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## **Breaking the Rules (and a Few Eggs) --- At Frankfurt-Area Restaurant, Chef Hessler Earns Star Status With Natural Talent, Creativity**

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Maintal, Germany -- THE WHITE TIPS of Doris-Katharina Hessler's French manicure bob up and down as she fingers a pile of stark green seaweed, soon to be mixed with lettuce and sherry dressing and served alongside octopus carpaccio at Restaurant Hessler here, 20 kilometers east of Frankfurt.

Such unusual combinations help set apart Ms. Hessler, a one-star Michelin chef since 1981. In a country where heavy cream-based sauces and a paucity of spices long typified the cuisine, Ms. Hessler was mixing Indian, Arab and Italian flavors with French and German food long before fusion became all the rage.

Three principles guided her to her star, and have helped her keep it since: Always be good at what you do; find your own style and stick to it; and, finally, break a few rules along the way.

She broke a big rule simply by jumping in to help when the restaurant she and her husband had opened in their former discotheque needed a new chef. Overnight, she went from self-taught cook to professional.

German society places high value on apprenticeships and most people who become chefs go through rigorous training. The 54-years-old Ms. Hessler, who says she has never taken a cooking class, catapulted to the top with her natural talent and creative recipes. She is now one of five female (and 184 male) chefs in Germany to have at least one Michelin star. Ever since she received it, Ms. Hessler has been writing cookbooks, appearing on television and giving cooking classes.

Her restaurant, which also goes by the name Kathi's Bistro, serves lunch and dinner Wednesdays through Sundays to as many as 40 people in a prewar villa. Her husband, Ludwig, also self-taught, serves as sommelier. Fixed-price menus range from 29.50 euros for a three-course lunch to 73.50 euros for the menu de degustation, or tasting menu. This isn't a place with a long waiting list; calling on a recent Monday secured a table for two on that Saturday night.

Ms. Hessler declines to discuss the restaurant's finances, other than to say it is profitable.

The eclectic cook's monthly menu changes with the seasons and serves as the stage for Hessler-style experiments such as a mille-feuille using kohlrabi, also known as cabbage turnip, with small lobsters and green asparagus. Or how about pigeon breast and guinea fowl in a pastry shell atop lentils with balsamic sauce?

Rarely does something go wrong, and Ms. Hessler insists she can't recall a single experiment that flopped. Restaurant critic Michael Allmaier sent his green asparagus back to the kitchen, complaining that it was too salty and overcooked. Nonetheless, his review, which appeared in a Frankfurt paper last year, gave the restaurants good marks overall. The German online version of the GaultMillau food bible positively drooled, describing her style as one that "dances expressively on the tongue." It awarded her 17 of 20 points and ranked her restaurant among the top 20 in the state of Hesse.

Ms. Hessler has never moved away from her hometown of Maintal, population 38,000, and her adult life here has been suspended between stardom and community endeavors. Numerous German camera teams have traipsed through the riverside town to portray Kathi's Bistro and its chef as a role model for aspiring female chefs. Ms. Hessler has lost count of the number of times she has been on television talking about a woman's rise to the top of a male-dominated career, although she has never had to answer to a man or navigate her way through male territory. "I could never work as someone else's cook," she says.

Ms. Hessler tries to pass along her excitement in her regular cooking classes. All-day weekend classes are booked three months in advance, and weekday classes are regularly available.

On a recent Thursday afternoon, Peter and Martina Vikanis, amateur foodies from northwestern Germany, got their lesson, a gift from friends. The couple, wearing souvenir aprons that read, "Cooking with Doris-Katharina Hessler," observed mussels being loosened from their shells, salmon being filleted and soy-sauce marinades being mixed. The lack of hands-on cooking disappointed Mr. Vikanis, but he was nonetheless inspired to cook Hessler-style stuffed lamb and tuna balls at home -- to the approval of his dinner guests.

The lesson was interrupted as Friedrich Beilstein, Maintal's retired confectioner, stopped to gossip about doings on the nearby golf course as he delivered three portions of poppy-seed "pudding" that looked like minimuffins, baked in a water bath.

Ms. Hessler does create her own desserts, but she admits that had she ever taken a praline-making class, she would have flunked the part on getting the chocolate to shine. Sauces, not chocolate sheens, are her strength, she says.

A few minutes later, another neighbor calls to request that a 13-year-old girl be placed in Kathi's kitchen on Girls Day in May.

Rolling her eyes with a satisfied smile, she says, "My goodness, Girls Day? Was es alles gibt. Everything under the sun."

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