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*peace on earth, goodwill to men*

# CASA CORDOVA

A Little  
Switzerland in  
Arroyo Seco

BY KENNETH W. HARDY

Hi Martha  
Gün Aron  
- matt

Casa Cordova, a tiny restaurant in Arroyo Seco, is a contradiction. It seemingly has no reason to exist in this isolated Spanish village some nine miles north of Taos. Yet exist it does, nestled behind a wall of towering cottonwoods in the midst of quaint adobe homes.

During the long winter ski season in northern New Mexico, Casa Cordova teems with a cosmopolitan clientele of skiers from Chicago, Denver, New York, Boston, St. Louis, Memphis and San Francisco. These aficionados of the sweet life are drawn mothlike to this improbable spot by glowing recommendations from fellow members of the jet set. The result is a sophisticated atmosphere punctuated by bright conversation and superb dining.

Casa Cordova is hardly the name you would expect for a Swiss restaurant. In a region where chile sauce, not Bernaise sauce, is king, this shock factor is one of the things which is causing the tiny village (pop. 400) and the even smaller restaurant (cap. 60) to spin into the national epicurean spotlight.

The improbability of Casa Cordova becomes less mystifying when one realizes that Taos Ski Valley, the European-style mountain ski village benevolently ruled by the high priest of New Mexico skiing, Ernie Blake, lies just 10 miles up the canyon from Arroyo Seco.

It was Ernie Blake who several years ago convinced a fellow Swiss named Godie Schuetz to quit the Swiss-American village of New Glarus, Wisconsin, in favor of this wildly rugged mecca of expert skiers. Schuetz, who had come to the United States in 1948, reluctantly bade farewell to a restaurant which he managed with his parents and moved to New Mexico in 1959.

While gaining still more expertise in the restaurant and hotel business by working in several Taos hostleries, the personable Schuetz became one of Ski Valley's most popular instructors, a role he still plays during the ski season. When owners of the little known, but already outstanding, Casa Cordova put the restaurant on the block, in stepped Schuetz and his charming wife Daphne.

Schuetz knew from experience that the total environment of a restaurant—that unique blend of hospitality, fine food, gracious service, just the right wine—was the key to success. Rather than seclude himself in the kitchen as a player in his culinary orchestra, Schuetz decided to be the conductor. He would hire a chef, a bartender and the best waiters available.

"When you hire a chef, ask him to make a soup. Only great chefs can make great soups," claims Schuetz. Today, no one is sure whether it was Ernst Bolleter's onion or lentil soup that did it, but both could place him in the ranks of the great chefs. Godie Schuetz knew this and Bolleter was hired on the spot, bringing to Casa Cordova experience accumulated at such eateries as Aspen's Red Onion, Denver's Cafe Promenade and Zurich's Hotel Limmathof.

Bolleter is a culinary concertmaster charged with blending the commonplace into masterpieces noted for their subtlety in flavor. All of Bolleter's specialities are balanced to perfection. There are no prima donnas on the spice rack. No spice or herb is allowed to dominate the performance. Every dish is a concert in harmony.

The service at Casa Cordova is wholly continental, but with a Spanish accent. When Schuetz started recruiting waiters, he found none who could meet his standards, so he initiated an ambitious training program for local youth. "They stay with us until they join the Army or go to college," says Schuetz of his coterie of highly professional waiters. "In Switzerland it takes a man two years to train as a waiter. Here we train them in a year." The result of Schuetz' training program is among the many pleasant surprises at Casa Cordova.

As conductor, Schuetz oversees the nightly performance which gets rave notices from the forty to 100 guests his culinary orchestra entertains. These notices, spread by word of mouth, are the sources of Casa Cordova's far-reaching fame. It's not unusual for Schuetz to receive calls from Denver, Colorado Springs or even Dallas to make reservations for Friday or Saturday dinner. Reservations

are definitely recommended in view of the experience of some 100 prospective guests who were turned away one recent Saturday evening.

Owner-maitre d' Schuetz regales his guests with quips as he bounces from table to table on the alert for the slightest flaw. When it comes to food he is dead serious. The story is told around Casa Cordova about a man from Los Angeles who called saying that the restaurant had been highly recommended by a friend. The man allowed that he was in Taos and wanted to have dinner at Casa Cordova with his wife. "What do you have on your menu?"

Schuetz explained that the menu was continental.

"Fine," said the Californian. "Could you also tell me how much you charge for dinner?"

"Five to eight dollars per person," was the curt but still polite Swiss-German reply.

"Excellent," said the man. "One final thing. We have our eight-year-old son with us and he's a goofy eater."

Composure exhausted, Schuetz exploded into the telephone, "I'm sorry, sir, but we don't have any goofy food."

"To this day," recalls Schuetz, "I don't know where they had dinner that evening."

Next to the outstanding cuisine, probably the greatest factor contributing to the enjoyment of Schuetz' clientele is his philosophy of restaurant management. "When our guests leave, I like to hear them say, 'We've had a marvelous evening.' If they say, 'We've had a superb dinner,' this is just part of what we are aiming for. But to say they had a marvelous evening embodies the entire staff. I want our customers to leave with the feeling that everything is being done just for them as if they were our only guests."

The Schuetz philosophy carries over into the decor of the Casa Cordova. In the spacious lounge, guests enjoy before-dinner cocktails while ensconced in bright red overstuffed

Former Sports Illustrated editor John Stebbins caught the mood of Casa Cordova in his photograph of chef Ernest Bolleter serving guests a house specialty, pompano en papillotes.



chairs reminiscent of the orchestra seats at the opulent *Folies Bergere*. A roaring fire at one end of the room casts a warm light over the revelers sipping apres-ski concoctions expertly prepared at the massive wooden bar filling the opposite end of the room.

The dining room is distinguished by a rare collection of paintings from the studios of such well-known Taos artists as Eric Gibberd, Dorothy Brett, R. C. Gorman and Emile Bisstram. There are two particularly striking works by Bisstram—his famous 1932 painting, *Consolation*, and a more recent effort depicting four Indian women.

The extensive cellar at Casa Cordova offers guests a selection of over twenty-five foreign and domestic wines ranging from Beaujolais St. Louis to Chateau Lafite in the French reds and from Pouilly Fuisse to Chateau d'Yquem in the French whites. Other wines are from Italy, Switzerland, Austria and Germany, and range from the popular Liebfraumilch to an expensive and expansive Bernkasteler Doktor. White wines are a particular specialty in view of the emphasis on the traditional European fare of veal.

Highlighting the menu at Casa Cordova are such specialties as veal curry, cordon bleu, shrimp gourmet, pompano en papillotes and a veal piccata so delicate that it defies description.

Skiers favor such dishes as cheese and beef fondue. "Beef fondue is one of my favorites," says Schuetz with a characteristic twinkle in his eye. "We follow an old Swiss tradition that when a girl drops a piece of meat in the fondue pot she must kiss every man at the table—and that includes me."

Following dinner and a delightful dessert, which could be a meringue or a chocolate mousse, guests traditionally retire to the lounge for cognac or Swiss coffee, a drink similar to Irish coffee but with kirschwasser rather than Irish whisky.

The mark of a restaurateur as an artist is the manner in which he composes a menu. At this, Schuetz and Bolleter are masters. Take for instance the one prepared recently for a party of twelve. The culinary extravaganza began with escargots a la Bourguignonne, a house specialty of exquisite delicacy. Soupe a l'oignon au oxtail lie followed by salade verte were next on the menu. The piece de resistance was a superb filet de boeuf Wellington accompanied by sauce chasseur, epinard "Rockefeller," carot glace and pommes duchesse. For dessert chef Bolleter served beignets de

pommes. Cafe Suisse was the finale to the banquet served with a Chateau de Meursault (1964) and a Chateau Lafite (1964).

A favorite of the house is Ernie Bolleter's veal curry, a superb cubed veal dish laced with just enough curry and ginger to give it a spicy but not overpowering flavor. To prepare the dish at home, use the following recipe:

Veal Curry Casa Cordova  
(for six)

- 1/2 pounds of milk fed veal cut into 1/2-inch cubes
- 1 large onion
- 1/2 apple, peeled
- 1/4 orange with rind
- 1 tablespoon raisins
- 2 tablespoons curry powder
- 1 tablespoon pineapple
- 1/2 cup pineapple juice
- 1 bay leaf
- 1/2 teaspoon ginger
- 1 tablespoon salt
- 3/4 cup flour
- 1 cup half and half cream
- 2 quarts chicken stock (or chicken bouillon)

Heat enough vegetable oil to cover the bottom of a skillet and in it very lightly brown the veal (approx. 5 min.). Chop the onion, apple, orange (including rind) and pineapple very fine and add to the veal. Saute for about 4 to 5 minutes. Sprinkle flour and curry powder over the above and mix thoroughly. Mix in chicken stock, ginger, salt and pepper. Bake in a 400-degree oven for about 40 minutes. After baking, more curry powder may be added to individual taste. Just before serving, add the half and half and blend together. The dish may be garnished with browned almonds, bananas, pineapple rings and peaches

all sauted in butter. Serve with rice (1/3 wild rice-2/3 domestic rice) and chutney.

An excellent accompaniment to chef Bolleter's veal curry is:

Lentil Soup  
(for six)

- 1 1/2 cups lentils
- 1/2 onion
- 4 slices lard or bacon
- 2 fresh garlic cloves
- 1 tablespoon tomato puree
- 1 large potato
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 8 cups water

Soak lentils in water for about six to eight hours to soften. Combine chopped onions, lard or bacon and fine cut garlic cloves and brown slightly in just enough oil to cover the bottom of a heavy skillet. Place lentils in a large pot and add all of the above plus the water and tomato puree. Cut the potato very fine and add to pot. Simmer four to six hours before serving.

For dessert, chef Bolleter recommends a cake and pudding treat known simply, but elegantly, as the:

Diplomate  
(for one)

- 8 small cubes of pound cake
- 10 pieces of candied fruit
- 3 tablespoons vanilla pudding
- 1/2 ounce rum
- 2 tablespoons of whipped cream
- 1 cherry

Place the cubed pound cake in the bottom of a molly polly glass, then add a layer of candied fruit and pour 1/2 ounce of rum over the whole. Fill two-thirds of the remaining empty portion of the glass with any standard vanilla pudding and refrigerate until thoroughly chilled. Just before serving, top with whipped cream and a cherry.



Genial Godie Schuetz, owner of Casa Cordova, serves beef fondue to Miss Tally Richards and her escort, nationally famous sculptor Eugene Dobos.