

Gourmet Food Abounds In Winter Capital

By Patricia Arrigoni

ST. MORITZ, Engadine Valley, Switzerland – Winter sportsmen come to St. Moritz for the exciting bobsled races, the famous Cresta run (sliding head first down a canal of ice on a single sled), the skiing, hang-gliding, and ice skating.

Celebrities arrive in formal gowns and jewels to be seen with European aristocrats, nobility, and Hollywood film stars.

Still others make an annual appearance to soak in the hot mineral baths enjoyed by the Romans two thousand years ago, and by the Celts a thousands years before that.

I flew to St. Moritz to accompany my husband and a bachelor buddy of his on a skiing holiday. We purchased a “Death Defying Sports Trip” from a tour packager out of Denver who specializes in exotic vacations at affordable prices.

The fee included a seven-day stay at the world-famous Badrutt’s Palace Hotel, daily breakfast and dinner, a six-day ski pass, transfers to airports, first-class train tickets from Zurich to St. Moritz, one night’s lodging at the newly refurbished Central Hotel in Zurich on the way home, and roundtrip air fare on United Airlines and Air France.

The surprise in all of this turned out to be the gourmet quality of food served on Air France and in the Engadine Valley. The dining at the Palace lived up to its advance praises. A recent TV program about Badrutt’s Palace, featured on “60 Minutes” promised sleigh rides on frozen lakes, heated towel racks, Iranian caviar, wooden hangers, hearty cooking, and a 120,000-bottle wine cellar.

I found all this true and unexpectedly friendly Italian waiters who cheerfully explained the delicious menus and helped us with the wine lists.

While in St. Moritz I attended a one-day “Professional Show of Food preparation” featuring the cooking of the Engadine Valley. Four hundred plates of freshly cooked dishes were put on display, each looking more delicious than the other. There were entries from dozens of hotels and restaurants, plus a special category for the fifty or so apprentice cooks who work in and around St. Moritz. The categories consisted of menu preparation, cold plates, hot dishes, pastries,

desserts, and show pieces. Two thousand people toured the show, proving that the residents of the Engadine Valley take their dining very seriously.

Grossert Fritz, chef from the four-star Suvretta House, gave me a tour of the entries, explaining that they were preserved for the day by an aspic glaze. The food is a French-type cuisine combined with artistic new ideas.

The Suvretta House displayed its entries on silver trays, mirrors, china plates and velvet cloths. Overall show pieces included flowers and fruit made of spun sugar, birds, fish and other figures molded out of margarine, and a hotel built from cubes of sugar.

The most famous restaurant in St. Moritz is La Marmite, located 7500 feet up the Corviglia ski run. Diners arrive by cable car. The restaurant is owned by Hartly and Freda Mathis, son Reto and his wife Barbara.

Hartly Mathis began cooking thirty years ago at age 15 with a two-and-a-half year apprenticeship. Over the years he has cooked for Badrutt's Palace and the Hotels Kulm and Suvretta in St. Moritz, plus the Excelsior in Florence and the Plaza Athene in Paris.

His lunch specialties include a truffle salad, duck liver pate, beef, boiled English lamb, small curries and boiled chicken. For the past 15 years Hartly has been preparing pastries, a tradition of his family beginning with his grandfather. The 32 special desserts which Hartly and Reto display daily reportedly offer the most outstanding selection in Europe.

Lunch at the La Marmite is expensive, but the same food may be purchased in the adjoining cafeteria for considerably less.