



## ***Rollin' Restaurant: Destination Unknown***

***Giulia Pines bags a table at one of Berlin's most exclusive supper clubs...***



It reads like the beginning of a mystery novel, or at least some kind of demented eating contest: The Challenge? Eight courses paired with eight cocktails consumed in a matter of hours. The Location? Old-timey Schöneberg cocktail bar [Stagger Lee](#), whose name on a normal night might seem merely clever, but on one special night, seemed like a veritable foreshadowing of hangovers to come. (It's actually a folk song.) The Cast? Ten hungry strangers, brought together by three charming and stylish *bon-vivants* with the cooking chops (and chopping skills) to rival those of Michelin-starred chefs.

Suffice to say, just like well-crafted *krimi* novels, this dinner was not for the faint of heart or the weak of stomach; its succession of succulent dishes seemingly unending, a veritable parade of meats and fishes.

So let's call this gluttonous and entirely enjoyable evening a sort of [Omnivore's Dilemma](#), only this dilemma's central question wasn't "to eat or not to eat?" but rather "how much and how fast?" The [Rollin'](#)

[Restaurant](#) concept can seem like some kind of extreme sport to the uninitiated. In reality, it's one of the best dinners you're likely to have in Berlin...but good luck getting a place at the table.

"All of us had been cooking for years when we met at work and decided to have a 9-course-dinner just for us," explains Paul Fritze, one of Rollin' Restaurant's three master chefs along with Björn Schmidt and Paul Nonnenmacher. (It should be noted that "work" for them has absolutely nothing to do with cooking, and they plan to keep it that way.) "After a couple of times, we just thought we could do it for a lot more people and it would probably be great fun. We looked for locations, threw around some ideas. It was supposed to be a one shot thing for us, but...since then we never stopped."

The idea of a supper club may not be entirely novel to those in the know: amateur cooks lure in guests with creative recipes served in a private home or another unusual location. But perhaps the genius behind Rollin' Restaurant is that they manage to tweak an old concept into something novel—either that, or you become so wrapped up in the experience (and even the anticipation of the experience) that you forget it's probably been done before.

What hasn't been done before, however, at Rollin' Restaurant or at supper clubs in general, is the unbridled enthusiasm for the art of the well-mixed cocktail, which has already gained overwhelming support in countless "Prohibition era" lounges and speakeasies in places like New York and San Francisco, but has yet to make a big enough splash on this side of the pond. Indeed it was obvious to everyone present that night that the food may have been good, but the cocktails, mixed in front of us by Stagger Lee's main man Jakob, were the real stars.



Starting off the evening with a single oyster on a bed of ice was an inspired choice—the gush of seawater coupled with a hit of pickled onions felt like an introductory palate cleanser, pushing aside the remnants of whatever ill-advised *Döner* or pizza concoction most of us had eaten for lunch and paving the way for the complexities of what was to come.

A special room had been set aside for us, just apart enough to feel like the VIP area, but featuring a convenient window separating it from the rest of the bar, allowing patrons to wonder what on earth was going on in there. What was going on in there, over the course of about four hours, was a *smörgåsbord* of Swedish- and German- inspired creative concoctions and alcohol-fueled conversation, mostly about food of course.

"We all love food," commented chef Paul when I emailed with him later, "because it brings together great people. We are constantly looking for new stuff to put on a plate, and that's the essence of it: Great food to share with great people. Over and over again.



In spite of the fact that the Rollin' Restaurant boys had advertised entry to this month's dinner as lottery-based, it was fairly obvious that a bit more thought had gone into the guest list than simply picking names out of a hat, a fact confirmed by an insider—the wife of chef Björn—seated at the table among us.

Of course, it is hard not to view supper-clubbing as a self-selecting activity; you have to be a pretty special breed of extrovert to want to take up the challenge embodied in Rollin's tagline, printed on its website: "Come to places you don't know, to eat food you haven't ordered, together with people

you have never seen before."

As such, however, it creates a very special sort of atmosphere—a room full of utter food nerds (or "foodies" although the term is overused) exchanging tips on where to buy the best flours in town, or a story about a pig farm north of Berlin that actually sends you a photo, along with your choice cuts of meat, of the animal you are about to consume. In discussing his food shopping habits, Paul summed up the sentiment behind this quite well: "I try to apply a simple rule: Shop as close to the producer as possible.... Tough sometimes, but if you love food, there is really no another choice."

Private supper clubs have already colonized other major capitals like Paris or London over the last decade, but the trend has really only taken hold in Berlin in the last three or four years, with a new ones now seeming to pop up almost monthly. But the fact that Germany still lives in quasi-infamy for its lack of decent eats can prove to be a boon for the discerning food fan—going to one of these events really does feel like a meeting of a secret order—Teutonic nights of the round dinner table, perhaps?—and less like something to do simply because it sounds cool.

And there is really only a special subset of people in most parts of the world that would consider eating a sliced, pickled *amuse bouche* of elk heart (hunted by one of the chefs and presented to each guest on a spoon), undoubtedly the highlight of the evening. While cities like New York and London groan under the weight of their own artisanal chefs—brewers, bakers, jammers, and picklers all--and a trend that started on the outskirts of geekdom now seems so mainstream it's hardly worth mentioning anymore, it feels nourishing to find some fellow Berliners who can and want to hold down an entire conversation about bread.



Now about that elk heart, the only part of the meal not listed on the menu: it could be seen as the second palate cleanser of the night, sandwiched between five main courses and two desserts. Seeing as those five main courses were also accompanied by five alcoholic masterpieces, all the guests of the night should have been far more than simply tipsy at that point.

I have no idea how everyone else was doing, but somehow I had managed to hold it together by swigging only half of each drink—as difficult as it was to leave the other half alone. Along with their crab-filled take on the summer roll was the only non-alcoholic drink of the night (put there as a decoy no doubt): a spritzzy shot of sweet and sour ginger beer and lime.

Next up was an ethereal mussel tartare sitting in a kind of witch's brew of refreshing cucumber *gelée*, accompanied by an equally reviving dill and mustard martini cocktail. To follow would be a sort of cod



brûlée, burned with a flamethrower usually reserved for the classic French crème brûlée, expertly cooked lamb with a swirl of pea shoots across the plate, and crisp bits of pork belly arranged like abstract art.

Paired with each of them would be drinks like a port cocktail topped with a puff of egg white foam, or a combination of dark beer from a little-known brewery in Franken and a wonderfully smoky shot of Talisker. Of course a dinner like this could only be capped off with two desserts of distinctly different flavors. The overwhelming favorite combined chocolate syrup and candied fennel with a homemade whiskey and burnt-almond ice cream.

The drink that came paired with it was an “egg bourbon” using the yolks that remained from the earlier egg white foam. Delightfully creamy but with a sweetness not at all overwhelming, it came topped with a grating of nutmeg that provided the necessary kick.

It can be argued, of course, that those who seek out dining experiences like Rollin' Restaurant's revel in a level of decadence that even most restaurant meals barely approach. Making diners apply to a lottery system to gain a reservation and transfer money ahead of time certainly can't be the best way to win loyal customers. Then there's the fact the meal can cost anywhere from €30-90, depending on the number of guests at each dinner and the number of courses served.

Even worse, it can lead diners to engage in a kind of self-deceit, believing the food to be better than it actually is, simply because they have jumped through so many hoops to get to it. But three members of the Rollin' Restaurant team are not out to get rich, and they aren't even looking to open a restaurant.

They do this because they are food geeks, and they want everyone else to join in. They tap into the most primary urge that those who love cooking and food can have: to make others happy with their creations. And teetering drunkenly home on our bikes (me), or wisely and safely taking the U-bahn (everyone else), we were all quite happy in the notion that, somewhere out there in the city, there were others like us.

*Sign up for the [Rollin' Restaurant mailing list](#) to find out about their next event and bag a place at the table.*

***All photos by Giulia Pines***