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Interview with Maurice R.L. Urech, General Manager of the Beau Rivage Hotel, Lausanne

The summit of hospitality

First-class hotels in Switzerland have an outstanding reputation. Managing a five-star hotel demands considerable experience and sensitivity to new trends. 'Swiss Review' spoke to Maurice R.L. Urech, one of the world's best hotelkeepers.

Swiss Review: Mr Urech, you are the General Manager of one of Switzerland's best hotels, the Beau Rivage hotel at Lausanne-Ouchy. What attracted you to the hotel industry in the first place?

Mr Urech: Nobody dreamt that one day I would manage a five-star hotel. My father lived in France and worked as an engineer. I myself was attracted to architecture. But it all turned out differently, and in the mid fifties I went to a hotel school in Paris.

And of course that automatically meant various career postings where you gathered the necessary experience. What hotels did you work at?

My first job was at the Baur au Lac hotel in Zurich, where I worked first in the personnel office, then as a restaurant cashier and at reception. In London I worked four years at the Savoy, followed by a period in St. Moritz.

Why shouldn't young people take on higher positions immediately after completing a top training course, like that at the Lausanne Hotel School?

Again and again I see young people who are keen to climb the career ladder as fast as possible. That is very understandable, but it does make them excessively specialised, and this is a disadvantage in the hotel industry. I am absolutely convinced that it is necessary to experience all the stages of hotel operations if one is to become a successful hotelier.

In that case it would appear that rising from the ranks is still the right way to go about things. You mentioned in passing that you had worked in Italy for a longer period of time. What can we learn from the Italians?

In a nutshell – a positive attitude to life. I learnt a great deal about this in Venice, at the Gritti Palace and at the Lido, and at the Miramonti Hotel in Cortina d'Ampezzo.

Perhaps a rather heretical question: Aren't Swiss hotelkeepers abroad still living on laurels earned in the past?

Certainly not. They are still highly regarded. Indeed, they are the true ambassadors of

Swiss catering. And our hotel schools also have an excellent reputation.

You have been the General Manager of the Beau Rivage hotel since 1983. Your hotel belongs to the select 'Leading Hotels of the World' group. How do you go about meeting the very high expectations of your guests?

The Beau Rivage is a very traditional hotel with a relatively large share of loyal and regular guests. I attach great importance to ensuring that my guests are comfortable here. They should feel at home. I am proud of our very high average stay figures, since they indicate the high level of confidence which our guests place in us.

Tradition is important. But I assume your guests' needs are changing continually.

Cosiness alone is not enough nowadays. In addition to the best possible care by trained staff we also provide a considerable range of leisure activities (trips to closer and more distant destinations, cultural events). It is also



A manager like Maurice R.L. Urech has a great influence on the style of his hotel. (Archive photo)

important not to neglect the sporting needs of active guests.

Moreover, we work continually to adjust our hotel infrastructure to new trends. This applies particularly to the cuisine in our new restaurant, La Rotonde, where we endeavour to offer considerable variety. I am particularly fond of trying out new kinds of culinary tastes.

How do you guarantee 24-hour care of your guests in view of the extremely difficult staff situation in the hotel industry?

Nowadays people attach great importance to quality of life and self-fulfilment. More and more professional people want work where the hours are regular. This means a high level of staff fluctuation in our establishment. In addition, an increasing number of young cooks are leaving hotels in order to realise their dreams of their own restaurant as soon as possible. The consequence is that we are using more and more part-time staff. Yet I am dependent on very well qualified and motivated staff if I am to offer my guests the best possible service.

Is there a future for traditional luxury hotels?

Yes. But it means the continued investment of all available energies and means. And customers will have to provide the right kind of recompense for the service they are demanding. Trends are clearly heading in the direction of luxury, which means that well-managed establishments have every chance of survival.

At the same time we should not conceal the fact that a number of hotels in Switzerland are likely to disappear during the next few years. One reason is the cost of staff, and the other their failure to keep up with new trends. Many hotelkeepers rested on their laurels for too long, and failed to recognise the changing requirements of their guests. Rationalised business hotels and well-run first-class hotels will continue to exist, but many medium-class hotels will find themselves in difficulties.

Mr Urech, thank you for this interview.

Interview: S. Müller