

Munich Gourmet Stores Cater to the Elite (December 23, 2004)

Abstract

A journalist compares two internationally famous gourmet temples in Munich, calling the Dallmayr store a bastion of taste and tradition and the Käfer shop a representative of style and experimentation. In the process, he highlights the emergence of an elite for whom culinary excellence has become a form of social distinction.

Source

Dallmayr and Käfer – like Rolls Royce and Ferrari

Where gourmets sniff truffles and the professional spouse orders the champagne – the temples of fine food represent two Munich worlds.

The professor cuts an imposing figure in his white llama overcoat and angora hat; he's a gourmand straight out of another, more elegant era. Strictly speaking, Elk Preßler isn't really a professor at all; they just call him that at his favorite store on Dienerstraße. "Good day, professor, isn't there something you'd like from me today?," asks the lady behind the patisserie counter. Preßler remains in place, puts down his Dallmayr bag, and has a little chat. Then he buys Christmas truffles – "gifts for my friends" – and ambles into the coffee section, where the aroma of freshly roasted beans, the most distinctive smell in this aroma-rich house, is the strongest.

Yes, the professor. Later, after bringing home his freshly-prepared foods, he'll enjoy a gourmet feast: he'll drape Indonesian shrimp salad, duck leg, and gingerbread mousse onto his finest plate and tuck into it with great pleasure. "I treat myself a couple of times a month," says the 64-year-old, who started shopping at Dallmayr with his mother. He would never follow the path to Munich's other gourmet house, Käfer, on Prinzregentenstraße – the neighborhood of Bogenhausen isn't for him. "Do you know that at Dallmayr practically nothing has changed since back then. That's what's great about it."

If you survey the vaulted gourmet paradise of the royal court supplier Alois Dallmayr at noontime, you'll mostly see customers (in winter coats and with heavy shopping bags) who make their way to the nearest counter so confidently that it seems as though they were in their own living room. Seated at the Lukullus Bar are business people at lunch and society ladies who are recuperating from shopping with a glass of champagne. Things get frantic and pretty crowded in the afternoon when tourists from all over the world pour into the store through the arched entryway to have their picture taken in front of the *putti* fountains with the live crabs. This is the success of TV advertising: an ever growing number of curious people want to experience the place where young Munich models in blue blouses and white aprons serve Prodomo coffee to the sound of feel-good music shortly before the "Tagesschau" [nightly news]. They caress the Nymphenburg coffee pots – the ones with the exotic birds on them – so tenderly that it seems as though this were their life's fulfillment.

The Customers Pay Cash

Germany's most storied gourmet shop simply offers more: a sense of shopping. Of course, most come because the wine selection is superb. Because they can choose from 50 different kinds of honey, 120 kinds of jam, and 75 kinds of assorted pralines. Because they've been buying their cold-smoked duck

breast and filet Wellington here for decades. And because the wild salmon is sliced to perfection at Dallmayr. Granted, an avocado costs 2.50 Euro here, but it's guaranteed not to taste watery and is neither rock hard nor mushy when you cut it open.

But this isn't the only thing that has made Dallmayr the most popular Bavarian tourist attraction next to Neuschwanstein. You can experience moments of culinary bliss in this perfectly stocked store, where customers still mostly pay cash and no inane Christmas music plays over the loudspeakers. "One day, I was feeling really down; I had received bad news from the doctor," recounts Helga Kiefmann from Gauting. "I immediately went to Dallmayr and bought myself the most expensive treats; that consoled me quite a bit!"

The man in charge carries himself with the same reserve that characterizes the 300-year-old family business. Georg Randlkofer, an elegant man in a gray suit with a neatly trimmed beard, doesn't make a big fuss when he receives a visitor in the conference room above the storage and retail rooms. In fact, he doesn't speak about customers at all; in this regard, he's a diplomat: after all, when official foreign guests are received at the *Residenz*, he prepares the appropriate menu for them at the request of the state government. Fifty people are busy preparing the food in the Dallmayr kitchens.

"We're happy with the business during the Christmas season," says Randlkofer. For him, December 23rd is the best sales day of the year. "I like it when bank board members stand here at the counter and decide on the holiday menu while talking on the cell phone with their wives." The customers allow themselves time and money for good food – one has to agree with Randlkofer on this point. But is there any truth to the notion that older, tradition-conscious Munich residents shop at Dallmayr, while social climbers in pinstripes from law offices and firms drive to Käfer in Bogenhausen because it's easier to find a parking spot there for the S-Class Mercedes? "No, actually many young people come to us," replies Randlkofer. "And singles who enjoy the good life." Perhaps this is the reason why the firm used to sell 300 geese at Christmas time and now only sells three dozen. Singles prefer mini-portions. Caviar, for example. That can be had in tiny portions.

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Dallmayr and Käfer are separated by only two kilometers as the crow flies, and both actually have the same goal: to make sophisticated eaters happy by offering products that can't be bought in the supermarket. And yet these two companies are worlds apart. No, it's not only the colors – red for Käfer, blue and white for Dallmayr; it's not only the philosophy. It's the customers that set them apart. Granted, you see the famous Munich mix of deer-antler buttons/loden/cashmere in both houses. But there's still a very specific clientele that feels at home in the nooks and crannies of Käfer's fairy tale building on Prinzregenstrasse.

Käfer's world: here you encounter slender ladies between 35 and 40 with bleached, perfectly styled Gerhard Meir coiffures, clever designer jackets, Prada handbags, and Rolex watches; sun-tanned men in tailor-made suits with the cell phone at the ear because the mistress is making a fuss again. And of course people from the tabloids. And so it's more than a coincidence that on a Friday afternoon the grande dame of Salzburg, Marianne Fürsting zu Sayn-Wittgenstein-Sayn, nearly collides with actor Friedrich von Thun in front of the incomparable cheese counter – both preoccupied with the subtleties of the holiday menu.

The real theater takes place at Käfer's. Perhaps instead of going to see socio-critical dramas at the *Kammerspiele* or witty social satires at the *Resi*, one should simply stand at the salad counter. This is where Marianne Weber has served [customers] with devotion and a keen eye for twenty-eight years; after all, she's one of the most experienced specialists in the Käfer empire, which has already seen many renovations and new beginnings, even a loudly trumpeted public offering. You can learn a lot about

Munich society here. For example, that some customers know from gourmet magazines that fresh Alba truffles, at 4.90 Euro per gram, only keep for two days, while other hobby truffologists are sure that the products will easily remain delicious for a week. “I can already tell from the expression on a customer’s face whether he wants to talk or just buy. With many, I know their names and tastes,” says Marianne Weber.

Of the more reticent sort is a gentleman in a black tweed blazer and Joop jeans; he’s carrying a basket with eight bottles of Aceto Balsamico, four packages of salmon, and a portion of truffles for 95 Euro. And if, just for the fun of it, you trail the female customers from the fish counter as they head outside, you can watch as athletic professional wives in their late twenties have employees carry cases of champagne to the Porsche, and then you can see them hold up a ten-Euro bill with pointy fingers and purr sweetly: “Young man, I wish you a very nice day!”

One employee knows them all, the rich, the beautiful, and the spoiled, but also the totally normal customers from the neighborhoods of Haidhausen and Lehel; they’re still around, too. Hans-Georg Staib started at Käfer 25 years ago, and today hardly anyone in his line of work knows as much about fine fish as he does. Staib, a stocky, friendly Swabian who has a lot of fun with his customers, seems cheerful these days. Among other reasons, this is because sales of the wild catch from the French Atlantic coast and particularly of caviar, are going exceedingly well. “People buy caviar like crazy before Christmas – we had to reorder.” With great pleasure, Staib opens the largest available can of the Osciera Imperial, a brand of Iranian caviar that costs 4,386 Euro according to the scale. There are people, he says, who buy such a can to eat at home, “for this, you only need a couple of good friends.” He sweeps a mother-of-pearl spoon over the black eggs and offers them to a regular customer – “this is what we call the 50 Euro spoonful,” he says. “Why should you be ashamed of gorging on caviar? The people who can’t afford it don’t see it anyway.” The days when wealthy customers exercised culinary understatement out of solidarity with Aldi^[1] regulars are over. Thank god things are getting better again.”

This is also the view of the boss, whose office includes a painting of the immortal James Dean. Michael Käfer has made it. He’s the master of a legendary Oktoberfest tent and the once famous P1 disco. As a party organizer, he followed in the footsteps of his father, Gerd Käfer, though he’s barely on speaking terms with him now. He sells a pile of licensed products and entertains guests not only in his Munich tavern, but also in his restaurant at the Berlin Reichstag, at the airport, and soon in the VIP lounges of soccer stadiums when the World Cup begins in 2006. Oh yes, and lately he’s been showing the sheikhs of Bahrain how to really party. Käfer Jr. appears to be the opposite of Dallmayr chief Randlkofer, whom few recognize on the street. An expert familiar with both houses puts it this way: “At Käfer it’s the trappings that matter, at Dallmayr it’s the quality.” And a Munich society lady who buys no small amount from both concludes: “Dallmayr is the dark Rolls Royce, Käfer the red Ferrari.”

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NOTES

[1] [ⓧ] Aldi is a popular discount grocery store chain based in Germany – eds.

Source: Christian Mayer, “Dallmayr und Käfer – wie Rolls Royce und Ferrari”, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, December 23, 2004.

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