

Interview by Wirtschaftsregional with Jutta & Hubertus Real

Wirtschaftsregional (Magazine): Ms. Real, Mr. Real, you won the Lifetime Achievement Award at the “Wirtschaftswunder” just over a month ago. Congratulations, also from us.

Hubertus Real: Thank you very much. We are very pleased to have received the award. It's just a pity that my father couldn't be there to see it.

Jutta Real: We could hardly believe it, that we, the small Sonnenhof, should receive such an award. But with time we got used to the idea (laughs). It is a tremendous appreciation of our work.

Hubertus Real: It's nice to be able to accept such an award even as a small company and to receive so much recognition. Certainly, most people are not aware of what it means to run a catering business at this level. This makes it even more satisfying that it was recognized and that we were perceived as “small artisans”.

Wirtschaftsregional: By calling yourself a “small artisan,” you're doing yourself a disservice. After all, you run one of the best-known hotels here in the region.

Hubertus Real: Yes, that's true. But look, what we do here is not purely managerial. Our job includes management, hosting, marketing, controlling, sales, personnel management, cooking, serving, creating, purchasing, hotel craftsmanship, gardening, maintaining and beautifying the building, and much more. We still do everything ourselves, as it's not otherwise possible in a relatively small business.

Jutta Real: It's service, craftsmanship and trade under one roof.

Wirtschaftsregional: In addition to all this, you also run a small company called "Valle Dulcis" and produce sauces, salad dressings and chocolates. How did that come about?

Hubertus Real: A few colleagues of mine had the idea of setting up this kind of food production and distribution company and approached me one day to ask if I would like to join them. Since I had a similar idea for some time, it didn't take much persuasion to convince me.

Wirtschaftsregional: What was it like at the beginning?

Hubertus Real: It was clear to us that it would not be an easy start, since we, ironically, came onto the market with our first product at the beginning of the global economic crisis. Our good fortune was that we all remain involved in this project to this day, in addition to our day jobs, so we see it as a hobby. It is still not a big business, but we are growing from year to year, and it is really fun. The tingling in the fingertips, when a new project is pending, makes it worth all the effort.

Wirtschaftsregional: You must have made salad dressings before?

Hubertus Real: Yes, of course (laughs), but only for my restaurant guests. Suddenly, however, the mixing pots became bigger and bigger, as the sauces were also sold on a trial basis at my colleague Willi Maier's Roximarkt. At first, I just wanted to produce a few sauces, until I felt that this was a completely new line of work, about which I then had no idea. When we were accepted into the product assortment at the "Globus" department store, everything changed overnight. Before that, we produced in the Sonnenhof's kitchen...sort of wherever we could. And now we suddenly had to comply with highly sensitive hygiene regulations, controls, proof of production, shipping contracts and everything else - and we also had to rent our own space and find a bottling company to meet all these requirements. If we had known that in advance, I wouldn't have gotten involved. Today, we're glad we did.

Wirtschaftsregional: Your restaurant "Marée" has won several awards. It currently has 17 points and three toques from Gault Millau, plus a Michelin star. But let's be honest: Do you really need all that? The recognition is often criticized.

Hubertus Real: About 20 years ago, we resisted being included in "Gault Millau" at all.

Wirtschaftsregional: Why?

Jutta Real: There was a time when the writing was very negative, even nasty. Many restaurateurs suffered from the ratings.

Hubertus Real: At that time, we were still under construction and did not even operate a public restaurant. The restaurant was reserved purely for hotel guests. At some point, however, the testers arrived: "We're writing now, whether you like it or not." Luck was on our side right from the start, however, so we immediately received positive reviews. Suddenly we realized that these gourmet food critics could also have a positive side.

Wirtschaftsregional: Why is that?

Hubertus Real: After each award, the success is distributed by the authors in the media, which is the equivalent of free advertising. Moreover, there are guests who attach great importance to such awards and visit us precisely for that reason.

Wirtschaftsregional:

Do you not feel any additional pressure because of this?

Hubertus Real: No. I myself am now at an age where I can fortunately let go a little. If we have one point less next year, then that's just the way it is. But that wouldn't be good for the business and my dear employees, that's for certain.

Wirtschaftsregional: Most hotels in your segment have a significant financier in the background. What is the situation with you?

Hubertus Real: Fortunately, we don't have that yet, which means we are our own boss. Even though we have had to adjust our prices upward again and again in the past, and work in a highly cost-optimized manner so that we can maintain this entire apparatus. In return, we always reinvest the entire cash flow for conversions and cosmetic renovations every year during the company vacations, just like my parents did back then. Otherwise, it would not be possible for us to continue to play in the top league.

Wirtschaftsregional: Ms. Real, let's take a look back. The Sonnenhof didn't start out as a gourmet temple.

Jutta Real: No, that's true. Back then, we had anything but an easy start. We were able to take over a well-run guesthouse, but many old regulars were not convinced that young people such as us could run a business and they turned around once they got to the parking lot. In addition, there was a considerable financial burden and there were at least five other good hotels in Vaduz at that time, plus the motel in Triesen. We started with four employees. We cleaned the guests' shoes ourselves. I was the secretary, and my Emil was the cook. We also carried suitcases, but we were convinced from the first moment that we could do it and it was a lot of fun. Back then the guests were mainly vacation guests. However, the industry was developing enormously at that time and this brought us many guests. In addition, Liechtenstein's international relations brought high government officials and dignitaries to the country, who mostly stayed with us. Liechtenstein's financial center developed at the same time.

Hubertus Real: So, it was obvious that the overnight stays would be shorter. On top of all that, we had to deal with a few other tough challenges. For example, my parents' regular guests were getting on in

years and becoming rarer, also the steady appreciation of the Swiss franc. In 1997, about four years after I started, I felt compelled to open the restaurant to passers-by as well, in order to give the Sonnenhof a new, younger dynamic (the restaurant had previously been open only to hotel guests. This was an agreement between my father and his brother Felix, so as not to compete with each other). Lo and behold, the concept worked, and we had suddenly created a new revenue stream. On the other hand, our cuisine, our hotel, our standards were always driven by a very high increase in quality. As my parents practiced back then, I now raise my personal bar higher and higher.

Wirtschaftsregional:

Did the hotel adapt to the guests or the guests to the hotel?

Hubertus Real: As I said, my parents had an incredible urge to get better and better. They didn't look primarily at the guests, but at success.

Jutta Real: In 1972, for example, we conducted surveys among the guests to find out whether they wanted a swimming pool. "For God's sake, no!", they shouted. We built it anyway, of course, along with 12 junior suites, to keep the business going. But we also always asked ourselves: What do we value in a hotel when we go on vacation?

Hubertus Real: So refrigerators were also added to the rooms in 1969. That was an absolute novelty at the time and did not exist anywhere else in the hotel industry.

Jutta Real: On one of our walks, my husband asked me what we could still improve and he wanted to know what I would wish for in a hotel room when traveling. My answer: Something to drink without having to call room service! The idea of an in-room refrigerator was born.

Wirtschaftsregional: So you then installed refrigerators in the rooms?

Jutta Real: It started with a single mobile one! We moved it from room to room, depending on the request. But after just a few days, reservations started coming in for "the room with the refrigerator." So we ordered more and more...all mobile, until each of our rooms had one.

Wirtschaftsregional: financial crisis of 2008 was also certainly one such external influence.

Hubertus Real: We were probably the first to really feel it. After the flow of journalists died down, there was a crash in January 2009, and overnight we had no more guests. They suddenly didn't dare to come to the country. Every day we got calls and cancellations, saying, "Well, you know why ...". And we always thought they were good regular guests who came to Liechtenstein because of us, the Sonnenhof. That's how you can deceive yourself. (laughs)

Wirtschaftsregional: What did you do about it?

Hubertus Real: I'm not the kind of person who immediately throws in the towel, so I thought carefully about how I could give the business new impetus and thus bring new customers back into the country. I also cared greatly about my employees. I just wanted to keep them all and maintain the standard! So there was only one magic phrase: Go for it! I invested at a time when the Liechtenstein financial center was in danger of capsizing, so everyone said I was crazy and shook their heads when I told them about my plans. Even my father seethed, and my mother was also quite queasy. But I simply gave our Sonnenhof a chance to grow in terms of tourism and to turn it into a little paradise in order to again attract more vacation guests. This has resulted in daily motivation for me to maintain our little paradise for as long as possible.