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vol. 8

# FOOD CAN HELP US HEAL

BY THOMAS BÜHNER
PHOTOS BY MICHAEL HOLZ

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

*Highly-regarded German chef Thomas Bühner, whose restaurant La Vie earned three Michelin stars, has taken a different route in the food industry. The chef who was recognized as a Relais & Château "Grand Chef" now works as consultant in the food industry, traveling extensively as a guest chef. He writes about using the healing powers of food, especially food served in hospitals.*

Please let me introduce myself: My name is Thomas Bühner, I am the former general manager and chef de cuisine of the 3-star Michelin restaurant La Vie in Osnabrück (Germany), which was closed by the owner in the summer of 2018. Because of my awards, I was a member of Relais & Châteaux and Les Grand Table du Monde. When the restaurant closed, I had been working in top gastronomy for more than 30 years. For many years, I was not only a 3-star Michelin chef, but one with the highest awards in all German restaurant guides and international rankings.

Today I work as a consultant for the hotel industry, for example for the Marriott Kaoshiung (Taiwan), the catering industry, as well as for the food industry. I am an ambassador for world-famous brands such as LSG-Skychefs and FrieslandCampina and am responsible for the Europe-wide distribution of Pödör (excellent vinegars & oils as well as an extensive range of delicacies). I am also ambassador for Helios, Germany's second largest hospital operator.

However, my career taught me to always think outside of the box. So even when I was working at la vie, I made sure to be part of projects that gave me additional input and made sure that I worked with people outside of the fine dining world. One of my projects was therefore a collaboration with the local hospital in my hometown. I worked as an external consultant for the Klinikum Osnabrück and gained a good insight into the processes, problems and possibilities of the kitchen in a hospital. I realized that most of the people who have the overall responsibility in hospitals are not aware of the value of high-quality food, the balance of the diet and the importance of a disease-oriented diet. Another consulting and ambassadorial job of mine was for Nutricia – a manufacturer of dysphagia foods – which has given me even further insights into the world of nutrition for sick people.

Because what I have learnt (and what we already know but sometimes forget) is that food not only serves to satisfy the basic need of hunger – it also fulfils a social function. It is about bringing people together at a table, having good conversations and sometimes also solving problems, or initiating and concluding business deals over a meal at the table. It is about joy and living your life.

So how bad must it be for people, when they can no longer join in, when swallowing becomes a torture or only works to a very limited extent?

So much for my history.

Today, not only I am, but the entire world is facing frightening times: Many people around the world have died, businesses are suffering, travel is unsafe in many parts of the world, and the catering industry has an unknown future ahead of it. And yet: COVID-19 taught and teaches us to spend more time thinking - about the way we are and have lived, about the way we should

live in the future. About how we treat others, Mother Nature and ourselves. All in all, COVID-19 has taught us to stop and use our minds - and our hearts.

Most of us knew this in the past, but it is only recently that we have been given this great reminder of what is most important in life: health. And how can we support health if we cannot even move around freely or as much as possible and be in nature? Exactly: through healthy eating. Because only if we take care of our body (and our mind) with healthy food, we are able to cope with all the small and big daily tasks we encounter in life.

Against this background, I came across the question why the food we eat in hospitals is still as bad as it is. I mean, if we know that food can help us to heal - why do hospitals serve the absolute minimum of food? I would even go so far as to say that some hospital meals are a form of assault or attempted murder.

But why is this so? Well, in many cases it is not the hospital's culinary team that is responsible for the quality of the food given to the patients. In most cases there is not even a culinary team anymore. It is the responsibility of the hospital director, who tries to keep costs as low as possible.

Sometimes a spoonful of turmeric is enough!

So, what can we do to change this? I say let's get creative! I have visited many hospitals over the last ten years and learned that sometimes new spices make a change. Turmeric, for example, has an anti-inflammatory effect, ginger helps diluting, etc. And sometimes, it is just a new cooking method or the motto "less is more" that have a big impact. For example, it makes a huge difference whether you cook carrots in water or in carrot juice, whether you try to prepare a meal for 3 euros and include meat - or whether you prepare it vegetarian and squeeze fresh vegetables into it, etc. Also, excellent oils, such as linseed oil, pumpkin seed oil or milk thistle oil have outstanding impacts on our body.

I therefore strongly believe in change and that is why I have entered into a partnership with HELIOS - a German hospital operator with 86 hospitals in the country. Together with other Michelin star chefs, we have created 12 new dishes for HELIOS, which are now available in every hospital as a supplement for patients. Every single one of them is absolutely delicious, creative, balanced and also partly vegetarian.

Don't get me wrong: it's not about bringing luxury products to the hospital or bringing Michelin stars to the patient - it's about thinking about a new quality for the patient, so that they can heal better and faster. Because in the end it is about what it is all about: a healthy life.

And one more thing: in the past years I had the great opportunity to travel the world as a guest chef. It was striking that the supposedly poorer countries were mostly "getting along better" in terms of hospital nutrition. This may be due to the fact that they are often not centrally supplied but run by a family. They show what it means to cook with "love", the patient does not take the meal alone and is fed, if necessary. I have also experienced a deep and broad knowledge of the healing effects of roots, herbs and vegetables in many cultures. This knowledge naturally helps to prepare tasty, digestible and healthy food.

So, there is definitely a lot more to learn for all of us. I am happy to do so and hope you are, too. Stay safe, stay healthy!