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These Professors Are Moving Zurich Into The Culinary Twenty-First Century



High above Bahnhofstrasse, the most expensive shopping promenade in [Europe](#) and the third most expensive in the world, on the top floor of fashion house Modissa's flagship store, is a new restaurant named "The Rooftop Restaurant." Unlike Zurich's 3,000 other restaurants (an astounding number considering the city only has a population of 300,000), it is defying almost every one of the city's dining conventions.

The Swiss love to select what they eat from a menu packed with traditional offerings. Here the only option is to take small tapas-style items from a cart that is rolled to tables throughout the evening. One night dumplings might be on offer; the next Thai curry or meatloaf.

This is the first restaurant in the city to serve bespoke cocktails, not just wine or beer, alongside food. And it entertains its guests until late at night with a jazz band.

It's only the second venue in Zurich to be located on a roof; Modissa initially wanted the eatery to sit on its fifth floor because the top floor (with dynamic views of the city) was being used for storage.

Most shocking is that restaurant patrons are willing to wait hours for a table, something required most nights of the week. "It's really strange," said Florian Weber who runs the restaurant with his business partner Michel Peclard. "Swiss people want whatever they want, right now. We are really really surprised it is working right now!"



This is the ninth restaurant this duo, both professors at the school of hotel management in Lucerne, have opened, and each one is bringing something new to a city notorious for clinging to tradition. Coco Grill & Bar, just steps away from Credit Suisse and UBS's headquarters (on a street under which legend says gold is buried), makes guests feel they are on a "noble schooner from days passed." Fischer's Fritz is located on a camping ground on Lake Zurich and makes fried fish caught by the restaurant's own fisherman, Adrian Gerny. Another venue specializes in making sushi out of sweet water fish; another gluten free baked goods, not prevalent in Switzerland.



"If we have an idea, and we are convinced it will work, we try it," said Weber. "We aren't making a 100-page study if it will work or not or how to organize it. We just go for it, and then we try it, and we see if it will work or not." (The gluten free bakery had to close after a few months; Zurich wasn't ready for it.)

Peclard opened his first restaurant in 1999 when he was teaching finance at the hotel management school, from which he graduated and was asked to stay on as staff. A lawyer friend of his father called and offered a suffering historic restaurant for free if he would re-open it within 30 days. Peclard did just that and became hooked on opening new restaurants that pushed boundaries.

While the concepts behind these eateries may seem bold in Zurich, they come from ideas that Peclard and Weber (who joined the company five years ago as a partner) find while traveling the world. A few times a year they head to a new city where they look for innovative dishes, new ways to organize a restaurant, methods to surprise and delight guests. For example, the Rooftop Restaurant combines the interior designs of a restaurant in LA, the cart service model of a spot in San Francisco, and the menu of a place in Tokyo. Peclard was recently in New York City staying at the Nomad Hotel and learning from fellow Swiss restaurateur Daniel Humm.

This way trends get to Zurich much faster than they would, said Weber. "The ideas come from the States, they get to England, and then they are slowly getting to Germany until they get to Switzerland. The entire process takes about four years."

Their company, called Pumpstation Gastro GmbH, also employs a young staff of 150 plucked directly from classes at the hospitality school. Both partners teach students for four months at a time, observing their skills and attitudes, and then asking the best ones to join their venture. David Allemann, who manages Rooftop Restaurant and was a student of Peclard, said most students aspire to work for him: "He is mad. He is crazy. He is the exact opposite of all the teachers you have in management school. Everyone else explains things simply and are straightforward. Michel tells us, 'If you want to make money you have to go with your gut.'"

Peclard's skill is with finances, said Allemann, who is going on his third year with the firm. "Once a month I give him the finances, and from that he knows which days are raining, which days were busy. He knows everything." Last year the company made a profit of 15 million Swiss Francs, and projects a profit of 18 to 20 million this year. Rather than getting rich, however, the owners invest all of their profits into new restaurants.

This winter the company is conquering another stale concept: the ski mountain restaurant. "If you go skiing, most of the restaurants are run by the owner of the mountain and they are crap," said Weber. "They serve pasta bolognese, and there is no love." In contrast, their restaurant in Arosa opening this winter will offer a set five-course "surprise" dinner the chef will cook directly in front of you. No waiters will be involved; the chef will take the food from the grill and place it on your table perfectly placed in front of a fireplace.

As soon as Weber finished describing the new restaurant in the Alps, he asked me if I would show him around my favorite spots in New York City. "Then," he said, "We can get excited for even newer concepts that we can open up in Zurich!"