

Sachertorte and Its Namesake Hotel

by Lucy Gordan



From five-star hotel to famous confection, the Sacher name embodies something special

The Sacher Hotel in Vienna is one of the few five-star hotels in Europe to have always been family-run. The others are the Bayerischerhof in Munich, the Baur du Lac in Zürich, the Palace in St. Moritz, and the Hassler in Rome, all with Austrian, German, or German-Swiss owners.

The Sacher is also unusual in another way. While most great hotels became famous for their hospitality first and then for their cuisine, the Sacher Hotel owes its take-off to a cake. The hotel was opened in 1876 by the Eduard Sacher, the son of the inventive pastry chef Franz.

Thanks to the generosity of the Austria Tourist Board in New York, the

Vienna Tourist Board, and Reiner Heilmann, the Managing Director of the Sacher Hotel, last March Franz's present-day successor, Alfred Buxbaum, took me on a tour of his strictly off-limits bakery.

Franz Sacher, a sixteen-year-old apprentice chef in the home of the Austrian State Chancellor Prince Clement Wenzel von Metternich, created the first Sachertorte in 1832. The official story relates that the afternoon before an important banquet the head chef, who was supposed to invent a new sweet for that evening's high-ranking guests, fell ill. In spite of his overnight success, Franz did not become a confectioner, but one of the

greatest court chefs of all times. It is generally agreed that he is the father of "Viennese cuisine."

On March 15, 1999, the Sacher Hotel's Bakery moved off-premises. The advantage: more space and custom-designed equipment. "On average we produce between five hundred and eight hundred Sachertortes per day," said Mr. Buxbaum. The first professional pastry chef in his family, he started working at the Sacher Hotel at age nineteen in 1989 and has been the head pastry chef since 2003. "Sachertortes come in four standard sizes. The smallest called 'Piccolo' or small in Italian, is twelve centimeters in diameter, weighs four hundred grams and

serves four; the others are sixteen centimeters, seven hundred grams, and serves six; nineteen centimeters in diameter; weighing a kilo, and serving nine; twenty-two centimeters in diameter, weighing one-and-a-half kilos, and serves twelve."

"We make about three hundred fifty thousand every year," Buxbaum, who collects sunglasses and watches, continued. "Our busiest time of the year is Christmas, when we bake about three thousand cakes a day. Annually we use more than one million eggs, twenty-five tons of castor sugar, around seventy-five tons of icing sugar, sixty-four tons of apricot jam, twenty-three tons of butter, and twenty tons of flour. We use three types of chocolate, all preservative-free and handmade. As you can see, the dough is mixed in machines, but the rest is all hand-made, including the wooden boxes Sachertortes are packed by hand in."

Mr. Buxbaum's typical day begins at 6:00 a.m.; he lays out the day's ingredients and then informs his staff of their jobs for that day. Next he controls all the special orders, only private individuals, and never cafés or shops except at the Sacher Hotels and Cafés here, in Innsbruck, Graz, and Salzburg, and at the Vienna airport. Last on the agenda before his paperwork, Buxbaum and his team cover all the cakes with hot chocolate icing and then move on to doing traditional (chocolate seals), seasonal, or special-order decorations which include marzipan roses, Santa Claus, and Easter bunnies. In fact, on the day of my visit I watched as they decorated a Sachertorte with a diameter of eighty centimeters. It was a special order for a seventy-fifth birthday, but Sachertortes are most popular for weddings.

Beside the Sachertortes Mr. Buxbaum and his staff of twenty-one chefs bake four other cakes: the most traditional Viennese *Gewürzguglhupf* flavored with ginger and other spices; *Anna Sacher Schnitte*, a fluffy layered sponge cake with orange and hazelnut praline cream filling and a hint of Cointreau and covered in chocolate; a large chocolate-covered wafer *Sacher Eck*; and *Schokerkuchen*, a fudge cake with egg liquor.



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ABOVE: Alfred Buxbaum has worked at the Sacher Hotel since he was nineteen and has been the head pastry chef since 2003. **RIGHT:** A rack full of Sachertorte awaiting final decoration and packaging. Sachertorte can be delivered to any destination in the world in three to six business days.

Around a third of these mouth-watering sweets are exported to Germany, the United States, Switzerland, Italy, and Japan by DHL. Delivery time to any destination in the world is between three and six working days. For maximum freshness, Sachertortes should be stored at a temperature between sixteen and eighteen degrees Celsius (60.8 and 64.4 Fahrenheit). Once opened, they should be eaten within two weeks. The best way to enjoy them is with a cup of coffee topped with unsweetened whipped cream.

Try as I would to weasel the recipe out of sweet-tooth Mr. Buxbaum, he politely backed off saying: "Sorry, the recipe is top secret. It's kept in a safe at the Hotel. However, Alexandra Gürtler, in charge of the Hotel's marketing and sales and the daughter of Hotel's the present-day owner Elisabeth Gürtler; the cookbook author Christoph Wagner; and the Hotel's executive chef Hans Peter Fink included my simplified version in their cookbook, *The New Sacher Cookbook: Favorite Austrian Dishes*, published in 2005 and for sale on the Hotel's website."

Speaking of the Gürtlers and their



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family hospitality, soon after my return from the bakery, I met with Mrs. Gürtler, the extremely elegant present-day owner, who began by giving me a brief history of the Hotel. "Upon the death of Eduard Sacher," she said, "his eccentric cigar-smoking wife Anna, although the daughter of a butcher from Leopoldstadt, turned it into a favorite meeting place for the aristocracy including the Emperor Franz Josef himself. Sadly, Anna's charisma couldn't prevent the First World War and the downfall of the Austro-Hungary Empire. Anna Sacher died in 1930 believing that she was still a wealthy woman. She even generously left legacies to the Hotel's employees, but an accounting of her estate revealed that she had long been heavily in debt. The Hotel went into bankruptcy and was managed by the courts until it was put up for auction."

The hotel was bought by Mrs. Gürtler's deceased husband's grandfather Hans who was a very famous lawyer. His partner was a man named Siller, who ran coffee shops. They signed a contract: when one of them died, it was the right of the survivor's



LEFT and CENTER: Franz and Anna Sacher. Franz Sacher was the creator of the first Sachertorte. **RIGHT:** Elisabeth Gürtler, present owner of the Sacher Hotel.

family to buy out the deceased's share. At first Mr. Siller and his wife managed the food; Hans Gürtler the finances, and his wife, a very beautiful lady, guest relations. The Sillers had no children, so since their deaths, the hotel has belonged to the Gürtler family.

Peter Gürtler ran the Sacher for twenty years. At his death seventeen years ago, Mrs. Gürtler, a workaholic who, besides the Sacher, runs with her sister her father's world-famous grain and seed development business and who never takes vacations, took over. "Recently I've often been approached to open Sacher Café franchises in China, Japan, and Hong Kong," she said, "but I have to refuse. The essence of a Viennese café is that people stay a long time, must be left in peace, and only drink a cup of coffee and read newspapers. This means there's no turnaround on the chair so, if you have a very expensive rent, you won't be able to make money. This explains why we have only one franchise abroad: in Bolzano in Italy's South Tirol, part of Austria until after the First World War, a hotelier sells all our products."

Over the years, the Gürtlers have hosted many royals and VIPs, but two memories are still particularly vivid. "When the Beatles stayed here," Mrs. Gürtler said, "Yoko Ono and John Lennon held a press conference in

bed. Not to mention Leonard Bernstein [who] loved this painting hanging above us here. I always hung it in his room, which also had to have a grand piano. When my ex-husband, Peter Gürtler, married Reagan's ambassador to Austria in 1985, Bernstein, who was a staunch Democrat, refused to stay here anymore because Austrian-born Helene Van Damm, Reagan's personal secretary when he was governor of California, was a conservative Republican."

Speaking of paintings, the Sacher owns a collection of over one thousand paintings by nineteenth-century Austrian artists. "The collection began with Anna Sacher," Mrs. Gürtler explained, "because her brother studied with famous Austrian artists and she bought their works. My husband's grandfather and the Sillers also collected paintings and they all hung them in the hotel. I don't add new artists, but I try to buy works of artists we already own. Our largest number of paintings by one artist is seventeen by Aistauer. A contemporary of Anna Sacher, he lived in Salzburg and Vienna. His works hang in our elegant 'Anna Sacher' restaurant. You'll see that Aistauer was full of admiration for Cezanne until he developed his own style. Besides still lifes, he painted his family. He was very much in love with his wife."

To come full circle Mrs. Gürtler (who collects Sacher memorabilia and loves the Carinthian painters Boeckl and Kolig, Verdi, Donizetti, and Austrian operettas, red amaryllis, yogurt, and Austrian white wines, especially those from Styria) agreed that the Sacher's success and that of the other five-star family-run hotels was just that. "Family-run hotels," she said, "mean continuity, good service, the same style of decor throughout the hotel, and a softer, home-like atmosphere. Otherwise managers think they have the right to make refurbishments; in five years they're gone, and the new manager wants to make his own imprint and insists on his own changes. I decorate everything myself here because I stand for this. Decorating and designing fabrics are my passion. Sadly, hoteliers like me are a dying breed, although I'm confident Alexandra and her brother Georg, who is in-charge of personnel, have inherited my perfectionism."

Sacher products can be ordered by e-mail: wien@sacher.com or from the website shop: www.sacher.com. **GL**

Lucy Gordan is a regular contributor to Bookdealer, Renaissance, Epicurean Traveler, Food & Beverage International, and La Madia, an Italian food and travel monthly.