



Interview with Rolf Hiltl December 2015

Monica Shah, founder and Head of Children First, is passionate about making food for children that is healthy and delicious to adults too. Hiltl is one of her favourite restaurants in Zurich, both with kids and without them. She interviewed Rolf Hiltl, CEO of Hiltl and a father of three, called with affection in local press 'the king of vegetarian food', to find out more about the man behind his vegetarian mission.

Hiltl has been family-run for four generations since 1898. Its campaign promises 'healthy indulgence', and Rolf Hiltl has called himself in the past a part-time vegetarian, putting quite a relaxed stamp on the unusual and presumably often challenging specialisation of his business. He seems rather fit and looks, it has to be said, more healthy than indulgent. I asked him what 'part-time vegetarian' really means. "I am actually more and more vegetarian these days," he said. "not vegan," he emphasises, "but unless I know where it comes from, I really prefer to avoid meat and fish."

If the head of Hiltl is holding fast to his convictions, at the principled rather than the indulgent end of the spectrum, this might explain the energetic expansion of Hiltl in Zurich in recent years, with outlets on a roof terrace above Bahnhofstrasse, in Jelmoli, in a flower shop in Talstrasse and two summer Badis. In each place the comfort and aesthetics of the environment indulge our senses and spirits. Two more Hiltl restaurants are planned in Langstrasse and at Sihlpost next year, equally distinctive locations. It must keep him very busy, running a growing number of restaurants, the cooking academy, producing cookbooks and pursuing charitable objectives too.

Given the fusion of Rolf's business and lifestyle choices, I wonder how his children have been involved in the concept. It is clearly a family business: the three meeting rooms in Hiltl's original building are named after his children, Céline, Léna and Téo, who are free to come and go - what a cool place for *Mittagessen*! Does he prefer they eat vegetarian? "They are free to choose. Léna did a vegi month once." And are the next generation expected to continue the good work? "There is no pressure on them to get involved, it is too early to say," but they are very much present in his work life. When I ask which dishes the children would choose from the Hiltl menu we hear the well-known *Hiltl Tatar* was invented because Céline said her favourite dish was the more traditional *Steak tartare*! Earlier today Rolf heard his youngest daughter Léna will come in with a few friends - they will probably choose from the very varied buffet. But just like a lot of other boys his age, their son Téo would most likely go for one of the pasta dishes, conveying theirs is a relatively normal family, despite the growing reputation of their father's company which holds a Guinness World Record as the oldest vegetarian restaurant in the world.

The roots to Rolf's attitude to food can be imagined from his family upbringing. He told me how his mother got so frustrated by his love of sweets that one day she put a huge pile of them in front of him and exclaimed emotionally, "There! Eat as many as you want!" To this day, he tends to choose less sugary options.

When asked if vegetarian food could be healthy for kids, he mentions alternative protein and sees no problem with this. His reference to the fine Swiss dairy tradition reminds me that eating habits are hugely cultural. The vegi versions of Swiss dishes on the menu such as their famous Cordon Bleu, Ghackets with Hörnli and Apfelmus, and Zürcher Geschnetzeltes show loyalty to local customers as well as offering children something familiar. My parents were originally vegetarian, so I have to confess I considered these detracted from the Hiltl mission to convert customers' to vegi food and I was wondering why meat look-alike dishes had to feature at Hiltl at all. Could it be that as their Swiss and European customers are mainly women they need to redress the balance by competing with the most popular choices of meat-eaters and men? Or to introduce comfort food for the Swiss, and challenge the non-believers? As an apprentice chef Rolf Hiltl was teased about his family company's unusual specialised cuisine, so he may wish to shake off the label of minority restaurateur.

The international influence at Hiltl has roots in his family rather than stemming from the global world in which we now live. Rolf's grandmother Margrith brought Indian flavours and ingredients to Switzerland in the 1950s. The prime minister of India even visited her at Hiltl. Importing spices and new foreign ingredients was radical then, only now does it seem quite normal to fuse flavours and cultures, in this adventurous age. So perhaps internationals read the presence of Indian food as a departure from Swiss culture that is not entirely intended.

In our interview Rolf acknowledged his multi-cultural staff for bringing inspiration to the Hiltl range. "We ask them, which were your three favourite dishes at home? Then we try to re-create them." The room we are sitting in will be used for German lessons for the staff later that day. You get the impression working at Hiltl is like joining a community.

Great vegetarian choice is now being proved not just visionary but essential to ensure children develop a taste for healthy food and it effectively moderates unbalanced adult eating habits too. Hiltl restaurants respond to nutritional needs and also cater extremely well for people with food allergies and particular diets. They aim to reduce the allergens in dishes to zero, so that these customers do not need to think so hard about what to eat, welcome news as I have myself experienced the embarrassment of commandeering a waiter's attention while trying to find out if the food I order might cause more trouble than it is worth! But crucially, although diet seems at the core of their business model, the atmosphere, location and cultural events they host create a social brand rather than one that purely represents the food. They host breast-feeding advice sessions for new mothers, linking the restaurant's position as a social place for mums with making healthy choices as parents. Fun is also a necessary ingredient of the brand as symbolised by Rolf Hiltl abseiling down the PKZ Woman building to the opening event of the new Hiltl Dachterrasse this September.

Diets are not much fun, and Rolf seemed irritated by the social inequity of those with special diets having to order different food to everyone else. His comment about organic produce similarly reflects a desire for enjoyment of the food, and reminds us he is a cook first, an

ideologue second - "it is not necessarily better for health, but we might choose some bio products because they taste better." However unlike many famous chefs he is uninterested in fads and is not an advocate of flying in exotic ingredients, even though a recent trip to New York had given him an insight into a quite amazing level of choice on the market.

As a person, Rolf Hiltl comes across as a moderate, not a radical like his grandmother, but he is absolutely clear that he wants to stay true to the family vegetarian tradition. As a businessman he is practical and has to be flexible. When I ask about his take on sugar, he does not believe it needs to be cut out altogether. Ever sensitive to customers' views, they trialed a liquid form of sugar which can be served on the side. In this way the food landscape at Hiltl remains responsive to the health agenda, with indulgence an essential accessory to the gentle transformation of our eating habits.

The happily improving status of fruit and vegetables enables Hiltl to grow in step with current thinking, reflecting popular trends and trend-setting, in contrast with the less recognised pioneers in generations before him. The kingdom of indulgently healthy restaurants is growing and its concept is finding new channels, hopefully reaching many more people than those who eat in central Zurich. The social entrepreneur in me was keen to discover a vision for society of this man with a vegetarian mission, and rewarded with an idea in the making : "I would love children to learn about food in schools". I wish him every success.

Monica Shah

Monica is founder and head of Children First in Zurich where nutritional and delicious meals are provided for children aged 0 to 7 years old every day. Click [here](#) to see feature recipes that are incorporated into our season menus at Children First the featured recipes are being incorporated into our seasonal menus for children.

Profile

Name: Rolf Hiltl

Job: owner and CEO of Hiltl, co-owner of tibits

Birthday: April 25th 1965

Civil status: married, 3 children (Céline 19; Léna 15 and Téo 12)

Hobbies: Kite surfing, snowboarding, jogging, riding the Harley

Studied at: Ecole Hôtelière Lausanne

Languages at home: Rolf and Marielle speak French together, at the dinner table the family speak both Swiss German and French

Vision: I would love children to learn about food in schools

Hiltl Cookbooks In English:

Veggie International (2009)

Hiltl. Virtuoso Vegetarian (4th ed, 2013)

Vegan Love Story (with tibits) (2014)

For children:

Globi kocht vegi (for kids, published with Globi Verlag in German in 2011)

Available from shop.hiltl.ch and in the Hiltl shop.

Hiltl restaurants in Zurich

- Haus Hiltl, Sihlstrasse 28 (since 1898).
- Hiltl Dachterrasse (Roof terrace at PKZ, Bahnhofstrasse 88) opened 2nd September 2015
- Hiltl Sihlpost, due to open in March 2016 in this characterful building near HB
- Langstrasse 84 (coming in Autumn 2016)
- Pflanzbar (in the florist Blumen Krämer, Talstrasse 62)
- at Mythenquai and Kilchberg Lidos, Lake Zurich
- Take-away in Jelmoli

tibits restaurants (Rolf Hiltl is co-owner):

- Zurich
- Lucerne
- Berne
- Basel
- Winterthur
- London 12-14 Heddon Street off Regent Street, London W1B 4DA

Breast-feeding Sessions:

<http://www.stillkampagne.ch/kampagne>

Lentil and Chestnut Soup

Serves 4

20g butter

1 small onion

70g red lentils

50g brown lentils

150g chestnuts (fresh or frozen)

1 tsp mild Madras curry powder

½ tsp turmeric

1.2 litres vegetable stock

1 tbsp freshly squeezed lemon juice

Sea salt

Freshly ground black pepper

100ml double cream

2 tbsp chopped parsley

Heat the butter. Peel and chop the onion and sauté until transparent.

Add the lentils, chestnuts and spices and continue to sauté for a minute or two. Add the vegetable stock and bring to the boil. Simmer over a low heat for about 40 minutes. Add lemon juice, sea salt and pepper to taste. Then blend the soup till smooth.

Add the cream and briefly bring to the boil again. Garnish with chopped parsley just before serving.

Tip: For fresh chestnuts, make a cut in the round part of the shell. Cook for a minute or so in boiling water. Peel while still hot, removing the fine brown skin under the shell at the same time. If it cannot be removed, return the chestnuts to the boiling water for a few more minutes.

Recipes for the holidays to make with the kids, translated from 'Globi kocht vegi' by Monika Hilfig:

Plum Crumble

Makes 800g

Preheat oven to 180°C

Ingredients:

500g plums

15g sugar

Hint: Delicious with vanilla ice cream. Can also be prepared with other fruits (rhubarb, cherries, apricots, berries, apples)

Crumble:

55g butter

45g flour (half-white)

65g brown sugar

65g finely ground almonds

1 tsp ground cinnamon

Instruction:

1. Cut the plums in half and pit them.
2. Melt butter in a pan. Mix flour, sugar, almonds and cinnamon in a bowl. Add the melted butter and crumble the mixture.
3. Put the plums in an oven dish and cover with crumbles.
4. Bake at 200°C for c. 15 min.