



Marcel and Sabina Heinrich Tschalèr,
Freddy Christandl (from left to right)

Photo: Tina Sturzenegger

ALMOST EVERY VARIETY
HAS ITS OWN
CHARACTER, ITS OWN
TASTE AND OFTEN ITS
OWN TEXTURE TOO.

INTERVIEW

The interview with Freddy Christandl was carried out by Thomas Häring

What makes mountain potatoes different from lowland potatoes?

The biggest difference is that a mountain potato has more cell walls than a potato grown in lower-lying regions. That means that it stores far less water proportionally.

Is that why Albula mountain potatoes taste so good?

That's just part of it – various different factors are involved. While that is of course one of the reasons for the intense taste, another very important factor is the soil. A mountain region in itself is no guarantee of a good potato, the soil has to be right too. In the Albula valley, we are very lucky in this respect. Our soil is referred to as fluvisol – i.e. alluvial soil composed almost exclusively of sand, stone and humus. This means the potato can breathe better and there is hardly any waterlogging, for instance in the event of heavy rainfall.

So the alluvial soil acts almost like a flavour enhancer?

It is another part of the puzzle. The altitude and the higher intensity of UV light associated with this also play an important role. Take mountain wheat for instance: when placed under a microscope it has a completely different structure from lowland wheat. And finally there is the farmyard manure, which is refined by Marcel until he gets the dose right for use in the fields in autumn.

I know from Cyrill Pflugi, our chef here at Hof Maran, that cooking Albula mountain potatoes requires a slightly different approach. Does that have anything to do with the factors you mentioned?

The high cell wall content in particular has an impact on cooking techniques. Cooking time is almost doubled compared to lowland potatoes as a result of this. But even well-known recipes need to be changed: for mashed potatoes you need three to five times as much liquid depending on the variety, or you can make gnocchi with around 10% of the flour asked for in the usual recipe – the end result is a real revelation: a pure potato taste, light and airy like a soufflé.



My mouth is watering just at the thought! What is your favourite potato type and your favourite recipe?

Almost all of the nearly 50 varieties have their own character, their own taste and often very different textures. My favourite thing to do is make a few baked potatoes, usually in autumn and winter: around four to six different types with a good knob of butter. This reflects the taste and colour variety of the potatoes – it's the simplicity that makes them taste so great. If there are a few potatoes left over, I squeeze them gently and fry them in butter the next day. The recipe: www.bergkartoffeln.ch/rezepte

What are the practicalities of cultivating such variety and what particular challenges does this entail?

Variety also means considerable extra outlay in each step from the field to the plate – but the end result is a real revelation for the palate. It took Marcel years to understand the agronomic properties of each variety. In life, there are some neighbours you get on with better than others – it's no different in the potato field. The sporty types are always at the start of the field, where the wind usually blows into the crop land. If a variety is sporty, it means it is generally more resistant to blight. If varieties with a weak immune system were to be placed out front, the wind would soon cause any viruses to infect the entire field. As in any case, there is added concern for at-risk groups (or varieties). But then it goes on, from harvesting, sorting, storage and order picking all the way to the kitchen ... Last autumn we placed 88 different items in stock. There were maybe 20 kg of some sizes and a few tonnes of other varieties.

Your explanations are very interesting and I can see some parallel with the restaurant trade, which is equally complex. Can you compare the two?

You can definitely draw comparisons here. The more variety you offer a guest, the more effort is involved. But it's worth the extra effort if you can make your guest happy with it and they enjoy every second of their stay. That creates lasting memories! What more can you ask for?

Is that something that drives you in your project?

If you enjoy doing something then it comes naturally. Our primary motivation is to preserve the ancient varieties and knowledge of mountain potato growing for future generations. That's why we started the *Kartoffelakademie*. It's just wonderful to think of the part played with every potato consumed – all the more so if there is enjoyment involved and a holiday at Hof Maran.