

From “root bunker” to gourmet temple

or how the world's oldest vegetarian restaurant came to be located in Zurich.

The 1st Generation

Ambrosius Hiltl (1877-1969) loved beauty – nature, the opera, fine paintings, furniture, clothes and travel. He was also a flexible man with an entrepreneurial spirit, self-confidence and a willingness to take risks. He grew up as the son of a small farmer in Neumarkt, Bavaria and learned a craft, because in those days craftsmen could earn good money wherever they went. As a journeyman tailor he travelled widely, as part of his general education as a craftsman, and was supported by the Tailors Guild with a 5 pence per mile travel allowance. Ambrosius Hiltl's wanderings led him several times into Switzerland and with needle, thread, scissors and thimble he earned his living in Basel, the Jura, Geneva, Liestal, Herisau and Interlaken until he settled in Zurich at the age of 20, in autumn 1897.



In 1898 the "Vegetarierheim and Abstinence-Café" opened in Zurich. However it met with little success due to mismanagement, and also because vegetarians were ridiculed at the time. Moreover, it was hard to find suitable kitchen staff. Then in 1901 Ambrosius Hiltl became ill with rheumatism. His doctor predicted an early death if he did not immediately change his diet and completely give up meat. In those days, tasty and varied meatless meals were not easy for an unmarried tailor to organize, and so Hiltl visited the "Vegetarierheim". The Sunday roast was at that time considered the height of culinary art, but Hiltl observed that at the "Vegetarierheim", they could create something very special without meat. Vegetarians were then derided as "herbivores" and the "Vegetarierheim" was laughingly nicknamed "the root bunker", with some guests preferring to visit the place through the back door. Nevertheless, Ambrosius Hiltl was impressed by the vegetarian diet, and above all it led him to an amazingly rapid recovery.

Hiltl-Front around 1898

Therefore he did not require much persuasion, when in 1903 a replacement for the ailing manager was sought. What a challenge for a tailor from Neumarkt! The daily turnover in the "Vegetarierheim" at the time was around 35 francs - and from that, the staff had to be paid (two kitchen maids, a waitress and a cook). The cook, Martha Gneupel, grew up in a strictly vegetarian family in Saxony and ran the kitchen as well as helping with the service. Thanks to increasing sales, Ambrosius Hiltl took over the whole operation in 1904. Shortly afterwards he married Martha Gneupel and they had two sons and a daughter.

In 1907 Ambrosius Hiltl bought the building at 28 Sihlstrasse. His astonished friends asked why he had bought a property outside the city, as the area between Bahnhofstrasse and Sihlstrasse was then a small forest, and opposite the building were an old cemetery and St. Anna's Chapel.



Ambrosius Hiltl and Martha Hiltl-Gneupel

In 1909, the Hiltl family was granted citizenship of Zurich, and in 1925 the restaurant was redesigned. Interestingly, almost coincident with Hiltl's discovery of vegetarian cuisine, Dr. Max Bircher-Benner opened his Zurichberg clinic to cure his patients with a meatless diet. Hiltl and Bircher-Benner were not zealots, but understood food in the context of lifestyle and culture, rather than as something separate. So, Ambrosius Hiltl was no moral crusader. This is testified to by Dr. Ralph Bircher, the son of Max Bircher-Benner, who wrote for the celebration of Ambrosius Hiltl's 90th birthday: "There stands the ninety year-old pioneer of vegetarian hospitality, Ambrosius Hiltl, and he is the exact opposite of the stereotype – robust, vital and jovial as hardly anyone of his age, a successful man of the world, and anything but a pale, narrow-chested, and humorless nerd." Heinz Hiltl recalls, "My grandfather was a cosmopolitan man with wide interests. He loved to travel and often mingled with the guests. He knew how to create an atmosphere in which artists, politicians and intellectuals felt comfortable and inspired." This tradition has been preserved, and to this day prominent people of all stripes can be encountered in the restaurant on the Sihlstrasse.

The 2nd Generation

On the restaurant's twentieth birthday in 1926, Margrith Rubli arrived as a service employee. On the occasion of her eightieth birthday, she recalled the working conditions of that time:

"We worked from 7 o'clock in the morning until 9.30 in the evening, with a one-hour break. We had half a day per week free, and the monthly wage was 60 francs plus room and board. We had five days holiday in the year, and even though a coffee crème cost only 25 cents, we couldn't take extravagant trips." In 1931, the restaurant was rebuilt and extended up to the first floor. Leonhard Hiltl, son of Ambrosius Hiltl and later husband of Margrith Rubli, drew up the plans for the renovation. He actually wanted to become an architect, but for the sake of the family business trained to be a confectioner. Due to his initiative, that same year also saw the establishment of the first all-electric kitchen in Zurich - a sensation that made the headlines not only in Swiss professional circles.

At the same time, his brother Walter joined as a chef, eventually working in the business for 40 consecutive years. Cooking was mainly done according to the recipes of mother Martha Hiltl.



Zurich's first fully electric kitchen, 1931

Vegetarians were still regarded with skepticism in those days, and even derided as crackpots. The feeling of the times was that "he who ate no meat was not a real man." In 1933, Leonhard Hiltl married the service employee Margrith Rubli, and together they led the vegetarian restaurant with great dedication. In 1951, Margrith Hiltl travelled as official delegate of Switzerland to the World Vegetarian Congress in Delhi. At that time the traditional choice of vegetarian food in Swiss gastronomy was generally poor - hash browns or vegetable dishes were served as the same old alternatives to meat. With Margrith Hiltl able to advise foreign guests, it was no surprise that this created friendly relations. Indian guests returned time and again to Hiltl, which for them was a culinary oasis. From her friends and contacts in India, Margrith Hiltl had learned much about the fascinating and diverse Indian cuisine. Inspired, full of enthusiasm and with countless spices and recipes, she came back to Zurich. What was more natural than to put her discoveries into action? Hiltl guests should also be able to order Indian dishes, she decided. For Margrith Hiltl this meant a welcome addition and extension of the kitchen. However, curry, coriander, turmeric, cardamom and jeera were not so easy to find in Zurich in the 1950s.



The Indian premier- and finance minister Morarji Desai with Margrith Hiltl

Therefore, Indian friends brought the exotic spices and ingredients with them on their trips to Switzerland. But when Margrith presented her ideas to the kitchen staff, their response to the Indian dishes was not positive. No one would eat such foreign stuff, they mocked, and simply refused to cook it! But this didn't deter Margrith Hiltl, and she prepared the Indian dishes in her private kitchen on the second floor of the Hiltl restaurant until one of the cooks took over their preparation. At that time Indian dishes were cooked only to order, but as more and more Indian guests came to Hiltl, and when Swissair requested if they could provide food for Indian passengers, all skepticism finally dissipated among the employees. When Leonhard Hiltl died in 1959 at the age of only 53, Margrith Hiltl took over management. She was actively supported by her son Heinz. "From then on, the restaurant became like a replacement family for my mother. And for the employees, she was like a mother", recalled Heinz Hiltl. Even at the age of eighty, Margrith remained interested in the daily business of the restaurant. "But she always let me run things and didn't interfere in my management, and for that I am grateful," affirmed the son.

The 3rd Generation

After the early death of his father it fell to the barely twenty-two year old Heinz to support his mother in the business, immediately upon completing hotel training school. Thus, further years of hotel apprenticeship remained wishful thinking for Heinz Hiltl.

Interesting parallel: Heinz wanted to know – just like his son Rolf would thirty years later – with whom, when and why did vegetarian food become a preference. The study done at that time found among other things that younger people - especially women under 30 - are most willing to change their dietary habits. Still young himself, Heinz Hiltl was convinced he could attract a younger clientele if they were prepared to drop their ideological baggage. In the years 1968 and 1969 Heinz Hiltl attended the first seminars offered by the Swiss Hotel Association. "It was tremendously exciting and I met lots of interesting people. The seminar inspired me incredibly, and I was full of enthusiasm!" he said.

The city had expanded more and more in recent decades, and though once located on the outskirts the restaurant was now in the centre. Guests came from all directions, but many also worked in nearby office buildings. This was reason enough for Heinz Hiltl to implement his visions: In 1973, after a spectacular renovation, he opened the new "Hiltl Vegi". "It wasn't so easy for me to withdraw into second place and make room for my son. When Rolf came into our business, I was just 53 ", recalled Heinz Hiltl (1937-2001), regarding the handover of operations to his son Rolf. And he can be taken at his word - he continued to make many innovative suggestions. But he also knew that his son should be allowed to take centre stage with no distractions: "If one has a successor charging forward, then one must not slow him down as this can dissipate all power."



Hanni and Heinz Hiltl



Especially attractive and new for Zurich's dining scene were the salad bar, the takeaway and a wide range of freshly squeezed juices. The "Indian Tea and Ravaya Corner" on the first floor was a tribute from Heinz Hiltl to his mother, who defied all odds and introduced Indian dishes into Hiltl. Though at first only successful with Indian guests visiting Zurich, Indian cuisine later became popular with the domestic clientele. The Hiltl Vegi had become a restaurant that was no different from other restaurants, except that it served only vegetarian dishes and was a little bit ahead of its time. "I deliberately avoided going for maximum profits and decided on profit optimization, repeatedly looking at my personal and family goals and my responsibility to God in the way I was able to make use of my employees. Because business success was only part of my personal life goal", said Heinz Hiltl as he later took stock. As someone who cared not only about his own affairs, Heinz Hiltl was also actively involved in various committees and hospitality organizations. "These commitments cost me some time, but again and again they gave me new impetus, and I got to know a lot of people in the industry."

The 4th Generation

The family restaurant had always interested Rolf Hiltl (born 1965), although even as a youngster he never wanted to take the easy and direct route into his father's business. He apprenticed as a chef at Zürich's Grand Hotel Dolder, learning the fine French cuisine of veteran Escoffier, including the preparation of meat courses. Then came the Hotel Management School in Lausanne, followed by stints in San Francisco, Acapulco and Paris. Rolf Hiltl was full of plans, and wanted to open his own restaurant and bar in San Francisco. But he could also see that the still-popular Hiltl Vegi on Sihlstrasse could use some new ideas and a breath of fresh air.

His father Heinz had shocked the professional world at the beginning of the 1970s with his radical conversion of Hiltl Vegi, and wanted to make new plans only with his successors. His daughter Sonja was a kindergarten teacher, but his son Rolf canceled international plans. "I think my father had trouble with me sometimes, because I like to constantly change things and try new ideas," he grins. "But with us Swiss, everything takes so long." Rolf Hiltl's motto is more American: "Trial and error" – ie try and constantly improve. Actually, the great-grandson of founder Ambrosius Hiltl could rely on his intuition: A 1990 study confirmed his feeling that the image of vegetarianism had changed fundamentally. Instead of being seen as heroic renunciation or the denial of pleasure, eating little or no meat had become very "in". But a meatless diet is neither joyless nor boring - on the contrary: The modern part-time vegetarian is a foodie who combines healthy eating with enjoyment. And this new culinary trend was fully supported by Hiltl's fresh approach. Rolf Hiltl's decisive influence on the restaurant's 1993 remodeling broke with a tradition from its founding period: In the spirit of "healthy pleasure" even alcohol would be served on the premises.

On 1 January 1998 - one hundred years after the founding of the oldest vegetarian restaurant in the world - Rolf Hiltl took over operations and therefore full responsibility from his parents. At that time he probably couldn't imagine how quickly meatless cuisine would grow in popularity. Accordingly, increasing numbers of requests came from home and abroad for more Hiltl enterprises. In 2000, with the help of partners the Frey brothers, the first "tibits by Hiltl" opened in Zurich, by the Opera. There are now seven 'tibits' in Switzerland (Zurich, Winterthur, Bern, Basel and Lucerne), all enjoying great popularity (www.tibits.ch). In addition, in 2007 a first branch abroad was opened in London.

This is how since 1898 and into the future, the Hiltl restaurant on Zürich's Sihlstrasse is personally managed by the Hiltl family. Thanks to constant high demand, Rolf Hiltl has continuously expanded the parent company with various other developments. In spring 2007 Hiltl was reopened after a year of rebuilding and an interlude in temporary premises at Paradeplatz. Since then, guests are invited for Hiltl's "healthy enjoyment" from early morning until late into the night with a self-service takeaway, a bar-lounge and a club.

In subsequent years Hiltl has further expanded, with an à la carte section, seminar rooms since 1898 and the Hiltl Store with the first Vegi Butchery of Switzerland. Since October 2015 the Hiltl Academy is located on the 5th floor of Haus Hiltl. Outside the parent company, homemade specialties are also available at Hiltl Dachterrasse on the 3rd floor of the PKZ women shop on Bahnhofstrasse, Hiltl Sihlpost at Europaallee next to Zurich's main station, from Hiltl catering at event venues and at the unique takeaway location in the heart of Zurich, Pflanzbar at Blumen Krämer. In addition, during the summer months two restaurants on Lake Zurich (Lido Mythenquai and Kilchberg) are open. In September 2017, another Hiltl restaurant at Langstrasse with a Club in the basement opened.



And the next expansion? It's written in the stars, but with Marielle and Rolf Hiltl's three children Céline, Lena and Téo, the possibility of a Hiltl fifth generation remains quite intact.