

A collage of various Swiss dishes including salads, soups, and breads. The central text is overlaid on a black circle.

Beyond Muesli and Fondue

The Swiss Contribution to Culinary History

Martin Dahinden

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PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-1-63263-630-0

HARDCOVER ISBN: 978-1-63263-631-7

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2018

First Edition

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OSCAR OF THE WALDORF

Oscar Tschirky's life and career sound like a story that is too good to be true, the story of a poor man who attained prestige and wealth in America through his great commitment. Oscar Tschirky was the maître d'hôtel of the Waldorf=Astoria for fifty years, from its opening in 1893 until 1943. The famous hotel owes its reputation to him to a large extent. But let us start at the beginning.

Oscar Tschirky was born in La Chaux-de-Fonds in 1866. His parents came from the German-speaking part of Switzerland. Oscar began his schooling in La Chaux-de-Fonds and later he and his brother Brutus were sent to Fribourg to work on a farm. His brother, who was ten years older, soon emigrated to the United States. He enthusiastically wrote home about the opportunities for making money in the New World. At the age of 17, Oscar followed him. On the day before the Brooklyn Bridge opened, he arrived in New York, applied for American citizenship and began to look for work. There were no vacancies at the hotel where his brother worked. Oscar found a job as a porter at the famous Hoffman House hotel on Broadway. He went all out and quickly proved his efficiency. Soon he was no longer a porter and was assigned new tasks. Oscar Tschirky became a floor supervisor, worked at the reception desk, in the accounting department, organized parties and became a steward on the hotel owner's yacht.

On the recommendation of Oscar Wilde, in 1887 he is supposed to have been wooed away by Delmonico's, where he served at the bar, but also organized a wide variety of events. Three years later, he finally applied for the position of maître d'hôtel of the first Waldorf Hotel, which opened its doors in 1893. The hotel was built by the famous architect Henry Hardenbergh for the industrialist William Waldorf Astor. The Waldorf was a hotel palace with 450 rooms, halls, restaurants and bars.

Oscar Tschirky had the job of organizing the opening gala with two thousand guests. Magnificent events later became his trademark, recalling Vatel and Ritz in a certain sense.

Through the extraordinary dishes it offered, the Waldorf attracted a great number of prominent figures and became a hub of social activity. For special events, for instance, the ballroom was converted into a circus menagerie or into a Roman park landscape. The extravagance was often sensational. Business was so good that John Jacob Astor IV, a cousin of the builder of the first Waldorf, had an even bigger hotel, the Astoria, built right next to it. The Astoria had seventeen floors, more than 1,000 rooms, and a ballroom for 1,500 guests. Both hotels were joined by a connecting passageway, the Peacock Alley. The double hyphen (Waldorf=Astoria), which must be between the names to be correct, recalls that connecting passageway even today.

In 1929, the old Waldorf=Astoria was demolished and the Empire State Building was built at the same location as the tallest building in the world at that time. The new Waldorf=Astoria came into being further east on Park Avenue and its size was again impressive: two thousand rooms and a hundred apartments were spread over forty-seven floors. At Grand Central Terminal, the Waldorf=Astoria had its own platform with a private underground passageway used by personalities ranging from Franklin D. Roosevelt and Douglas MacArthur to George W. Bush. Oscar Tschirky organized the opening event for the new hotel as well. Meanwhile he had turned 63 years old. When the Waldorf=Astoria celebrated its 50th anniversary, it was also the 50th anniversary of the day when Oscar Tschirky started working there. Tschirky's biography, *Oscar of the Waldorf*, which seems more like an autobiography, came out for the anniversary. When Oscar Tschirky died, the flags at the Waldorf=Astoria were flown at half-mast for days. The newspapers were full of detailed obituaries. He bequeathed his estate and his collection of more than ten thousand menus to Cornell University.

Everyone called Oscar Tschirky just Oscar. In 1896, he published *The Cook Book by "Oscar" of the Waldorf*. There are several recipes bearing the name Waldorf in the cookbook: *Chicken Waldorf Style*,

Sweetbreads Waldorf, Potatoes Waldorf, Blanc-Mange Waldorf Style, Sherbet Waldorf Style, and Welsh Rabbit Oscar Style.

The dish that is the most well-known and widespread to this day, however, is undoubtedly the *Waldorf Salad*, a salad made from sour apples and raw celery cut into strips, with chopped walnut kernels and a light mayonnaise. Celery stalks were used in the original recipe; today it is mostly cut celery root. *Filet à la Oscar* (Filet Oscar Style), a steak with crab meat, blanched asparagus and Béarnaise Sauce, is also attributed to Oscar Tschirky. *Eggs Benedict* are poached eggs served on toast or halved English muffins with a slice of browned cooked ham or breakfast bacon and Hollandaise Sauce. Today they can be found at many breakfast buffets at international hotels. There are different opinions about the history of their exact origin. In 1942, Lemuel Benedict, a former Wall Street trader, wrote in a column in *The New Yorker* that one morning in 1894 he went to the Waldorf with a hangover and asked for buttered toast, poached eggs, baked ham and a dash of Hollandaise Sauce. Oscar Tschirky was so impressed by the order that he later put the dish on the breakfast and lunch menu; however, the ham was replaced by bacon and the toast by English muffins. Another anecdote claims that Eggs Benedict was created by Delmonico's. There would be a connection with Switzerland there, too.

OYSTER SOUP

Serves 4

*1 dozen oysters in shells or fresh shucked jarred oysters
in their juices*

1 oz. butter

2 tablespoons flour

4 cups fish stock

Salt and pepper

Pinch of ground nutmeg

*1 tablespoon parsley, finely chopped
1 egg yolk
½ tablespoon lemon juice*

Shuck the oysters and finely chop them and save their juices. Add the butter to a saucepan over medium heat and let melt, then add the flour and stir to combine. Cook the flour in the butter for 2 minutes, then gradually add the fish stock, stirring constantly until the roux dissolves into the soup and comes to a boil. Reduce the heat to low and let it cook for 15 minutes. Add the chopped oysters and strain their juices into the soup and cook for 5 minutes. Season with salt and pepper to taste and add the nutmeg and parsley. Remove the pan from the heat. Beat the egg yolk with the lemon juice and gradually add to the soup, stirring to combine. Serve the soup immediately topped with buttered croutons.

WALDORF SALAD

Serves 4

*½ cup celery, julienned
2 apples, peeled and julienned
Grapes, halved
2 tablespoons walnuts, toasted and chopped
½ cup yogurt
½ cup crème fraîche or sour cream
3 teaspoons lemon juice
A pinch of white pepper
Salt to taste
¼ cup walnut oil*