresh chicken stock of course. I exhaled. Not so bad.

The second course was going to be a *Gigot d'Agneau à l'anglais*. Roast leg of lamb, pink in the middle. Not such a big deal either.

To go with the leg of lamb the Chef wanted three different varieties of vegetables and- **Croquettes!** Damn. And Sauce béarnaise, to top things up. It was getting even more complicated towards the end! I broke out in cold sweat. For dessert I had to prepare *Parfait Glacé Grand Marnier!* Of all things!

Only four hours to get everything ready! Total panic! As anticipated it didn't go according to plan at all. The time was flying by and I wasn't getting anywhere, at least that's how I felt. I started to make mistakes:

The soup was too salty; I had to add tons of cream to make it eatable again. The leg of lamb I forgot in the oven. The vegetables went missing. Some other chef had accidentally sent them down to the production kitchen via the service elevator. The Sauce béarnaise was too thick. That was not such a big problem. I only had to add a little water to thin it down. But I added too much water. Shit!

Luckily I stuck to the golden rule: always prepare the dessert first. Due to that piece of kitchen wisdom the *Parfait* was frozen by the time the testers were eating it.

Even though I was nervous and some things went wrong, in the end the whole operation turned out to be a minor success. The test eaters were my parents and the owner of the chain of restaurants I

worked for, the big Manitou himself. They loved my food! My mom even ate the lamb, an amazing feat! Maybe that was because it was slightly overdone.

It was the first time my parents had come to the restaurant to eat. They were positively surprised of the quality of food their son was able to produce! I had previously cooked at home on my occasional visits. But this was entirely different. They were proud of me. The owner of the restaurant assured them that I was a very hard working and well liked apprentice. The man didn't even know me!

The Head Chef was not so enthusiastic about my performance. He presented me with a written assessment. The highlighted and thickly underlined item on the list was the leg of lamb. What had been so wrong about that? I asked myself. Well, it was all written on the assessment. The meat had tasted fine, although it was slightly overcooked. I had known that already. But apparently I had cut off too much whilst getting it ready for the oven. And I hadn't used my paring knife to do so, instead I had used my bread knife. A major offence in the kitchen.

The consequences were dire: the next day I was sent underground again. To the butcher shop where the head butcher immediately confiscated all my knives and handed me a fifty centimetre long, razor sharp and brand new butchers knife.

„The day you can de-bone a leg of veal with this knife will be the day you are ready to go to your final exams. “, was all he said.

My mates had already told me in advance what to expect, so I wasn't really surprised when the butcher told me his famous line. My mates had also told me that he wasn't all right in the head. I was pretty sure that it was impossible to de-bone a leg of veal with such a knife. But I was wrong. The butcher showed me how to do it. The knife he gave me on that day I still have now. And I have never let it out of my eyes in all the years I have been travelling the world as a chef.

To work on large animals I had to wear an apron made of chains. In case I slipped with the knife to not accidentally gut myself. In my first week I was mainly cutting meat on the wooden block in the middle of the butchery. Hundreds of Schnitzels, sliced veal and filet steaks. I de-boned legs of veal, removed sinew from hips, shoulders, necks and backs of pigs, lambs and sides of beef. I operated lumps of pus out of livers.

The longer I stayed in the butcher shop the rougher the work I was asked to do. I cut bones on the circular saw without wearing gloves, because the chief butcher said that such gloves were only for cowards. That he wasn't a coward I could tell by looking at his hands. He was missing several fingers and had some ugly scars on his arms.

By the end of the day, with bloody hands and the smell of meat in my hair, congealed blood and bits of meat in my socks, I went straight to the Pub. Not to get drunk but to study. Armed with my books I sat there for hours. I had plenty of time. Kelly had left Switzerland because her work permit had expired.

She was working in some Hotel in the Black Forrest and I went to visit her occasionally with some of my mates. She wasn't really happy there and when I turned up with my mates she gave me the evil eye for bringing them along.

And she was getting bigger. She still ate a lot and mostly unhealthy food. But she was good in bed.

What Kelly never knew was that back in Zurich I had an affair with a young waitress. Well, she wasn't really that young. In fact, she was ten years older than me, bisexual, very pretty and full of energy. She didn't ask much of me. Just the occasional sex and someone to get drunk with. Perfect for me. I could study at her place when she was at work and when she got home we showered together and had some fun. Before going to sleep we sipped a few beers and talked. At six AM I went to work and she slept in.

After several weeks in the butcher shop the chief butcher declared me ready for the final exams in butchery.

I was moved on to the larder. There they taught me to do terrines, pies, cut up fish, bind and cut up chicken and poach galantines. And I jellified hundreds of canapés.

I was working dayshifts below ground again, but this time I didn't really mind at all. After the exhausting time in the butchery I enjoyed working in the larder section. The rough work and the bad smell had slowly gotten on my nerves. I loved eating terrines and pies so I was looking forward to prepare them and, after I had cooked them, to have a decent tasting session! I put a lot of detail in the decoration and presentation of the product. The a la carte chefs just had to pick up the finished plates and platters to place in their fridges or onto the buffet.

My affair with the waitress ended abruptly when she fell in love with a female stripper and they moved in together. I found a vacant bed at one of my mate's flats for the time being. Occasionally, well quite often really, I went home to my parents place to stay the night. My mother washed my clothes and I was able to rent my old room for just two hundred fifty Francs per month. Kelly stayed in the Black Forrest. The quiet before the storm.

One day I got the letter, the invitation to the final exams. My apprenticeship was coming to an end.

On a bleak day in February I went to do the written tests. They wanted to know it all and I was giving it to them.

Some forms were full of multiple choice questions. On other forms I had to write down explanations and descriptions and even do drawings to answer what was asked of me. During the whole of the tests I felt good and was able to finish my papers in time or even before the deadline.

One week later the practical exams took place. The days before the tests I couldn't sleep properly anymore. But the night before the exams I stayed sober!

The test kitchen was on the grounds of the Zurich University and was brand-new. Just the year before the testing had still taken place at the examinees place of work where it had been much easier for them for obvious reasons. They could do the tests in their usual surroundings.

Personally, I liked the test kitchen at the University much better. Each of the eight examinees got his or hers own fully equipped open plan kitchen. Similar to the internal tests at my place of work we had to do the preparations in the morning. In the afternoon it was cooking time! Several experts watched the way we worked and took notes. They assessed the organisation, the cleanliness, the speediness and the way the end product looked. They checked the bin and the compost bucket to make sure we didn't dump too much.

During the cooking of the menu each examinee had his or her own expert. Everything went perfectly. No catastrophes like during the previous tests. The fresh *Chicken Consommé* with the *Ailerons farcie* (stuffed chicken wings) was clear, golden and without specks of fat, just perfect. The chicken wings I had de-boned with my humongous butchers knife. The experts were impressed. The stuffing I made out of finely chopped chicken breast and seasoned it with some far eastern spices and chilli. I wanted to have a bit of heat in the traditional Consommé.

What the test eaters loved most was my *Poached Dover Sole on a bed of fennel with Pernod sauce*, I was told later by the leading examiner. I had seasoned the sauce with very little saffron and only added a good measure of Pernod at the very end.

I was very lucky with the main course.

*Roastbeef a l'anglais with Sauce Béarnaise Croquettes and seasonal vegetables.*

The Roastbeef was perfectly rare in the middle, unlike my leg of lamb the last time. And this time I didn't water down the sauce béarnaise, I left it as thick as it was. My all time favourites, the Croquettes, turned out crispy and piping hot. The vegetables I blanched off in the steamer and cooked them *al dente* in a sautoir pan, seasoned them and tossed them in hot clarified butter. I arranged the Roast Beef in the middle of a silver platter, surrounded by the Croquettes and the vegetables. The sauce I poured into a silver sauce dish. The examiner even called the others over to have a look at my presentation. I didn't really understand why until I later heard that some of the other examinees had just dumped everything on four plates.

As usual I had started with the preparation of the dessert.

*Poached Pear on Crème Brulée with homemade Croquant.*

The Crème was ice cold and the pears had been marinating in the white wine syrup for one hour. The result tasted perfectly. Even though I hated to prepare sweets! Towards the end of the examination, my expert winked at me once and went off without saying a word. I didn't know what to make of that.

Finally the test eaters sat down to eat.

I went outside and lit a Cigarette. Exhaling blue smoke I thought about the course the test had taken. I was positive that I had done everything perfectly. My work *must* have been perfect! Otherwise I would not be able to fulfil my dream and go abroad working as a fully trained chef! After all, I had been waiting for that day for four years!

The test results took their time to come through. The weeks went by and I continued to work in the kitchen underground, increasingly nervous.

One day, I was on my way to the canteen; the Head Chef intercepted me and whispered that I had passed. Just like that. On the go.

„Who would have thought that“, he added on, turning around grinning

Cheeky bastard! I thought and screamed out loud:

“Today Switzerland, tomorrow the world!”