



LOVE YOUR FOOD

When spending a day with caterer Laura Schälchli gustatory revelations and culinary knowledge line up like pearls on a string — be prepared for some serious food shopping. Text: Gabriella Hummel Pictures: Noëlle Guidon Translation: Sabine Lenggenhager

Roaming about haphazardly in her sneakers, several jute sacks slung around her neck – that’s Laura Schälchli exploring the springlike and bustling atmosphere at the market in Oerlikon. It’s 10 o’clock in the morning, a nice and sunny Saturday beginning of March and half the city seems to be up and about to celebrate spring and sunlight, shopping for locally grown vegetables, organic eggs and whatnot. Eggs prove to be a buzzword for Laura: «Oh, look, the old man with the egg stall is back! I haven’t seen him at the other markets in town, what a shame.»

Though she seemingly roams around, it soon becomes clear that she is familiar with almost all of Zurich’s marketers. She definitely knows what she’s after and

where to get it. Today she’s hunting for ingredients that later on will be transformed in to snacks and served to the participants of her course called «Food Photography». But not yet – there are still four more hours to be spent shopping and cooking.

Sipping her morning coffee and leafing through the «Züritipp» (a local magazine with the latest about food, culture and things not to miss), she discovers an event to her liking: the «Rindsmetzgete» at the «Ziegelhütte». A «Rindsmetzgete» usually involves the butchering, processing and eating of at least one entire beef. Knowing exactly what’s going to happen at this event and who’s organising it, she can’t hold back no longer, a characteristic

we're to witness on several occasions on this day. It's basically impossible to beat her in the field of food and drinks in and around Zurich – Laura knows the venues, the keyplayers, the latest news. And she is keen to share this information, as only persons having found their true passion seem to be able to. «Oh, and look what I've got: red walnuts!», she blurts out with the same naturalness, «have you ever seen anything like it?»

And it's not only us, the author and the photographer, she shares her secrets with, but nearly every person she meets by chance at the market on this beautiful spring day. Sobre-Mesa is Laura Schälchli's baby, born out of her passion for food and drinks. Not long ago she founded the Ltd «Sobre-Mesa», but for months now she has been organizing different courses in the overall context of food and drink culture. The Bachsermärt at the new settlement Kalkbreite has proven to be an appropriate location to carry out these activities. They are not only interesting in content but also creative in their naming; one of the most popular courses is called «beautiful boozing». Laura's high standards when it comes to aesthetics is rooted in her Design Management Studies. She was only nineteen when she decided to give it a go in New York, where she ended up getting married and plunging into the culinary adventures the city had to offer. Admittedly, the plunging in was not entirely by choice in the beginning, as Laura earned her money the way many a student does, catering and waitressing. While she gained her first experiences in that field at the Rimini Bar next to the river Limmat in Zurich, it was not until she got to New York when she noticed how grotesque the influence of modern lifestyle food on the average person was. «The further you drive out of the city, the bigger people get.» This insight led her to the next step: To open up a lunch service, providing healthy and balanced meals. Again an undertaking not entirely voluntary: She had just been dismissed and was looking for a new job opportunity. In these times healthy catering facilities were still a market niche, thus the first little baby steps towards a more conscious approach to food and eating soon became larger than she had initially thought.

As we pass an incredibly colourful stall of an Italian

marketer, Laura whispers: «He does have the most beautiful fruit and veggies from Italy – only look at these artichokes! - but he doesn't treat his staff well enough, that's why I don't like buying from him.» Sustainability and fairness are non debatable, both regarding human beings and animals. Laura does eat meat with pleasure and buying local is more important to her than cooking vegetarian or vegan meals. That's why you'll meet her every week at the market down on Helvetiaplatz, where she gets her bread from the family Scharrenberger, who owns a bakery in Oetwil am See: «Mr. Scharrenberger makes a point of mixing the dough just after the grains have been milled. He insists that this is the only way to transfer the entire energy from the grain to the bread.»

In New York, Laura was working with Vitra until she came across a masters program in food culture and communication, offered by the Slow Food University in Bra, Italy. Yep, you heard right, there is such a thing as a Slow Food University. Laura was lucky enough to get funding through the US Student Funds, which allowed her to study in Bra. 2011 she returned to her home country and became president of Slow Food Youth Switzerland. In the meantime, she took jobs in different culinary establishments such as the Rosso located at the Geroldsstrasse. From time to time, whenever she runs out of money, you can still see her there or at the associated Rössli – serving sustainably produced fish'n'chips or helping out with whatever is needed.

Originally, she had not aimed to offer courses and happenings. Starting out with the food magazine «happen» she soon had to realise that it was way easier to bring about a change when getting involved with people on a more personal level. That's when – amongst many other projects – Sobre-Mesa was born.

Another catchword – what are the changes you want to see in the food world? «So many people are not passionate about their food, neither cooking nor eating it. I want to show them how much pleasure there is in preparing food and eating it!» And regarding yourself? «My aim is to only work with people who make me happy, a principle that has become very important to me.»

It looks like Laura successfully combined these two







purposes in her latest pop up restaurant «Hood Food», an enterprise undertaken together with chefs Vale Fritz and Fanny Eisl, among others. Hood Foods processes all edible parts of a pork – for Laura just another opportunity to honour food and learn more about it: «Did you know that brawn is actually made out of a pork's face and its tongue? You just cook it on end. The only thing eaten separately are cheeks and ears.» Laura smiles at our frowns and keeps on moving along the market stalls.

By now we are tempted to help her with all the jute sacks – at least five of them we count dangling from her arms and being filled up with unimaginable goodies: cheese from the Tyrol, Easter cakes from two different bakeries (you do want to be able to compare), small radishes, the last bottle of apple juice from the stall we just passed. Laura declines: «My mum calls me the crazy baglady, I'm used to carry around loads of stuff.» We think of buying her one of these shopping trolleys you see elderly ladies with, but we're not sure at all if she'd like the idea of it.

«Hey there, Laura!», a cry we hear quite a few times during the two hours we spend at the market, by now we've stopped counting. Next stop is the stall of family Fiechter, offering cold cuts to our hungry stomachs and a nice subject for the food photographers. One of the most important things altogether is getting in touch with the producers themselves. You could summarize her mission in the aim of bringing producers and consumers closer together: «If you don't know where to get a decent chicken from, call me up!» The Fiechter family we just visited is one of the few butchers left still offering soup hen.

Finally the bags seem to be unable to be stuffed any further and we leave the market. The tram takes us from Oerlikon to Seebach, only a few stops away, where the

course in food photography will take place today, at the studio of food photographer Lukas and food stylist Ayako. We arrive at an old industrial building that seems to host many different companies. We hear faint cries of people engaged in martial arts and someone is playing music in the back side of the building. The studio is separated by large walls from the rest of the hangar, although they do not quite reach the top. But who needs silence for a nice food photography? A lazy spring sun is peeking through the dirty windows on top of the room, just next to the entrance on the right hand a kitchen is nestled in a corner, to the left we are tempted to lie down on an l-shaped couch, a giant lamp on a cable pull over our heads. Behind it extends the photo studio, way less stunning than we'd have thought. A table, a plate with food on it, a glass with something to drink in it; a camera with a huge object lens pointing towards the whole scenery and a small table next to it, where the recently taken photographs can be admired. Next to the monitor an array of small plates, glasses and cutlery, behind the couch different underlays to fake a range of tables.

Laura developed the course together with Lukas Lienhard, over a few glasses of wine they let their ideas spin and spill. What they came up with can be experienced today for the first time. Lukas will lead the course while Laura will take a back seat, observing the class and the people she got together. During the break she will indulge in stories about the food the participants were using in class – it's hard to hide the fact that she is a big fan of every single ingredient: «You must try the hazelnuts from the Piedmont! If you've ever tasted them, you won't want to eat any other for the rest of your life.»

Laura is a relaxed yet passionate speaker. The tips of

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who make me happy.»*





her dark blond hair dance around her neck, her hands are marking the words in the air while she is speaking. Her eyes maintain a vivid contact and are changing from blue to yellow to grey. The same passion comes into play when preparing food – though her hands take on a much calmer life. The small radishes are cut in half, needless to say that the leaves are left on, tasty as they are. The beef is fried and made ready for presentation, the red walnuts, a culinary curiosity grown in the garden of family Zahner from Truttikon, are cracked open. Instruments are mainly unnecessary, what needs to be done is done by hand: «I have to feel the food between my fingers», says Laura with a certain steadiness. In the same tone she proceeds to tell us the story about her divorce. For ten years she and her husband had been the perfect couple to family and friends, but now things look slightly different: «I believe in transitory relationships, yet I think nobody has shaped me the way my husband did.»

This evening Laura will meet up with a friend who has come to Switzerland for a visit, they will spend the weekend in the Jura mountains. From there she will pay her father a visit to celebrate his birthday. He lives in the rural parts not far away from Zurich. A few years ago he bought goats he now takes for daily walks in the forests close to his house. But before Laura's on her way, we share another beer and a last drop of food wisdom – at least for the time being: «Did you know that dried meat is actually brown? The red colour comes from the nitrite that producers add.»



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Name: Laura Schälchli

Year of birth: 1982

Nationality: Swiss/US

Place of birth: Zurich

Place of residence: Zurich

Has lived in: New York, Miami, Piedmont

Trained profession: Design Manager

Currently working as: Restaurateur

First thing in the morning: Shower

Last thing in the evening: Switch mobile to flight mode

Most influential person in my life: Toyes, my husband

Message to my 16-year-old self:
 Don't be afraid of boys

Message to my 60-year-old self:
 Treat everyone with respect

Never leave the house without: Mobile

One point on my bucket list: I don't need a bucket list

A magical place: By the lake

What I show first-time visitors to my city:
 The viaduct with its covered market and the Geroldstrasse

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