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## Swiss-Kiwi Life Stories

### The Swiss Chalet

Iconic Hamilton restaurant of the 60's and 70's. Proprietors: Bert and Josie Flühler

On a cold Winter's night in the middle of June 1963, Waikato dignitaries and Wellingtonian friends and family arrived for a complimentary 3 course continental meal cooked and presented by Bert and Josie Flühler. It was an enormous success and thus began the 13 years of the iconic Hamilton "Swiss Chalet" restaurant.

It really started with the immigration of a young Swiss, Engelbert (Bert) Flühler and his brother back in 1952 – drawn to New Zealand by a sense of adventure and the beckoning of fellow Küssnachters already in the country. Bert had already completed his apprenticeship as a toolmaker in the Gewerbeschule in Luzern and had some work experience under his belt. Upon arrival in New Zealand, after the long 6 week boat trip, he worked with the NZ railways (a rather far cry from the efficient Swiss Railways!) until finding employment in his own field of training with Agmar Machinery and Tools in Petone where he worked from 1953-1960.

*"I remember going to the  
"Swiss Chalet" as a kid;  
it was so posh and such a  
treat!"*

During this time he also did some early mornings and evenings in a catering firm and maybe this is where his interest in the food industry really began. Not only did he work hard, but he also found time to socialize and spend many an evening in the family home of Josephine (Josie) Bitossi, legal secretary and accomplished pianist and broadcaster. They married on 15th November 1958, bought their first home in South Karori and welcomed their first baby in June 1960.

With Bert's insistence, Josie learnt Schwyzerdütsch. This put her in good stead for the arrival of Bert's parents in August 1960 on their first overseas trip to see their two sons and their 3 "kiwi" grandchildren. They travelled extensively throughout NZ visiting other Swiss, experiencing farm and city life, camping and Engelbert Snr even enjoyed some hunting in NZ bush. Then in March 1961 the parents, Bert and Josie and baby Belinda, spent a month

on board the Italian liner "Castelfelice" heading back to Switzerland.

*"I was a regular customer  
on a Friday night during my  
dinner break."*

The plan was to stay in Switzerland for 2 years so that Josie could spend some time in Bert's homeland and with his family. While living in Zürich, Bert worked for an engineering firm while Josie studied piano at the Conservatorium of music. Maybe it was the varied and interesting continental meals and the beautiful patisseries that they had while in Switzerland that were such a contrast to the NZ "steak and eggs" and "fish and chips" in the 1960s, that gave them the idea of opening a restaurant in NZ. Whatever it was, they began to seriously plan for this new venture. Josie learnt how to bake from her brother-in-law, an excellent Konditer and pastry chef, and she also gained some experience by helping out in another brother-in-law's restaurant and hotel in Arbon. Both of them did catering courses and Josie did a serving course – no mean feat in a second language in a climate when many Zürchers were not so welcoming of foreigners.

Armed with these new skills and a lot of stainless steel catering equipment plus decor (Swiss dolls, a miniature chalet, cuckoo clock, copper lamp, brass plant holders etc) they returned to NZ by boat in November 1962, arriving back in time for Christmas. To gain further catering experience, Bert worked at a continental restaurant in the afternoons and evenings and Josie worked in a bakery; both sharing parental duties. The plan was to open a coffee bar in Wellington but they couldn't find empty premises and it was difficult to get a mortgage. When close friends, Wally and Ricky Unternährer, told them about an empty building space in the "Dold's Building", Victoria Street, Hamilton, they decided to investigate this further.

*"We used to call in for dinner  
on a Sunday night on our  
way back to Auckland after  
a weekend skiing at Mt.  
Ruapehu."*

After many trips from Wellington to Hamilton, their vision began to be realized. A fabulous budding young Wellington architect designed the restaurant as part of his portfolio and a very experienced builder created the interior. A joiner from Frankton made the tables and wooden chairs with hearts in them and Josie sewed red and white gingham table cloths, curtains and aprons. To finance it all, they sold their Karori home and property and moved to Hamilton in June 1963... ready for opening day.

Bert sourced all his vegetables from local markets, meat from Waikato butchers, coffee beans specially blended by the renowned Robert Harris himself and continental meats from "Bell's Small Goods" in Wellington. Josie made all the continental cakes, pastries and apple strudel herself at home, starting at 5am every morning. She also helped cook or serve in the restaurant while juggling the growing family of 3 children and her own piano playing. The restaurant also employed a large staff, amongst them many part-timers.

"The Swiss Chalet," was the only Continental restaurant in Hamilton back then. In the early years, it was open 7 days a week as a coffee bar and restaurant. Staff from the Waikato Times and Telecom and guests from Parklands and Riverview became regular midweek clientele; Thursday nights saw the hairdressers come in

*"As a special holiday treat  
we used to come to the  
Swiss Chalet by bus from  
Morrinsville, arriving just  
before 11am to partake of the  
delicious Continental cakes  
and in time to watch the  
cuckoo clock in action."*

for their dinner break and Friday nights were two sittings for workers and shoppers. Sunday nights were the travellers. It was a busy, popular and "adventurous" eating place where you could order filet mignon, Hungarian goulash, Cordon bleu, spaghetti bolognese, Bratwurst, Fleischkäse, Lamb's Fry (French style) and the most popular dish, Wiener Schnitzel.

On the 27th March 1976 the Waikato Times featured an article entitled "Auf wienersehen, Bert!" "The man who brought wiener schnitzel to Hamilton is retiring after 13 years as... probably the longest-serving restaurant owner in town". After 13 years of hard team



