

At home away from home



Chef Otto Weibel has the perfect recipe for success. Work hard, party harder and make time for your loved ones. He tells us how he has managed to strike that balance in his life

Having made his choice, at sixteen, Chef Otto started his apprenticeship in Switzerland, working with a very tough chef. "If he did not like something, he used to kick us and slap us around. There were many times when I would cry in my room, wanting to run away from it all," he says. But he stuck it through, and now feels that the toughness of the chef was just a call for discipline. "He also took as much time out for us to teach us. He would stay back after work and ask us to join him to learn some thing new. I realise today how much I learned from him," he smiles.

That's not to say that Chef Otto himself believes in that school of thought. "I have over 350 cooks under me. I am tough, but I would never raise my hand on any of them. On the contrary, I believe that a little praise goes a long way in encouraging people to surpass themselves. A pat on the shoulder and a simple thank you for a job well done can go a long way," he nods.

A self-confessed "Asian specialist", Chef Otto Weibel, director of kitchens, Fairmont and Swissotel, Singapore, first stepped in the kitchen at the tender age of eight. "My parents owned a restaurant in Zurich, Switzerland, and it was only natural that when I was able I started peeling potatoes and washing dishes. I guess you could say I started as a commie at home," he laughs.

Even as the genuine joy of the memories light up his face, Chef Otto's eyes reminisce about the years past. "I recently celebrated my fiftieth birthday, and one of my school friends made a sort of collage on my life. One of my former teachers showed me something I wrote when I was fifteen. It was a wish list, and I had written that I wanted to be a famous chef and wanted to one day run one of the biggest hotels in the world," he smiles.

His other choice was mechanics. "I was very good at it in school, and my teacher encouraged me to get into mechanics professionally. But I consciously chose to get into cooking. Even though my parents owned a restaurant, there was never any pressure for me to get into the field," he states.

But two and a half years later, Chef Otto had had enough and he moved out. He went on to work in some of the biggest hotels as a seasonal worker, moving to a new place during summer and again when winter arrived. Although the seasonal work was tough, it was an experience that he treasures. "I worked at some of the best hotels that celebrities and royalty frequented. Although we mostly stayed in the back because we were commies, we were still at the most beautiful destinations," he says.

Working hard as a young man also meant that he partied hard. Coming home at 3 or 4 am meant going to work with a major hangover, and that, he admits, could have been the reason for some of the tough disciplinary actions. "But it was great fun," he laughs.

In 1968, Chef Otto decided it was time to see the world. So he joined a passenger ship, a Norwegian-American liner, one of the most elite ships at the time. "It was great, but the life is tough. I went in with the purpose of seeing the world, which I did. I also had the opportunity to experience different cuisines and learn about different cultures," he says.

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But the cooped up cabins and ‘unhealthy’ habits made Chef Otto uncomfortable, and he realised it was not a long term job for him. So a year and a half later, he went to London to the Dorchester Hotel. “At the time, the hotel had a very big name. And London was a very exciting city. We had the Rolling Stones and Eric Claptons and we were going to the same clubs these people were at, even though we did not have a lot of money,” he smiles.

Money was certainly not easy to come by. And even a raise did not help. “If I got ten extra, I would end up paying seven in taxes,” he laughs. But it was still a fun time. “I remember the first time I landed in London, I went and shaved my head military style because I thought big hotels must be very strict. But when I walked into the kitchen, I saw every single person there had shoulder length hair!” he laughs.

So one year down the line, he sported long locks as well. Only, when he went back home, it was a shock. “I walked into the hotel at 11 at night, and my father was sitting with some

friends, playing cards. He takes one look at me and says, ‘Get out, get a haircut, and then come back’. It was quite a scene,” says Chef Otto, his eyes lighting up at the thought.

Chef Otto had moved back home at the request of a friend, who wanted his help in opening a new hotel. “It was the biggest hotel in Switzerland, the Nova Park Hotel. I went in thinking I’d stay for about six months, and I ended up being there for nearly two years,” he smiles.

Following this, Chef Otto spent some time with his family, helping his parents run their business. But the generation gap led to many differences in business tactics and eventually, Chef Otto decided to make his own way in the world. “I was a major fan of Brazil at the time. To me, it was the perfect destination – I loved the food, the people, the football (I played a long time ago myself) and the beautiful girls. So I sent out applications to all the big names. I got many job offers, but nothing from Brazil,” he says.

So he zeroed in on Bangkok, and joined the Dusit Thani Hotel, the first Westin hotel in Asia, as Sous Chef. “A year and a half later, the owner and Westin as a company split up. And since I was hired by Westin, they pulled me out overnight and transferred me to the Shangri-la, Singapore as executive sous chef,” he explains.

The Shangri-la was ‘the’ hotel in Singapore at the time, and gave Chef Otto more than a great job. “That’s where I first fell in love and got married. Katrina was a cashier at the time, and when we got married was about the same time that I was transferred as executive chef to open a new hotel in the Philippines,” he says.

The hotel belonged to President Marcos, and Chef Otto worked extensively for Imelda Marcos. “I served many heads of state, and in fact, know her very well. Manila at the time was like a little cowboy town, with shootings everywhere, unorganised, and chaotic. But it’s a beautiful country with lovely people. I admire them for their way of life, the way they smile and stay happy even if they are poor,” he says.

But marital bliss eluded the young couple in the beginning. “A new wife expects her husband to spend a lot of time with her. With my new position, I was very busy and she could not get a job because of legal hassles. So she spent her time cooped up in the hotel and, well, the country is a little dangerous when it comes to women,” he says. But all was forgiven when Clarissa was born in 1978.

A couple of years later, Chef Otto was transferred to open the Shangri-la in Hong Kong. It was the ideal time to be there, when people loved good food and had the money to spend. That was where Chef Otto’s love for wines gained a new persona, and he got the opportunity to explore the intricacies of the same.

In 1983, tragedy struck, when Katrina passed away. “I found myself a single parent with a young daughter. I was completely confused about what to do. My wife’s sister saved the day for us by moving to Hong Kong. That allowed me to stay for a couple of years more,” he says.

At the time, David Paulen was the senior VP of Westin, and mentor to Chef Otto. “He always told me, ‘Otto, if I move, you will move with me - we are a team’. So when he was transferred to Singapore, I knew I would follow soon,” he explains.

Chef Otto flew back and forth, helping his boss with the opening of the hotel. “It was the biggest hotel in Singapore - 18 restaurants, 2,200 rooms. It was the Westin Plaza at



the time, and today it’s the Fairmont and Swissotel,” he says. As expected, Chef Otto moved to Singapore as well as corporate chef. “I knew at the time that this would be where I settled. One of the major reasons was, of course, my daughter, who had family to look after her, because my job still required me to travel for long periods,” he explains.

Travelling to Shanghai, Tokyo and Sydney, to name a few, Chef Otto hired executive chefs and saw the hotel through to smooth operations before moving on to the next. “At Westin, we also have a master class in Atlanta for a month. I conducted that class for eight years. I am also very involved in the Singapore chef’s association, having been their president for over 17 years. I also travel around the world judging competitions and participating in global activities,” he says.

For Chef Otto though, Singapore is home. “I love Singapore. To me, Singapore is a melting pot where you have great food freshly cooked out of the wok, and the most sophisticated Chinese, Indian, Malay, and even Western food. Singapore chefs are well looked after because they understand both eastern and western food very well. The city itself has grown and developed so well. It’s a city where

it’s safe, it’s a city where everything works,” he explains.

Even though Chef Otto receives many enticing offers from the Middle East, he feels he is too old to start over. “I’ve worked all my life, and it’s sad to see sometimes that things go bad because you neglected family and took them for granted. You have to make time to be with them, and I plan to do just that,” he smiles.



It's also where Chef Otto found love a second time. "Diana and I got married and have an 18-year-old son, who, I must say, wants nothing to do with the food business," he laughs. His daughter though is already a part of the industry and is working at a hotel as services manager. Her dream is to manage her father's restaurant, if and when he opens one that is.

"I recently did a concept for a casino, and part of the deal was that they would give me two outlets to run. One I intend to turn into an Aussie food joint with my friend Chef Scott Webster. The other will be my own brand of fast food, a very hawker store kind of concept with a fusion of Singaporean food with other influences. At this time, there are some discussions pending and I will finalise this when I go back," he says.

Meanwhile, Chef Otto is busy playing golf and taking life as it comes. "My wife and I are fanatic golfers. I play ever Sunday, but she plays five days a week, which is why her handicap is so much better than mine," he smiles mischievously.

Another one of his passions is travelling. "I am also president of a club called Chefs on

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Tour. We are a group of 12, with a constitution that we will never be more and one would have to die or unable to afford the membership dues for a new one to join. Once in two years, we take a trip to a new place, without our spouses. We all enjoy good food, good wine, love golf and have great camaraderie. There's such a friendship between us, it's great," he smiles, almost unable to contain the joy the very thought brings. Not surprising, considering they do more than just holiday. "In Norway, we were invited to be part of a TV show. Also, most of us know all the top chefs around the world, so very often we are hosted for lunches and dinners, and we just have a super time," he laughs.

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Signing off on that note, he encourages his colleagues to constantly strive for more, stating, "You are never really there. Once you're there, you're finished and you should just retire because you will lose your spirit." We hope Chef Otto never loses his.





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