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The Epicurean Traveler in Munich: Part Four

# ALFONS SCHUHBECK

CELEBRITY CHEF, RESTAURATEUR,  
AUTHOR, AND BUSINESSMAN

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*While playing with his band in the Bavarian holiday resort of Waging am See, Alfons Karg first met the restaurateur Sebastian Schuhbeck, owner of the country inn "Kurhausstüberl" there, who first encouraged him to become a chef and later adopted him and made him his heir.*

*After graduating from the College of Hotel Management in Bad Reichenhall, Alfons trained at the Munich famous cafés/restaurants/caterers Feinkost Käfer and Dallmayr and then at Witzigmann's "Aubergine" with three Michelin stars before returning to the "Kurhausstüberl" which he took over from his mentor in 1980. In 1983 he was awarded his first Michelin star, only the third chef outside France to have achieved this at that time. Six years later Gault Millau elected him "Chef of the Year."*

*In 2003 he opened a new restaurant, the "Südtiroler Stuben" in Munich. There that same year he won his second Michelin star which he still maintains today. In November*

2005 he was awarded with the Five Star Diamond Award by the American Academy of Hospitality Sciences.

Since 1993 the German TV-station Bayerischer Rundfunk broadcasts his show "Schuhbecks." This plus his more than 20 published cookbooks and guest appearances on other German TV shows have made Schuhbeck probably the best-known top chef in Germany.

At the end of the 1990s he set up "Schuhbecks GmbH." This company now includes the restaurant Südtiroler Stuben, a wine bistro, a catering service, a cookery school, a spice shop, and an ice-cream parlor; almost all located at Am Platzl, just of the city's main square Marienplatz. Schuhbeck Check Inn GmbH was established in 2001 to manage the "Check Inn Restaurant and Bar" in Egelsbach (south Hesse).



**Our tastes in food are closely connected to our childhood; what are your first memories of food?**

**AS:** I grew up in post-war Germany and there was very little food to be had. We had to make due. My brother, who is five years younger than me but a nice guy, and I were very lucky to have a mother who didn't work outside of the home. We lived in the country and so were lucky to have a vegetable garden. She made bread and canned the vegetables for the winter. She had to cook everyday at home. My favorites were her fried potatoes, her vegetable dishes, and homemade bread.

**You were trained and worked as a communications technician, exactly what does that mean?**

**AS:** Setting up telecommunications, telephones, but I wasn't very talented in that field so that's why I decided to pursue another profession.

**You met restaurateur Sebastian Schuhbeck while you were on holiday playing with your band in the Bavarian holiday resort of Waging am See; how old were you? What musical instrument do you play?**

**AS:** I played the guitar like everyone between the ages of ten and sixteen. I was 17 or 18 when I met Mr. Schuhbeck, who told me that, if I felt I had no talent in telecommunications, why didn't I consider going to hotel school to learn how to cook. Mr. Schuhbeck was the first entrepreneur that I got to know. He was also the mayor.

**How did he convince you to change careers? He was your adoptive father and your mentor; what did you learn from him?**

**AS:** He encouraged me and sent me to the *College of Hotel Management Bad Reichenhall* here in Bavaria. He broadened my horizon in a fundamental way. From him I learned what it means to be responsible for your property and for your employees as well as for the welfare of your community.

**After graduating from the College of Hotel Management Bad Reichenhall in Bavaria, you did practical training in Salzburg, Geneva, Paris, and London; can you tell me where?**

**AS:** At the five-star *Hotel Salzburger Hof in Salzburg*, at *Mövenpick* in Geneva, at the *Berlin Room* in Knightsbridge, London, at *Feinkost Käfer* and the *Dallmayr Kafè* here in Munich, and at *Walterspiel* in the Black Forest.



**You also worked with Eckart Witzigmann, known as “Chef of the Century” and certainly one of the greatest living chefs, at his three Michelin-starred restaurant here in Munich *Aubergine*. What did you learn from him?**

**AS:** I worked at *Aubergine* with Hans Haas and Johann Lafer. We were all young then. Witzigmann was a genius. He taught me to respect fresh produce and to create dishes in an imaginative and artistic style inspired by strong emotions. It was also of the utmost importance to cook the foods at the correct temperature to leave in all the vitamins and bring out the true flavors. For example, if you cook meat at too hot a temperature all its pores will close and it will dry up.

**What are the essential qualities of a top chef?**

**AS:** To respect all your ingredients. To cook the best quality foods with imagination and at the right temperature for the right amount of time so the dish will turn out at its best. These are the key qualities. Spices are also fundamental, which ones to put in a dish, how much, and at what point to add them to a dish. If you have ten different cooks all cooking the same dish but adding spices at different time, in the end each dish will have a different taste.

**Did you ever think of hosting a blind tasting to see if you could recognize, say, your own dish, one of Witzigmann’s, of Haas’s?**

**AS:** Yes, with every great chef you can recognize his personal style in how he composes a dish. You can easily taste his very individual way of seasoning a dish. It’s true even if Witzigmann has not had a restaurant for a long time now so his style might have changed. In the past his dishes were very distinct and had a clear line. So did Haas’s when we worked together. Twenty years ago we used butter and fresh cream in our sauces, now it’s different. We do not use so much oil or fat. We make lighter dishes.

**What do you like best about your work?**

**AS:** The creativity, the final polishing, that I cook differently in the morning from the evening, because, depending on the time of day, I have different goals to meet. I like to

combine my very special fresh ingredients in an innovative and delicious way. You could say the different tastes have to like and enhance each other. I have to be careful not to choose spices that work against each other. I like best being able to invent a new dish every day. Yes, the creativity.

**The least?**

**AS:** When I was young peeling potatoes, now maybe the paperwork.

**What's your culinary philosophy?**

**AS:** Use seasonal ingredients; cook according to the four seasons.



**In a nutshell, how would you define your cuisine?**

**AS:** Regional German cuisine looking towards the sun and the south.

**What are your signature dish and other specialties?**

**AS:** Boeuf à la mode cooked very slowly until it's very soft and I can add a splash of wine and cognac as well as fresh German fish dishes.

**At the end of the 1990s you set up Schuhbecks GmbH, which now includes your restaurant Südtiroler Stuben, a wine bistro, your catering service, a cookery school, a spice shop, and an ice-cream parlor, all in Munich. Schuhbeck Check Inn GmbH was formed in 2001 to manage the Check Inn Restaurant and Bar in Egelsbach (south Hesse); how do you divide your time between all these activities plus your writing and television appearances?**



Venison with stuffed zucchini flower (the flower is filled with javelins, foie gras and bread crumbs)  
photo by Lucy Gordan

**AS:** Of course I have a competent staff but I'm the overall manager of all my activities.

**What do you believe is the reason for your success?**

**AS:** Probably because I went up the stairs and not the escalator or elevator to know each step of the trade. I add a new business every year.

**Up to now you've told me about Alfons Schuhbeck the chef; I'd like to know more about Alfons Schuhbeck himself. For example, what are your favorite foods?**

**AS:** Fresh foods that keep my body and mind in shape. I have to be at my best every day to prepare the best food in the best way for my guests so I must eat accordingly. I like all foods, but I have to watch the amount I eat to keep in shape. I avoid eating sweets because I don't have much time to exercise. I'm known for working out every night at one o'clock in the morning. I have a personal trainer. I drive every night for 45 kilometers to a suburb of Munich where I meet up with my personal trainer at a gym where I bicycle, lift weights. I should sleep six hours a night but I sleep only four or five.



Iced pancake with rum fruit

photo by Lucy Gordan

**A dish you dislike?**

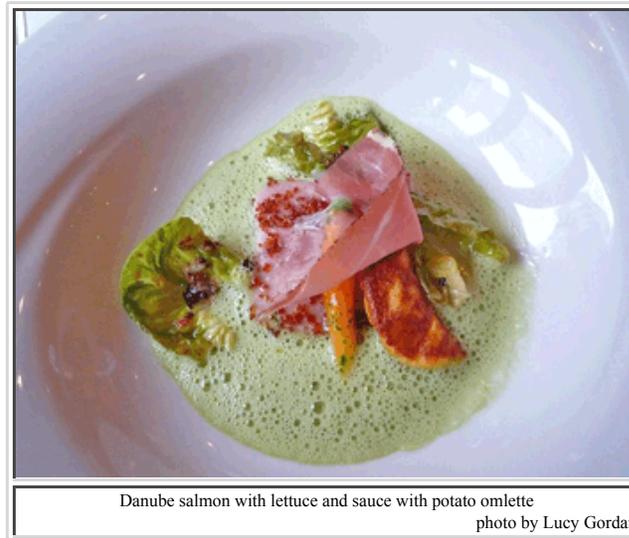
**AS:** I dislike fusions—combinations that don't make sense; for example a *loup de mer* with a sauce of rhubarb and caviar. I'm also not a sweet tooth. I've never finished a whole piece of cake in my entire life and the amount of chocolate I've eaten wouldn't add up to even one bar.

**Your favorite wines?**

**AS:** French wines used to be considered the best and the only ones to drink. Now there are good wines from many countries: Italy, Spain, Germany, Austria, the United States, Chile, and Australia. I try wines from everywhere. When I travel, I drink the wine of the country I'm in.

**Do you think the best German food is Bavarian?**

**AS:** Let's say that the food all over Germany has greatly improved recently. Fifty years ago German food was very heavy: pork, sausages, meatballs. Now it's changed completely. It's improved enormously. Our German cooks have trained outside Germany, in Italy, in France... It's important for young chefs to train abroad no matter what their nationality. Good food depends both on good ingredients and on the chef's talent of course. You don't need to have a huge long menu, but whatever you do present to your guests has to be cooked well and with passion.



Danube salmon with lettuce and sauce with potato omlette  
photo by Lucy Gordan

### Another cuisine you like?

**AS:** I respect every cuisine for its ingredients and historical background. Apart from Bavarian cuisine I like other multifaceted regional cuisines. I'm fascinated by the purism of Japanese cuisine and the refined cooking techniques of the Chinese. Greek cuisine is not very varied and sometimes Italian cuisine is too hot and spicy for my taste. Yet I admire Italian cuisine for its closeness to nature and its unpretentious approach. I'm a big fan of what

is called *cucina casalinga* or Italian home cooking.

### Where do you like to go on vacation?

**AS:** I haven't taken a vacation in the last thirty years, but when I travel for work, I sometimes add a day or so on to look around. Now wherever I go, I look at things more intensely, with more care. In the past I was more superficial.

### Chefs are well-known for having collections, often of motorcycles, fast cars, or watches; what about you?

**AS:** Old cookbooks.

### You have published over twenty cookbooks; are you writing a book now? If so, its title and publication date?

**AS:** My latest cookbook was the one about spices: *Meine Küche der Gewürze* published in 2009. It sold over 320,000 copies in three months in Germany. Only one of my cookbooks has been



Lemon roast chicken with celery and buttermilk mousse (the chicken was marinated in buttermilk, lemon and allspice).

photo by Lucy Gordan

translated into English: *My Bavarian Cookbook* (2007). The text of another one: *The Dish of the Day* (2005) was published side by side in German and English. I am particularly careful to make sure that my recipes can travel, that they can be reproduced in other countries. I only translate the recipes that also work outside Germany and Austria.

I am finishing another book *Meine Küchengeheimnisse* or *My Secrets of My Cuisine* which will be published next September.

### You've written a cookbook of Italian dishes. Why did you a German write a cookbook on Italian cuisine. What are your favorite Italian dishes?

**AS:** It was never my intention to add to Italian cuisine from a German point of view. This cookbook was the result of a TV program where I presented the different regional cuisines of Italy and adapted them for an audience of German food lovers. I'm particularly fond of fish and seafood dishes that Italian chefs come up with at the seaside. I also love a savory *bistecca fiorentina* as well as the very refined pasta dishes of Nadia Santini who knows how to make the silkiest ravioli.

**In 1983 you were awarded your first star by Michelin, only the third chef outside France to have a Michelin at that time? Who were the other two?**

**AS:** I don't remember who they were; it's a long time ago.

**Your feelings about food critics and restaurant guides; have they been helpful to you or do they add stress?**

**AS:** If you compare being a chef to a soccer star, many people don't reach the top leagues. If, like me, you do, you must be ready to accept criticism. Other people's judgments of my cooking skills are inspiration for me.



Tuna on celery-ginger salad

photo by Lucy Gordan

**Other chefs besides your father Sebastian Schuhbeck and Witzigmann you admire?**

**AS:** I know Paul Bocuse very well and admire him very much, Dieter Müller, André Jäger, Nadia Santini, and Heinz Winkler. Like Witzigmann, Winkler also had the courage as a young person to make himself independent. As for me, Witzigmann put his stamp on me; I'm one of his most loyal disciples. He is a very good friend. Of course I admire Hans Haas too and many other chefs who like us worked with Witzigmann. We were all young then and became friends.

Younger chefs I admire include Harald Wohlfahrt and Jörg Muller, but I don't know them as well as the chefs of my generation or older. They are not personal friends. The same is true of foreign chefs. I know of them, but don't have close personal contact. A serious chef must stay at home and cook.

**Would you like to be like Alain Ducasse and Thomas Keller with restaurants in many different places or even in many different countries?**

**AS:** No, it's too complicated. I'm too busy anyway because of my new passion for spices and all my other activities.

**How did you become so interested in spices?**

**AS:** I always had a talent for mixing spices and always wanted to own a spice shop. I went to New York, to London, to Madrid, looking for a spice shop to imitate and couldn't find one so I started my own in Munich. So far I have had three; each bigger than the one before. My present spice shop is 600 square meters.

**I'm doing this interview for an Italian monthly; your favorite chefs in Italy?**

**AS:** As I've said Nadia Santini, and Gualtiero Marchesi and Heinz Beck, but they are far away.

**If they hadn't become chefs, Heinz Beck told me he had wanted to be a painter; Marchesi a pianist; Thomas Keller the short-stop for the New York Yankees. What about you?**

**AS:** As you know I have already changed professions. When I was a child, I didn't really know what I wanted to be. As a teenager, I knew I wanted to do something involving people so that's why I went to hotel school. Mr. Schuhbeck noticed that I had a passion for cooking, but he knew from personal experience that to be a good professional I would have to learn other aspects of the profession, specifically management and finance. Now 150 people work for me.

As for another profession it would have to have been something equally creative to being a chef. Perhaps a musician as I wasn't bad as a guitar player. Luckily, once I became a chef, I never had to look for an alternative.

**Of all your many activities, which is your favorite?**

**AS:** The spice shop.

**Is that because it's the newest?**

**AS:** No, as a cook I've used spices for over 40 years, but to mix them, and give advice to clients and sell spices to them, is very different and special. People have been using spices for over five thousand years.

They are very important to good health, not only because they taste good, but to help you to live well. Ginger is my favorite; it's a team player. It is very healthy, good for the heart and the liver, a remedy against headaches. Don't forget that spices must also work well together if you mix them. You must know how to mix them properly. Anyone can open a spice shop and sell each spice separately, but a really professional seller must know which ones to mix or not to mix together. For example coriander and cloves speak two different languages, but when mixed together, they form a perfect harmony.

**So what mixes well with ginger?**

**AS:** All spices. It gives the perfect balance to a dish because it can go either sweet or salty.

**So you also enjoy the history of spices?**

**AS:** Yes, in ancient times the medical doctors studied and combined spices as remedies for different diseases or pathologies. We know this from the spices we found in ancient Egyptian mummy cases and other ancient tombs. For example, cardamom is very good for stimulating the brain cells and memory.

**Do you like to go to spice markets? Where do you get your spices?**

**AS:** Everywhere in the world. Marrakesh, Zanzibar, India, Istanbul. There are hardly any spice markets left in the world that I haven't visited. My special interest is not in the individual spice, but which ones in which place the dealers mix together and why. What colors: the yellows from kummel, the green of cardamom, the black of peppers, the red of chili or coriander. The beautiful reds and yellows always catch my eye first.

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