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Autor: Cooper-Flühler, Belinda / Flühler, Josie
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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 Sr 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 "Castlefelice" 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

work, a dream realized and no regrets, Bert and Josie sold the restaurant. Bert returned to his former trade as a toolmaker and worked for Micro Engineering, training many apprentices until he retired. He then continued with a wide range of hobbies until he passed away in February 2014. His funeral was a joyous Swiss occasion and many past customers and employees of the Swiss Chalet attended. Josie became a full-time piano teacher and pianist and today still has her hand in music and good cooking!

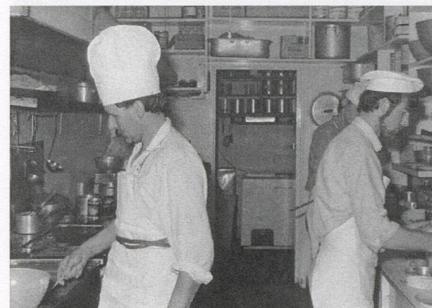
Written by: Belinda Cooper-Flöhler and Josie Flöhler



Assistant Chef Josie Flöhler in kitchen



Josie F Swiss Chalet front of house

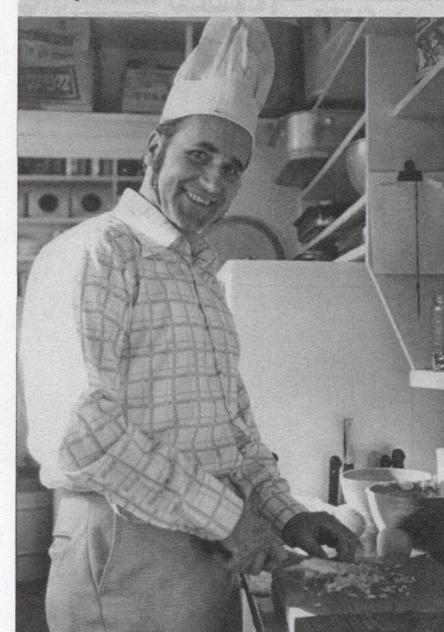


Swiss Chalet kitchen and Bert



Swiss Chalet Restaurant seating

Auf wienersehen, Bert



The man who brought easier schalet to Elmhurst is the man who runs a restaurant. He is called Bert Flöhler, a Swiss-born Bert Flöhler, a young man who has been serving restaurant owner in a small town in Switzerland since he arrived the Swiss Chalet in 1961. As well as furnishing the Swiss Chalet in Swiss decor Bert

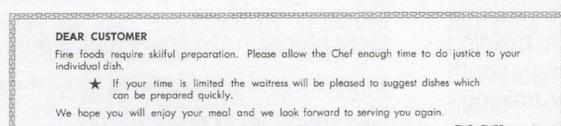
produced continental meals, notably Wiener schnitzel. He remained here for 22 or 23 years and then moved to Elmhurst, he said. "The woman would not let him leave, but the others insisted he go," he said. "My wife, who works as a partner in the business, are having the restaurant for Easter," just for a rest." "I hate to leave, but there comes a time when you have to have a change," he said. "I have been here with his family — his wife and children — for a try before we make other decisions on another job." And Mrs Flöhler, a well-known Elmhurst teacher, tends to return to full-time teaching.

Auf wienersehen Bert newspaper article 27 March 1976

Swiss Proverb:

Die Suppe wird nicht so heiss gegessen wie sie gekocht ist.

Margreth Meier



THE CHEF

CHILLED FRUIT JUICES	
Tomato	25c
Orange, Pineapple	25c
Grapefruit	25c
large	40c
COCKTAILS	
Oyster Cocktail	1.20
Seafood Cocktail	1.10
Shrimp Cocktail	1.10
Tuna Cocktail	1.20
ENTREES	
Mushrooms on Toast	1.00
Asparagus au beurre	1.00
Crumbed Oysters with tartare sauce	1.50
Crumbed Scallops with tartare sauce	1.50
Scallops Mornay	1.75
SOUP	
Soup Du Jour	40c
SEAFOOD	
Fresh fillet of Terokihi Deep Fried with	
sold and chips	
Terokihi Natural (coated in egg and	
deep fried) served with salad and	
chips	
Crumbed fresh salmon, fillets served	
with sold and chips and tartare	
sauce	
Flounders — medium and large 1.80-2.20	
Oysters natural (1 doz.) 2.20	
Oysters fried, sold and chips 2.60	
Crumbed Oysters, sold and chips	
and tartare sauce	
Crumbed Scallops, sold and chips	
and tartare sauce	
Whitebait Fritters in season	
(Sept.- Nov.) 3.00	
OUR MOST POPULAR MEAL	
WIENER SCHNITZEL	
HAVE YOU EVER TASTED IT?	
SALADS	
Ham Salad	2.40
Chicken Salad	2.50
Salmon Salad and Mayonnaise	2.40
M.Z. Tuna and Mayonnaise	2.50
Prawn Salad with Cocktail Sauce	2.60
Vegetarian Salad, served with	
cooked vegetables and rice	
Kale Plate (Assorted Continental	
cold meats and salad)	
2.50	
CHILDREN'S PORTION	
(for children only)	
Wiener Schnitzel, with rice and	
sold or vegetables and chips	
1.20	
Fried Fish and Chips	1.00
Filet Steak	1.50
Frankfurters, Sausages	1.30
Chicken with vegetables and chips	1.50
ADDITIONAL	
1 egg 1.5c	2 eggs 25c
Onions, Tomatoes (each portion)	30c
Rice, Vegetables each	30c
Plate of Chips	40c
Mushrooms	60c
Tartare Sauce	25c
Mayonnaise	25c

HOURS OF BUSINESS		
Monday - Thursday	9.30am - 4.30pm	
	9.30am - 8.30pm	
Friday	5.00pm - 8.00pm	
Sunday	Saturday Closed	

GRILLS

All served with chips and vegetables
Sirloin Steak 2.50
Filet Steak (prime cut and tender) 2.70
Minute Steak (thinly cut choice filet steak, specially for those who like their steak well done) 2.70
Fillet Mignon (prime filet steak grilled to perfection wrapped in bacon smothered with mushrooms) 3.00
Filet Hawaii, cooked with garlic and served with grilled pineapple 2.80
Pepper Steak (seasoned with black pepper) 2.80
Carter Bag Steak, filled with raw carrots and shrimps 3.00
Hamburger Steak 2.20
Cheeseburger Steak 2.20
Bacon, Eggs and Chips 2.00
Ham, Eggs and Chips 2.00

GRILLS

How do you like your Steak?
RARE: Brown crust with cool red juicy centre.
MEDIUM RARE: Brown crust with warm red centre.
MEDIUM WELL: Outside dark brown, inside done through, tends to be dry with little juice left.
WELL DONE: Outside black, inside very dry — tends to be tasteless.

OMELETTES

All Served with Coleslaw and Chips
Plain 1.70
Cheese 2.00
Ham 2.10
Cheese and Tomato 2.00
Cheese and Onion 2.00
Savory (cheese, ham, tomatoes, onions) 2.20
Mushroom 2.20

CONTINENTAL MEALS

Wiener Schnitzel with Rice and Salad or Vegetables and Chips	2.00
Wiener Schnitzel (smaller portion for the not-so-hungry)	1.70
Fleischkase (grilled continental meat loaf specially made for the Chalet) served with salad and chips	2.20
Brotwurst (Continental veal sausage) grilled with salad and chips or vegetables and chips	2.20
Alpine Sicks (tasty Swiss sausages specially made and exclusive to us) served with salad and chips	2.40
Frankfurter with vegetables and chips or salad and chips	2.20
Ruhi with Spicy Sausages (eggs, bacon and chips)	2.40
Wurst 'n' Eggs (A continental dish with a difference. Grilled Swiss sausages, topped with 2 fried eggs, and served with coleslaw and chips)	2.40
Lamb's Fry with vegetables and rice (cooked French style) in butter and onions	2.00

POULTRY

Roast Chicken, served with salad, vegetables and chips	2.50
Barbecued Chicken, Garni 2.40	
Quarter Roast Chicken for the not-so-hungry 2.00	
Maryland Chicken (tender chicken pieces, crumbed and deep fried to perfection)	2.60
Curried Chicken (tender pieces of chicken cooked to perfection in curry sauce served with rice and vegetables)	2.75
Chicken o' la Creme (tender chicken pieces served with rich cream sauce, rice and vegetables)	2.75

Weekend Meals and Public Holidays — 25c extra per person
Minimum Charge \$1.00 Friday Nights.

Half portions for adults 25c off list price.

LUNCHEON SPECIALS

Soup and Toast	55c
Toasted Sandwiches (depending on fillings) from	65c
Steak Toasted Sandwich served on toast with coleslaw and tomatoes	85c
Bacon, egg and chips	1.40
Ham, egg and chips	1.40
Milk and Egg	70c
Rustic Egg	70c
Beef Curry (during winter months)	70c
Pancakes	
Pancakes Belinda (generous pieces of tender spring chicken in fresh mushroom sauce)	1.80
Pancakes Prawns Mediterranean (a big helping of sauteed prawns in a zesty delectable cocktail sauce)	1.80
Sweet Pancakes (pancakes, ice cream and cream, with something simply superb to enhance the flavour. Take your pick. Lemon and sugar, cinnamon and sugar, honey, jam or golden syrup).	80c

DESSERT

Fruit Salad	60c
Ice Melba	60c
Coupe Denmark	60c
Eclair	60c
Strawberries (in season)	60c
Pineapple or Banana Fritters	75c
Meringues Chantilly	60c
Apfel Strudel and Cream	60c

HOT DRINKS

Coffee — 20c	
Tea — 20c	
Chocolate — 25c	

COLD DRINKS

Iced coffee or chocolate, topped with ice cream and cream	40c
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SPECIALTIES OF THE HOUSE

Recommended only to the connoisseur who is not in a hurry.

HAWAIIAN STEAK SPECIAL	2.85
Filet steak marinated in red wine, and soya sauce and served with grilled pineapple, vegetables, chips and salad.	
PORK FILLET CHARCUTIERE	2.85
(Pan fried pork fillet pieces served with a tasty red wine sauce.)	
HAWAIIAN HAM (Garni)	2.75
(Thick slice of succulent ham marinated in pineapple juice and served with grilled pineapple.)	
RAHM SCHNITZEL	2.75
(Crumbed veal, with a delicious filling of ham and cheese, served with rice and salad or vegetables and chips.)	
BEEF STROGANOFF	3.00
(Finely sliced filet steak cooked to perfection with cream and mushrooms, served on rice. A delight to eat.)	