



CHRISTINE SAAHS

The Wachau Cookbook

CULINARY WORLD
CULTURAL HERITAGE
FROM THE HEART
OF AUSTRIA

Brandstätter 

Best of Wachau!



Love is always one of the ingredients when christine Saahs cooks – a love for the Wachau, for her guests, and for the region's outstanding natural products.

In this book, the top-flight chef presents classic dishes from the Wachau and reveals tips for ensuring that they turn out well every time. Christine Saahs also writes of her childhood and vividly describes life in this unique World Cultural Landscape in the Danube Valley.

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PREFACE

ONE OF THE GREAT GIFTS given to me is the privilege to live and work in the Wachau. To me it is a landscape of broad views: from the vineyards to the Danube, from the ruins towering above to the ancient, red-roofed villages below, from steep, dry grasslands to the valleys of the Danube tributaries. But the Wachau is far more than that. This 36-kilometre-long stretch of the Danube from Emmersdorf and Melk in the west to Mautern and Krems in the east is one of the oldest cultivated landscapes in Europe in general and Austria in particular. On the northern banks of the river at Willendorf, small tool fragments were recently found that somehow survived the millennia in a layer of earth deposited 43,500 years ago. I believe that the true heartbeat of a land can be heard only in a place with such ancient evidence of human civilization. And it can be found only along the “lifeline” of the greatest river flowing through that land.

Sometimes I try to imagine how the Wachau might have looked 40,000 years ago: the forest would have been wild and overgrown and would have extended to the banks of a free-flowing river. In any case, the landscape would probably not have worked the same magic it does on me and on the many visitors today. It is certain, however, that even at that time the Wachau was in a favoured climatic zone and offered an adequate supply of food. Around the

time of the birth of Christ, the river was “shared” between the Romans on the southern banks and the Germanic peoples to the north of the Danube, which was at the same time both a protective boundary and a prized commercial artery.

Today the Wachau remains a symbol of the hospitality of feeding and sheltering visitors, a tradition that began with the establishment of the monasteries in the 11th century. They provided lodging for itinerant traders and clergy, feeding them with the yield from the monastery gardens, kitchens and cellars. But there is much earlier documentary evidence of the Wachau: the oldest surviving record, dated 6 October 830, mentions a “Locus Uahouua”. A century and a half later Bishop Pilgrim of Passau convened church leaders for a transregional synod at the early Christian basilica in Mautern. In the 11th century the chapel of our Nikolaihof was erected on its remains.

Here, at the oldest wine estate in Austria, I live and work together with my family, continuing an ancient Wachau tradition: in harmony with nature we produce first-class, biodynamic wine and food and serve them to our guests. My understanding of hospitality entails bringing the highest possible quality to the table.

We turn our agricultural products into outstanding and delicious good plain fare with a regional accent. Everything we do not grow ourselves is carefully selected from other growers in the immediate vicinity.

When it comes to viticulture, we follow the biodynamic guidelines of Demeter International: only vegetable and mineral substances are used to promote the growth of the vines. I observe the same principles in selecting food for my kitchen. In this regard, I strongly recommend that the readers of this cookbook pay close attention to organic quality. These wonderful recipes from the Wachau simply

taste better when they are made with organic ingredients. In addition, the use of organic foodstuffs signals respect for Mother Nature and her gifts to us. This I consider to be an indispensable principle in preparing fine cuisine. And if the dishes are then prepared with love as well, there is nothing to stand in the way of an excellent meal.

I hope you enjoy browsing through the Wachau stories and anecdotes in this book and find pleasure in trying out the recipes.

Christine Saahs



Smoked Fish Tartare



INGREDIENTS
FOR 4 SERVINGS



*1 large onion, thinly sliced
2 tablespoons tarragon mustard
3 tablespoons English mustard
3 tablespoons olive oil
2 tablespoons dill, finely chopped
3 drops Tabasco
5 drops chilli sauce
Natural salt*
Freshly ground black pepper
500g smoked fish, finely chopped
Nasturtium blossoms for garnish*

Stir together the onion, mustard, olive oil, dill, Tabasco, chilli sauce, salt and pepper, mix with the smoked fish, and season to taste. Let rest in the refrigerator for approx. 12 hours. Use a spoon to make small dumplings or set a ring mould on a plate, fill with the tartare, press down lightly, and lift the mould from plate.

Garnish with lamb's lettuce or small lettuce leaves, blossoms and dill mustard.

Tip

Any fish may be used for the tartare (char, trout, carp, etc.).

** Natural salt is unrefined salt that comes directly from the mine and contains all the important minerals. It is available in health-food shops.*

Mousse of Smoked Fish



INGREDIENTS
FOR 4 SERVINGS



5g gelatin or 3 gelatin leaves
250g smoked fish (trout, char,
eel, salmon, etc.)
250ml whipping cream
2 teaspoons lemon juice
Natural salt
Freshly ground black pepper
Clover blossoms for garnish

Soak the gelatin leaves in cold water.

Cut the smoked fish into small pieces, purée with 5 tablespoons of cream and put the mixture into a bowl. Whip the remaining cream until stiff. Remove the gelatin from the water and press out the liquid. Heat in a bit of water until it dissolves, and whisk immediately into the fish mixture. Then fold in the beaten cream and season to taste with lemon juice, salt and pepper.

Immediately put the mixture into moulds, glasses or a bowl and refrigerate for several hours until it sets.

Tip

Remove the mousse from the mould by dipping it briefly in boiling water, or use a soup spoon to serve small dumpling shapes from the bowl.

Suitable garnishes/accompaniments are various small lettuce leaves, blossoms, dill mustard, butter and white bread.

*Bread Dumplings
in Vinegar and Oil*



INGREDIENTS
FOR 4 SERVINGS



2 small onions
1 pepper
6 radishes
6-8 previously cooked, cold bread
dumplings (see recipe p. 69)
Parsley or chives for garnish
Hardboiled eggs for garnish (optional)

MARINADE:
60ml red or white wine vinegar
60ml oil (sunflower, pumpkinseed,
olive or canola)
60ml beef or vegetable broth
Natural salt, pepper

For the dressing stir together all the ingredients and season to taste.

Cut the onions into rings or small dice, the pepper into strips or small dice, and the radish into slices. Slice the dumplings, arrange them on a plate with the onions, peppers and radishes, and sprinkle with the dressing.

Garnish with parsley or chives (and with hardboiled eggs, if desired).

Chanterelle Aspic



INGREDIENTS
FOR 4 SERVINGS



*5 gelatin leaves
500g small chanterelles
3 tablespoons olive oil
50g onions, thinly sliced
2 tablespoons parsley, finely chopped
Natural salt
Freshly ground black pepper
125ml whipping cream
1 teaspoon lemon frozen in
one piece and finely grated
Clover blossoms for garnish*

Soak the gelatin in cold water. Clean the chanterelles.

Heat the olive oil, lightly brown the onions, then add the parsley and the chanterelles. Cook for approx. 5 minutes and season with salt and pepper. Strain the cooking liquid, stir the cream into the liquid, and reduce to approx. 250ml.

Remove the gelatin from the water, press out the liquid, dissolve in the hot cream sauce, add the mushrooms, and season with lemon to taste.

Put the mixture into serving-size moulds, a shallow bowl, a bread tin or an almond cake pan (lined with transparent film) and chill for approx. 12 hours. Remove from the mould or cut into slices, and garnish with lamb's lettuce or leaf lettuce and vinaigrette.

Tip

In a "good mushroom year" you can freeze the sautéed chanterelles and use as needed for aspic, mushroom sauce or soup.

SPRINGTIME IN THE WACHAU



Barefoot under Apricot Trees in Flower



WHEN THE FIRST RAYS of spring sunshine tickled our noses in March, we children of the Wachau took off our shoes and ran barefoot over the paths and meadows. After a long winter of privation, it was wonderful to feel the earth under our feet and thus become reacquainted with Mother Nature. Of course we had to be careful not to let the adults catch us; they considered it far too early to be running around shoeless. “You’ll catch your death of cold”, they warned us. As a young child I soon discovered there was nothing to worry about. It was simply another bit of adult nonsense, and I can’t remember any child ever falling ill from running barefoot.

Early in the year we gathered the young shoots of stinging nettles, which were used in soups and salads as an important source of vitamins after a long winter. We also fed it to the young chicks.

Stinging nettles and other herbs were my grandmother’s responsibility. She knew where they were to be found and often took us children with her when she went looking for them. We wandered from Oberfucha, where I was born, through Thallern to the water meadows of the Danube to see the first cowslips and spring squill, and we knew that morels and lily of the valley were to be found in an

especially mysterious place, a small forest clearing close to the river. Bluebells, ox-eye daisies, wild pinks and quaking grass bloomed around Mother's Day, and we found a wide variety of marsh orchids, rampions and spring gentians in romantic hollows with natural stone slides. We walked the farthest from home to find lady's slippers, a type of orchid that was already rare at the time and is hardly seen today. My grandmother – a great admirer of this unusual plant – taught us to appreciate them but never to pick them. In the evening we returned home from these daylong walks with grandmother, always rather exhausted but happy to have seen and enjoyed the beauties of nature. Today I still reflect happily on that time, my grandmother taking long strides while we children pattered along beside her, trying to keep up on our short legs.

Of course we also passed endless rows of apricot trees where the air was filled with humming vibrations, and we knew that thousands of bees and other insects were busily gathering the sweet nectar after a long winter. The extensive apricot orchards had been planted in the previous century, and it was probably the Romans who first brought such trees to the Wachau. In my childhood, apricots were not highly valued, but I remember that the orchards were heated with small oil-fired stoves when a late spring frost had coated their blossoms with a fine layer of ice. The smoke that shrouded the trees prevented the blossoms from thawing too quickly in the spring sunshine. Thus in their own way people at that time were very careful in their relations with Mother Nature.

It is a pleasure to see the boom this aromatic fruit is enjoying today. The "Wachau Apricot" enjoys protected designation of origin under the EU. As soon as the fruit has ripened, attention turns to putting them to the best possible use. They are preserved (which we also do at the