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## TANJA GRANDITS:

SWISS CHEF OF THE YEAR 2006

*Housed in a villa of the elegant suburb of Bruderholz on the top of a hill overlooking Basel, Tanja and René Graf Grandits's peaceful and understated restaurant, Stucki, has one Michelin star and 17 Gault Millau points. Here, thanks to the generosity of Basel Tourismus, soft-spoken, ingenious Ms. Grandits, mother of five-year-old Emma, discussed her love of cooking with Lucy Gordan, Epicurean-Traveler.com's Rome Bureau Chief.*

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

**TG:** In my grandmother's kitchen. When I was little, we lived three-generations in a big farmhouse. My grandmother always cooked for all of us. She cooked very simple Swabian dishes (I'm from Germany). I particularly loved her apple dishes: her pies and apple sauce which we ate with pancakes. We had a very big orchard with many different kinds of apples. I really loved her apple pies. She always put a lot of cinnamon inside.

**Where were you born in Germany?**

**TG:** I was born near Tübingen, not far from Stuttgart, but my father was Austrian from Styria in the southeast, famous for meat and nice wine. My mother was German.

**Why did you decide to become a chef?**

**TG:** Even when I was a young teenager I loved to eat and I loved to cook. When I finished school, however, everyone said: "No, you shouldn't be a chef because it's too hard and because you're a woman. You'll never have an evening off, no weekends." So I listened, obeyed, and studied chemistry, but only for one year because I quit. I decided to take time off so I went to California to be an au-pair girl for six months. As an au-pair I had to cook everyday so that helped me to decide that, yes, I really wanted to be a chef for the rest of my life. I came back to Germany; I was 23. So I was quite old when I started my apprenticeship, but it was in a very nice place: at "Traube Tonbach," in the Black Forest, with the best chef in Germany, Mr. Harald Wohlfahrt. I was there for 2½ years before I went to Claridge's in London for 1½ years and to the south of France to



René Graf Grandits & Tanja Grandits



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Bagnols-sur Cèze, 20 miles from Avignon, and worked at the Château de Montcaud.

**Are there other professional chefs in your family?**

**TG:** No.

**Who were your mentors and what did you learn from them?**

**TG:** Mr. Wohlfahrt, kind of. I didn't usually work directly under him because the apprentices worked in the hotel kitchen and in its à-la-carte restaurant called

Köhlerstube. I didn't really have a mentor because I was quite old when I started to cook professionally. When I started my apprenticeship at Traube Tonbach, I was older than the head chef in the kitchen who was only 22. I already knew a lot because I'd already read every cookbook I could get my hands on. I didn't really learn during my apprenticeship because I had to make breakfast for 1½ years. It wasn't very interesting, but I've always loved to go to very nice restaurants, to see all the different foods in the world, and to travel, looking into kitchens and talking to chefs. Everything I knew and still know, I learned by myself, from experience.

When I was at Claridge's, it was more interesting, but also there it was very, very hard work. I was the only woman in the kitchen except the pastry chef. It's very hard work to cook for banquets up to 800 people, for up to 18 to 19 hours every day. There was no air-conditioning. The workplace had bad, bad, bad conditions. I liked it anyway. When I was in London, I learned things from people from all over the world and by going to market and cooking the staff food. All this to explain to you that I never had a mentor!

**What are the essential qualities for becoming a top chef?**

**TG:** To love cooking. You must have this passion; it needs to compensate for the long hours and very demanding work in the kitchen. You must be a perfectionist. You need to have excellent skills. These are the basics. Then you can start, but you need to find your own style and establish a good team.

**How would you define your style?**

**TG:** Aromatic. I call it "Aroma Kitchen." It's a very colorful cuisine. I love colors. I love spices. I love herbs. It's a very fresh, very light menu with spices from all over the world.



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

**TG:** So many things! I love to create new dishes. I love to work with my team because I really have a very nice team. We are like a little family. We enjoy a very good atmosphere in the workplace. I'm pleased that people are happy to work here. I also like to talk to my guests. I like to come out of the kitchen every evening and ask my guests

“how did you like your food?” I like to write cookbooks. Recently I’ve started to make products for a gourmet shop in Switzerland. Every year a different chef makes products for the store for a customers’ Christmas menu. This year it was my turn and I made 14 products, two or three for each course, but you could buy each separately.



#### **What do you like the least?**

**TG:** I don’t like to order for the restaurant, deal with the suppliers. I’m lucky because my sous-chef does that for me. I don’t mind the long hours that most chefs complain about. My husband, René Graf Grandits, is Swiss from St. Gallen. He’s a chef too. When we first moved here, he too worked with me in the kitchen and someone else was in charge of the dining room. That didn’t work out so he decided to move from the kitchen. Now he’s the host, so he has even longer hours. He has to wait until everyone is gone and close-up. We work together but it’s not like work; it’s our life. We even live here above the restaurant. We started to work together near Avignon in France at the Château de Montcaud twelve years ago.

#### **So why did you come to Basel?**

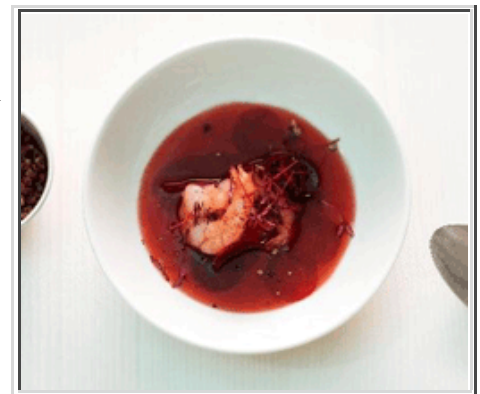
**TG:** Before coming here 2½ years ago we were in the canton of Thurgau, in a very quiet village of only 200 people and 2,000 cows, in the northeast of Switzerland. We had a very small restaurant in the countryside. It was very nice and we were very successful there for 7½ years but then we decided we wanted to do something else, something bigger, and in a city. Thurgau for me was very boring because I had no professional interaction. All my inspiration had to come from my inner self. There were no shops or good markets nearby. Then Stucki was advertised in the newspaper for rent and we thought we’d give it a try. We had to make a quick decision. We moved and reopened the restaurant in less than two months. The name of this restaurant was “Bruderholz” like this suburb’s name, but everybody has always called it “Stucki.” Hans Stucki started this place and everyone loved him very much. He created many gourmet foods which developed into his own brand and were sold in gourmet shops. He died 11 years ago.

#### **What’s your culinary philosophy?**

**TG:** To have my own style and to prepare food that makes people happy, that makes people feel good, gives them a sense of well-being for the mind, body, and soul. The philosophy of our restaurant is to make people feel very welcome in a nice atmosphere. To transmit my love for good food and for its preparation!

#### **What are your signature dishes and other specialties?**

**TG:** I don’t have signature dishes because we change the menu every six or seven weeks. As I say on my website: “‘Aroma Kitchen’ only works when tastes harmonize with each other perfectly, but also when contrasting flavors and textures, such as crispy and creamy, or juicy and spicy, meet in the mouth.” The special things about my dishes are that I serve a lot of raw foods; every dish has one



raw ingredient, maybe a fruit sauce, maybe marinated cubes, some raw vegetables in ribbons... For the texture I like to bite on something crunchy. I like a sour flavor. Every dish of mine has something sour. Every dish has a predominant spice and a predominant color. I don't like to mix colors in one dish. The menu is built around colors. A perfect combination of colors and spices is an expression of pure joy on a plate. Tonight the starters are yellow; the soup is green; the fish is orange; the main course, which is venison, is dark red. In autumn and winter the dishes are more orange, brown, and red. In spring and summer the main color is green.



**Switzerland has long been famous for its hotel management schools and its hoteliers, you were voted Swiss Chef of the Year 2006, what are the reasons for your success?**

**TG:** My hard work, my determination, my excellent staff, a very supportive husband. People often ask him how he can stand it that his wife is always the center of attention and that he is always in second place. He was a chef for 23 years; he doesn't want to return to the kitchen. I always say that if the husband is successful, nobody asks his wife how she feels about it. He and my whole team of 22 always support me. I think they are the reason for my success but also for theirs.

**Other Swiss chefs that you admire and why?**

**TG:** Andreas Caminada. He was just awarded his third Michelin star. He has 19 Gault Millau points. His restaurant is "Schloss Schauenstein" in Fürstenu near Chur, the capital of the canton of Graubünden in northeastern Switzerland. He was Swiss Chef of the Year 2008.

**Other non-Swiss chefs that you admire and why?**

**TG:** I like Thomas Keller very much. He is so relaxed and approachable. I went to "Per Se" in New York last month.

**Have you been to "The French Laundry"?**

**TG:** Yes, but years ago.

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

**TG:** Yes, they have been helpful, but for me their judgments are not the most important aspect. For me it's more important than points and stars that my customers, my guests like my food and that the restaurant does well. I've never had a problem, though, with food critics.



**Up to now we have talked about Tanja Grandits the professional chef; I'd like to know more about Tanja Grandits herself. For example, what's your favorite food?**

**TG:** I love sushi and pasta *ai frutti di mare*. I prefer very simple, plain dishes, but the

ingredients must always be fresh. I like healthy foods.

**Your favorite wines?**

**TG:** I prefer white wines, rosé champagnes. Sometimes I accompany my whole meal with champagnes. I really like that. I like Swiss white wines. There are a lot of nice ones.

**A dish you don't like?**

**TG:** Sausages. I don't like mixed ingredients. I don't like the taste of sausages. I don't eat much pork.



**What about innards, tripe, for instance?**

**TG:** I try everything, but would never order innards.

**Male chefs are known for having collections, in particular fast cars, motorcycles, and watches? Of the women chefs I've interviewed Daniela Kramari? in Istria told me shoes; Silvia Bisdorff in Luxembourg told me paintings and her fellow national Léa Linster happy moments. What do you collect?**

**TG:** René has a very fast motorcycle which he loves. I don't like cars and I don't care about watches or jewelry. I collect cookbooks. I've also published five and am writing my sixth. Unfortunately, they're only available in German; none of them has been translated, but they are available from Stucki's website: [www.stuckibasel.ch](http://www.stuckibasel.ch). Besides cookbooks, I like to collect shells and nice stones when I'm on holiday. We always go on holiday for three weeks in February or March. When we go to the beach, I love to walk there for hours and collect driftwood, shells, or little stones. We go to Vietnam or Thailand. I like to travel in Asia. Lots of people ask me if I'm partly Asian, but I'm not. I like Asian flavors and spices. Even when I'm in Asia, people there think that I'm part Asian.



**What do you like especially about Vietnam and Thailand?**

**TG:** The food of course. I like the sea. The people always seem so happy and relaxed to me especially in Vietnam. Everybody is so positive and friendly. Everybody owns his own little business. When you go to the markets in Vietnam everything is beautifully displayed, in orderly pyramids. They really love and take good care of their food and its presentation. I love to sample all the street foods in Vietnam; they're delicious.

**Is there a street food in Basel?**

**TG:** Sausage maybe, raclette, and *madenbrot* which is spicy sweet bread or a soft gingerbread.

**Do you have a favorite spice?**

**TG:** In the winter I like all the warm spices like cinnamon, especially cinnamon flowers, cardamom, ginger. No plate leaves my kitchen without first being decorated with fresh

lime cress or basil tempura. I decorate my tables with small jars of coriander, ginger, and many varieties of chilies, as well as fresh herbs.

**If you hadn't become a chef, what other profession would you have chosen?**

**TG:** I don't know really. When I was very young, I wanted to study biology because I like nature and ecology very much. At one point I wanted to be an interior designer. As I told you, I love colors.

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