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Where vegetarian cuisine is making history

Hiltl in Zurich is the oldest vegetarian restaurant in Europe and is currently managed by the fourth generation of the same family.



When the restaurant was first opened over 110 years ago, it was ridiculed. These days, it is considered a gastronomic highlight of the city.

Rolf Hiltl recounts the story of the long-standing family business. "When he became a vegetarian, my great grandfather was cured of gout in just a few months and lived to the grand old age of 93," he says. Representing the fourth generation, Rolf Hiltl took over the family business in 1998, exactly 100 years after Europe's first vegetarian restaurant was founded.

Over the past 100 years, the business has had to contend with some difficult times. The 20th century was marked by its fair share of crises and wars. This resulted in cost-cutting.

"For us, however, it was perhaps not as difficult as for some. When times are hard, it's not always easy to get hold of meat – but this didn't affect us," says the current owner.

The relatively small variety of vegetarian ingredients that were available to the Hiltl family several decades ago encouraged them to remain innovative and creative with their food. In those days, supplies included little more than eggs, flour, potatoes, grain and a few vegetables.

Thanks to this creativity, the restaurant was able to make a name for itself and survive the difficult post-war years at a time

when meat became an almost integral part of the Swiss diet.

For a long time, vegetarian cuisine lived a shadow existence. Only in the 1970s did it first enjoy popularity when young people in particular developed new sensitivities to nature conservation and animal welfare. Interest in far-away cultures such as India, the birthplace of vegetarian cuisine, also emerged.

"Globalisation was very good for vegetarianism. We were able to discover cultures with far more diverse vegetarian dishes than our own," Hiltl says. He travels extensively every year to find new recipes around the world. The business employs people from 40 different countries.

Over the years, the Hiltl restaurant has transformed from a "Vegetarians' Home and Teetotalers' Café" into a gourmet temple. The restaurant not only attracts strict vegetarians but also part-time ones – like the boss himself. For every now and again, Rolf Hiltl treats himself to some meat.

"A large number of the early vegetarians were dreamers who wanted to create paradise on Earth. Today, health consciousness and ecological awareness are the primary motivations. When the newspapers broke the news of mad cow disease a few years ago, people were queuing up at our restaurant", recalls Hiltl.

Visited by 1,500 people a day, the Hiltl business now includes not only the restaurant but also a bar, a disco and a cookery school.

Hiltl has become an icon in Zurich and can be found in every city guide. Its guests include celebrities such as Paul McCartney and Marc Forster.

Motivated by success, Rolf Hiltl founded a chain of vegetarian fast food restaurants together with the Frei brothers. Trading under the name Tibits, they have already opened four outlets in Switzerland and one in London since 2000.

from swissinfo

Butchers beef about meat tourists


Every tenth franc spent by Swiss on meat is being spent abroad, according to the Swiss Meat Association. The Swiss franc, which has gained about 25 per cent in value against the Euro over the past four years, is leading to an increase in shopping tourism.

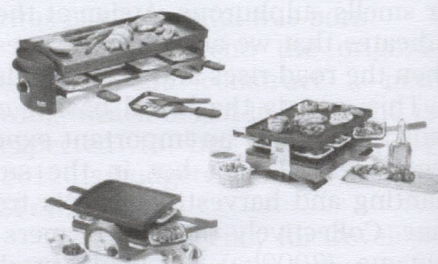
One study quoted found that in 2009 around SFr600 million worth of meat was bought abroad. This figure increased to SFr800 million between May 2010 and April 2011.

Meat is two or three times more expensive in Switzerland than in neighbouring countries, partly due to tougher Swiss regulations for animal welfare, farming and food safety. Wages are also higher in Switzerland.

The Swiss Meat Association wants the auctioning of import licences abolished. It says imports should instead be linked to how much Swiss butchers are able to supply.

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