

Swiss New Years tradition : dinner for one or James the butler

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Swiss New Years Tradition

Dinner for One or James the Butler

Have you ever wondered why the Swiss associate the name 'James' with a butler? Well, this may well have to do with a New Year television show tradition (please correct me if I'm wrong!).

For roughly 30 years, Swiss television has broadcasted an originally British comedy sketch with butler James (aka Freddie Frinton) and Miss Sophie (aka May Warden). 'Dinner for One' depicts the celebration of noble Miss Sophie's 90th birthday (a gourmet dinner at home). Due to her considerable age, Miss Sophie's close friends had all passed away but are nevertheless invited to the meal. Consequently, butler James, who remains the only one to celebrate the occasion with, impersonates each one of them. During the four-course menu, Miss Sophie decides on suitable drinks to accompany the dishes (sherry-white wine-champagne-port) and poor James simultaneously has to serve the dishes as well as raise and empty the deceased friends' glasses with each course. Ever more drunk, James is no longer able to pour the wine into the glasses when pouring drinks and keeps on tripping on the head of a tiger (carpet) on his way from the table to the buffet. Before each course, James asks Miss Sophie 'the same procedure as last year?' which Miss Sophie answers with 'the same procedure as every year'. The catch-phrases have become so popular that almost every Swiss can recite them.

Originally, the comedy was written for the theatre in the 1920s by British author Lauri Wylie. When performed on stage

in Britain, the sketch was discovered by Germans and was subsequently staged in Hamburg every New Year's Eve. In 1963, the performance was recorded and has been shown on German television since 1972. Many other European countries followed suit. Interestingly, the sketch which is broadcasted in English without subtitles is widely known in non-English-speaking European countries but almost unheard of



in English-speaking countries. Apparently, it has been so popular that it became the most frequently repeated TV programme ever and an integral component of the New Year's schedule of Swiss, German, Austrian, and other European television stations (ironically, the sketch has nothing to do with the occasion).

Nowadays, several versions of the sketch exist, including one adopted for Swiss television. The Swiss version (also featuring Freddie Frinton and May Warden) has less alcohol, lasts for 11 instead of 18 minutes, and depicts a set that is less lavishly decorated (e.g. no white tablecloths). For those of you who haven't had the pleasure of witnessing 'the same procedure as every year' - it's all available on YouTube these days. Cheers!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b1v4BYV-YvA>

Luzia Sauer

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Eveline and Franz and the Team.

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