

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Chef began grand traditions at desert hotels

Tracy Conrad

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Fresh peas and carrots were interspersed with the tiniest white pearl onions, all carefully seasoned. There was a choice of baked potato or baked potato skins. Hot rolls and butter were also included. The newspaper recorded the evening's entrée was "chicken a la Werner — it was flawless, the skin had the crispness of a raw apple in the fall."

The history of resort towns is often told in terms of famous visitors and celebrity residents. But what makes for a true resort is the working people who provide a festive holiday experience for guests and residents alike. One of those industrious souls, who honorably worked in hospitality in the desert for decades, is worth pausing to remember.

A little more than a week ago, Werner Futterer, the last of the great executive chefs of the heyday of Palm Springs, passed away quietly. Having come from a world away in Europe, he'd started his career in the desert with a big noise at the El Mirador Hotel, now the very site of Desert Regional Medical Center, where he poetically finished his life's journey.

His presence in the desert was loudly proclaimed as a boon for everyone who likes to eat. His arrival made the newspaper: "Oilman Ray Ryan's El Mirador Hotel has announced the appointment of a new executive chef — with a twist. Werner Futterer, at 32, is now one of the youngest top caterers in a major American hotel. ... Manager Gethin Williams called him 'energetic, and well beyond his years in experience.'"

A native of a medieval town near the Black Forest in Germany, Futterer served his apprenticeship in Switzerland after World War II, training in various restaurants, sanatoriums and hotels while attending culinary school. As was common in the food industry then (and still now), opportunities presented themselves.

While working at the Hotel Gotthard along the River Limmat, multiply crossed by arched bridges in Zurich, he



Werner Futterer stands behind the kind of lavish buffet that he regularly created for guests and residents alike.

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met a chef who was looking for a Swiss-trained cook to work in Stockholm. Together they went by train, but Futterer lacked the proper papers when he arrived at the border. The young cooks were held at the border until the chef called the police and they were finally admitted to Sweden.

Futterer found employment as the assistant chef at Stockholm's Grand Hotel, but Sweden an exceedingly expensive place to live and would not be his final stop. His paternal aunt sponsored his immigration to the United States. On December 9, 1957, he boarded a Swiss Air DC 7 propeller plane. The flight took him from Zurich to Koln, Germany, to Shannon, Ireland, to Newfoundland, Halifax, Nova Scotia and finally New York.

Working at the Buffalo Club in his aunt's hometown, he met Art Fri, who was maitre d' in a hotel in Palm Springs. Futterer interviewed with him and got the job in the faraway desert.

In 1959, a cross-country trip by car landed him at the El Mirador as "chef garde manger," under fellow German Gerhard Knack. Literally a world away from Germany, he made a home for himself on the desert, becoming an integral part of the community.

In 1965 with the retirement of Knack, Futterer was made executive chef of the whole El Mirador kitchen operation. His European training and sensibility were highly prized. As the visitors to the des-

ert were increasingly sophisticated, there was a strong demand for haute cuisine to go with swimming pools, golf courses, tennis courts and nightclubs. Futterer would command a small army of cooks in order to provide for the legions of hotel guests and locals who wanted to dine on his cuisine.

With the conversion of the El Mirador into what was then called Desert Hospital, Futterer became executive chef at the Spa Hotel. His tantalizing menus were published in the newspaper due to the intense interest. Appetizers started the offerings, then "fresh fish of the day — white fish, sand dabs and salmon — plus chicken beef, veal and lamb entrees" all dressed with secret European sauces were available. Tuna salad, shrimp Louie, pastries, soups and stews rounded out the menu. The tables were also always laid with a relish bowl of crisp celery, carrots and large green and ripe black olives to accompany the ubiquitous pre-dinner cocktail.

The Desert Sun reproduced his recipes. For Marengo Veal Saute featuring browned onions, baby tomatoes, piles of mushrooms, white wine and plenty of butter, the instructions concluded, "Arrange veal on a serving platter, spoon sauce over the top, and garnish with chopped or sprigs of parsley. Sprinkle fried croutons around meat."

No matter the cuisine, in the summertime the hotels and restaurants shuttered in the extreme heat. Working

people were compelled to travel in order to find jobs elsewhere. In a kind of valley-wide great pilgrimage, they found work at summer resorts, those with seasons opposite to that of the desert. They spread out to Yosemite, Lake Tahoe, coastal towns and even further afield from California. Futterer worked at the Stanley Hotel in Estes, Colorado, and in Harbor Springs, Michigan, always finding his way back to the desert for the winter season.

During his lifetime in the desert, Futterer worked at the La Quinta Hotel, Mission Hills Country Club, Tamarisk Country Club, El Dorado Country Club, Rim Rocks Restaurant and the Tennis Club, often as a guest chef or substituting for friends and lending a hand when needed.

The Desert Sun noted in 1983, two decades into his tenure in the valley, "Chef Werner Futterer may have the distinction of being the only chef in the entire desert who does not want to eventually open his own restaurant. As executive chef of the Spa Hotel, Futterer has found home and peace of mind that he has no wish to mar by taking on the responsibilities of his own establishment."

The article quoted him as saying, "No way would I ever open my own place... Ten to 12 hours of work a day is already more than enough for me. It's too rough to open up your own place, especially in this town where restaurants open and close at the drop of a hat."

Futterer had indeed found happiness and a true home on the desert, working industriously in the largest hotels of the valley. He understood hard work and the complicated logistics of creating a memorable holiday for visitors. Having trained in the old tradition of the grandest European hotels, the understated and elegant man embodied that tradition for decades.

His passing marks not only an end to his long journey, but the end of an era.

Tracy Conrad is president of the Palm Springs Historical Society. The Thanks for the Memories column appears Sundays in The Desert Sun. Write to her at pshstracy@gmail.com.