

LIFESTYLE

Harald Wohlfahrt (Schwarzwaldstube)

The grounded star

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While the cooks who have worked in Harald Wohlfahrt's kitchen in Baiersbronn-Tonach near Strasburg have collected over 75 Michelin stars, the German Bocuse remains down to earth in the purest sense of the word. Interview.

**“Success?
When
the guests
come back!”**

Harald Wohlfahrt



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How much time do you have for this interview?

As much time as we need.

I'd like to start by giving you a few words and having you tell me what this brings to mind for you.

The Black Forest: home.

Fire: useful for cooking.

Bocuse: an amazing icon.

The team: important.

Michelin stars: get us guests.

Cooking: passion.

Family: very important.

Harald Wohlfahrt: would like to be authentic.

Your restaurant and the cooks you've trained have been awarded over 75 Michelin stars. How do you manage to motivate your students so much?

I think that I've found my place and my home here. I feel good and live my passion. A cook needs a team. My role lies in giving instructions to my team which ensure that all stations and their staff are fully integrated. I adapt myself to all kinds of profiles, but one thing is clear: the more responsibility I delegate and the more I trust my team, the better the product is that I get. We like to have a kind of easy-going discipline here, which means that everyone follows specific rules, but also has enough space for their personal talent and creativity. The

most important thing is to always have good staff. I've been working here since 1978. My sommelier has been with me for 25 years, my head pastry chef for 20 years and my sous chef for 13 years.

You make clear the influence, which Bocuse has had on your kitchen, especially at the beginning of your career. However, in contrast to Bocuse, you constantly change your menu. Why is that?

Paul Bocuse has visited us multiple times, in particular in 1977 when we opened and in 1992 when we received our third star. I think one could compare the experience we offer our guests with a kind of time travel, sometimes into the past, but above all because we try to capture the spirit of the times and to share what moves us with our guests. High French cuisine, as it existed at the beginning of my career, privileged truffles, lobster, foie gras, caviar, oysters, gourmet fish, crayfish... Today, all of nature's products enjoy the same standing as these exquisite products. I make an effort to use all the herbs which I have in my kitchen. In a pesto, for example, we might use mint, sorrel and horseradish. We cook in harmony with modern times and aren't afraid to use lemon grass, coriander and yuzu if they help. Cooking has become a lot more multicultural and international.



Have the guests' expectations changed in recent years, above all due to the influence of cooking shows?

When you go to a three-star restaurant, you know that a very special taste experience awaits you. Just like, when I go to a premier league match, I also expect a different level of football than when I go to a match in Baiersbronn. I pay more but I also expect a different level. The people who come here are very well informed and have very clear expectations. Our goal has always been to surpass these expectations



and to see these guests come back. I've been practicing this trade for 46 years and last year was our best, although we might very well break that record this year.

Does the art of cooking help eliminate borders or does it suffer from linguistic and psychological barriers?

If you come here on June 21st, you'll see that we celebrate Luxembourg's national holiday and that many Luxembourgers living here come to celebrate. The French do the same on July 14th, as do the Swiss on August 1st. At Traube Tonbach we gladly celebrate the things we have in common with our neighbours and a great appreciation of good food is definitely one of these. I think that's fantastic!

What are your memories of working with Christian Bau, Klaus Erfort and Wolfgang Becker, all of whom work near Luxembourg and whose restaurants have been collectively awarded 8 stars?

I think that they integrated themselves and their excellent work very well into the kitchen here.

Christian Bau worked here for five years and rose from being a young cook to sous chef. The cooks who apply here are usually very talented and ambitious, work hard and work gladly. What I like about our kitchen is that these people want to get ahead in life and find their place among the great cooks. The more integrated they are, the more they can achieve. In Christian Bau's case, when he became number two here, he had to pursue his career somewhere else and, ultimately, I helped him find a job in Nennig, just a few kilometres away from Remich. I don't hesitate to foster my staff so they can move up to the next level, if they want to. I did the same with my sous chef Torsten Michel, only that I never let him go. He's now been by my side for 13 years and not without good reason.

Are you the owner or an employee?

I am an employee and, moreover, out of conviction. I could have negotiated a share in the business. But why? I would have had to give it up at the end of my career because I'm not a family member. I am an employee, but I make all of my decisions on my own and am rewarded for my work accordingly.

"Beauty is that which pleases."

Harald Wohlfahrt

Though my three children are pursuing other careers, I have colleagues whom I can rely on so that I can concentrate on my own work. I have everything here that I need.

Do you also have an advisory function in the company?

Very little. I have a lot to do here. I take care of the menus, I hire our staff. The most important thing is that our team sticks together.

Lastly, is there a "typical" dish or ingredient that you like in particular?

There are so many dishes that I don't want to highlight just one. In terms of ingredients, I love artichokes, but my favourite is horseradish because it has so much character. Even if I couldn't stand it when I was a child. You just can't change its taste.