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IN GOOD
TASTE

Elevating culinary excellence
in Zurich, Switzerland

BY Steven Tingle

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Three-Michelin-star chef Quique Dacosta of Spain paired his cooking talents with Dolder Grand hotel head chef Heiko Nieder at the Epicure culinary festival to produce works of edible art.

CHEF HEIKO NIEDER APPEARS PERFECTLY CALM.

The time is four o'clock, a mere three and half hours before he will begin serving a magnum opus of a tasting menu to guests of the Epicure, the annual over-the-top culinary festival held at the Dolder Grand hotel in Zurich, Switzerland. Despite the hour, the mood in the kitchen is quiet, serious, and austere, like that of an operating room during a delicate surgery. The dozen or so of Nieder's staff, all seemingly young, lean, and chiseled from stone, in that noble Swiss tradition, glide silently

among the stoves, warming cabinets, and stainless steel tables in a fluid and graceful rhythm. The only chatter comes from a group of food and travel writers, who look suspiciously out of place as they hover along the back wall of the kitchen taking notes and snapping pictures with their smartphones.

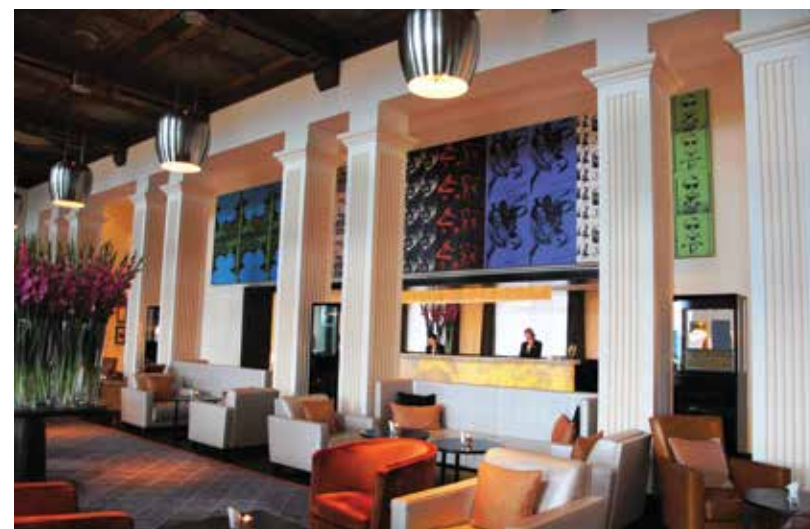
As Nieder inspects a tray of hollow, silver-painted egg shells, which will later be filled with a truffle egg custard, the silence is

broken when a young man carting dishes drops a small ramekin to the hard tile floor. The sudden, piercing crash disrupts the scene like a needle scratching across a record. All eyes swing to the red-faced busboy who immediately drops down to collect the broken crockery. A broom and dustpan are quickly fetched as jokes and barbs are thrown about, but soon tranquility returns to the kitchen, with each of the staff refocused on their own silent duty.

Photo by Daniel Szelényi



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1. A course at The Evening: goose liver with beet, walnut, and balsamic vinegar.
2. The Dolder Grand Hotel is the grande dame of Switzerland hotels.
3. Andy Warhol's thirty-six-foot-long *Big Retrospective Painting* is suspended above the hotel's front desk.

THE CUISINE OF SWITZERLAND IS SOMETHING OF A MISNOMER



1. Oil on canvas by Salvador Dali, *Femmes Métamorphosées*, is tucked in the hotel's restaurant.
2. Seared venison with garden herbs, sunflower seeds, and angostura
3. Hotel amenities include butler service (top) and a stunning, contemporary bar, with a lounge-style terrace.



AN EPICUREAN EVENING

JOINING NIEDER IN THE KITCHEN is Gert De Mangeleer, chef of Hertog Jan near Bruges, Belgium. Dressed in a tight black t-shirt, skinny jeans, and accessorized with multiple bracelets, rings, and necklaces, De

Mangeleer is the rock 'n' roll rebel to Nieder's buttoned-down, traditional look of double-breasted chef's whites. Both men are operating at the top of their games. Nieder's restaurant at the Dolder Grand, confusingly named "The Restaurant," has earned two Michelin stars and an impressive eighteen Gault Millau points. De Mangeleer's Hertog Jan has three Michelin stars, and with an average age of just twenty-two, his staff is the youngest three-star Michelin team in the world.

Tonight's dinner is one of three Epicure "Evenings" in which

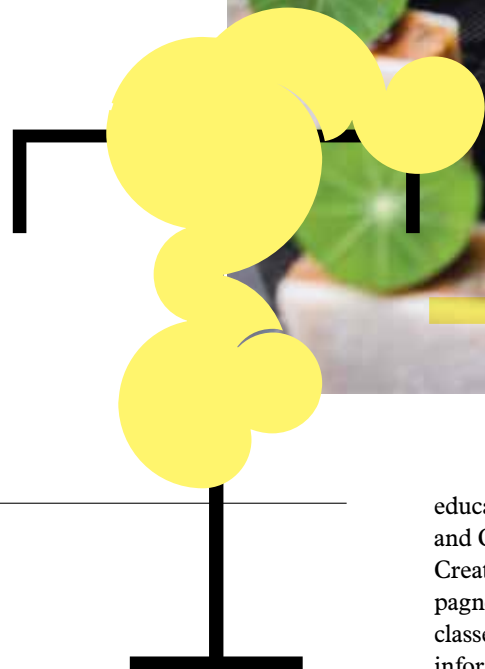
Nieder will collaborate with visiting chefs. Thursday's Evening paired Nieder with Quique Dacosta, whose eponymous three Michelin star restaurant sits on eastern Spain's *Costa Blanca*. And on Saturday evening Nieder will work alongside Christian Bau, head chef of Victor's Fine Dining by Christian Bau, a thirty-four seat, three-star Michelin restaurant on Germany's western border. Each evening is a culinary marathon beginning with champagne and *amuse-bouches* and ending with espresso, chocolates, and polite applause.

Photos by Fabian Höfeli and Heinz Unger

Tonight's Evening begins with a variety of *amuse* served on The Restaurant's patio overlooking Zurich, the lake, and on this clear evening, the Alps in the far distance. After a half hour of mingling, we are seated in the theatrically lit dining area, where spotlights illuminate the center of each table. Now the real fun begins: royal Belgium caviar atop dash vinegar-marinated watermelon and pearls of mozzarella; raw crayfish; raspberries marinated with vanilla oil and served under a crispy rose-shaped sliver of beetroot; seared venison with garden herbs and

sunflower seeds; and kohlrabi ravioli filled with smoked eel, goose liver, and yuzu. The courses keep coming, each delivered with Swiss precision by a brigade of efficient captains and servers who appear moments after the stewards have poured that course's wine pairing—a 2011 Grüner Veltliner for the raw crayfish, a 2008 Lupicaia for the venison.

Four hours after being seated, the final “official” course is served: a “refreshing combination” of cranberries, mascarpone, and jasmine blossom. Then, over the next forty-five minutes, two “unofficial” dessert courses appear with ingredients as contrasting as banana, avocado, corn, blue potato, Kombu algae, and gummy candies. Finally, just a few minutes shy of the five-hour mark, the trays of chocolates begin to arrive. Calogero Giunta, the hotel's chocolatier, is not only, in my observation, the largest man by at least one hundred pounds on the hotel's staff, he is also something of a magician, producing up to nine thousand pieces of gourmet chocolate each week with flavors as varied and distinct as green tea, curry, chicory, rhubarb, and Pop Rocks. The evening ends with coffee and espresso and a few brief but sincere words from Nieder and De Mangeleer who thank the guests for their participation in the event. As if it's been a chore.



NEW TRADITIONS

THIS YEAR MARKS THE SECOND year of the four-day Epicure festival, which, in addition to the tasting menu “Evenings,” also includes

educational classes such as “Rum and Chocolate” pairings, “Cocktail Creations,” and “Caviar and Champagne” tastings. These “master classes” are well produced and informational, but in the end, let's face it, they are really just additional opportunities to eat and drink. The festival culminates with the “Final,” a five-and-a-half hour long Sunday

Photos provided by Dolder Grand Hotel

afternoon Michelin-worthy gorge-fest, where each of the eleven visiting chefs presents a dish, along with a wine pairing, prepared at their own sleek, white-lacquered cooking station in the hotel's minimalist-designed banquet space.

Of the eleven chefs who will join Nieder at this year's Epicure, only two work in Switzerland: Nieder

1. The Evening with chef Heiko Nieder features a variety of amuse-bouches served on The Restaurant's patio overlooking Zurich and the lake.
2. Chef Nieder and Gert De Mangeleer, chef of Hertog Jan near Bruges, Belgium, work side by side in preparation for The Evening.
3. Chef Quique Dacosta's three-Michelin-star restaurant sits on eastern Spain's Costa Blanca.



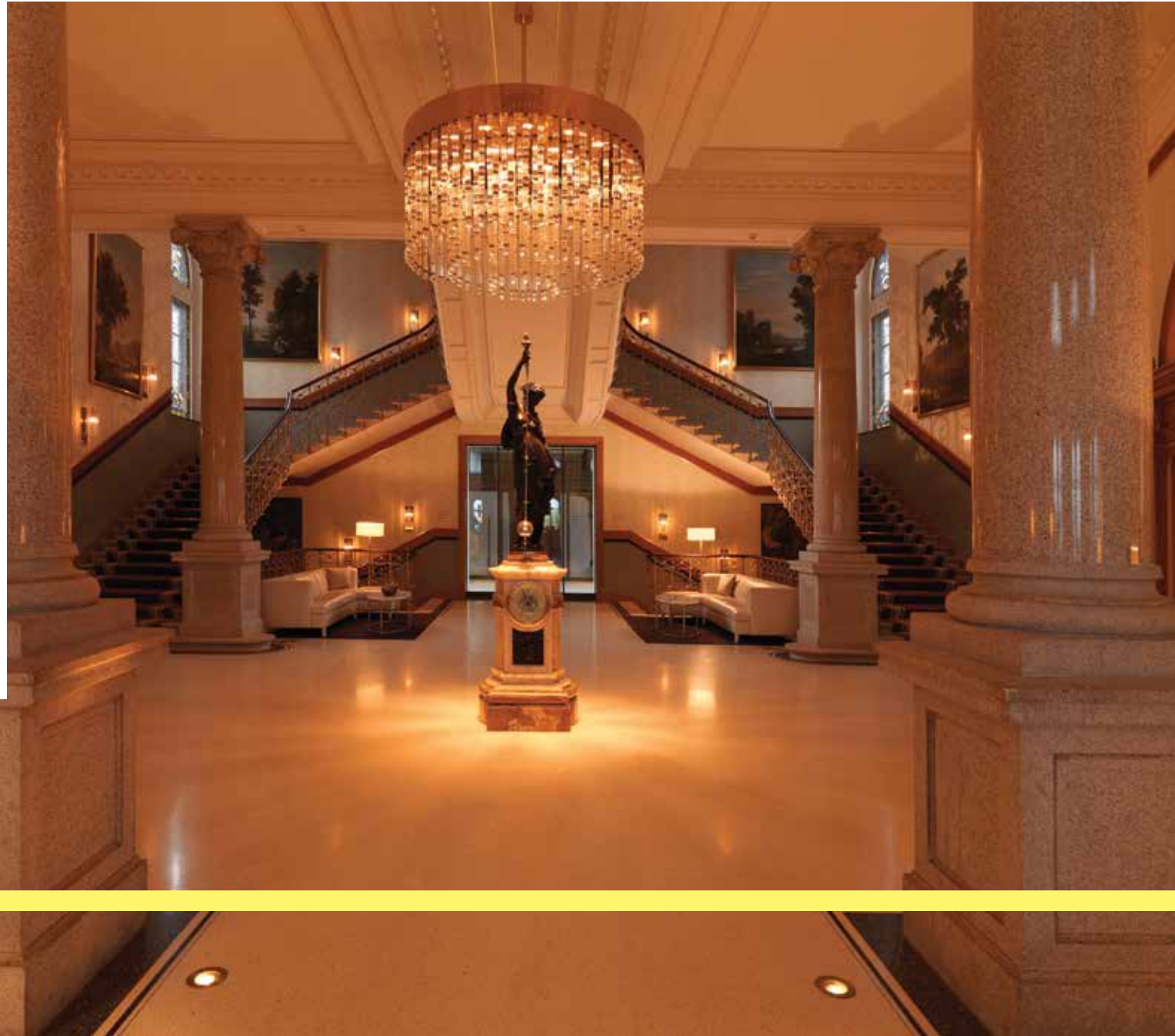


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1. Dolder Grand is elevated above the nearby city of Zurich and is twenty minutes from the airport.
2. The hotel lobby features a restored historic ceiling and antique fireplace.
3. The Steinhalle showcases exceptional European luxury.

THE DESIGN OF THE ORIGINAL BUILDING IS PART MEDIEVAL FORTRESS AND PART NINETEENTH-CENTURY CHATEAU

and Peter Knogl from Cheval Blanc in Bern, who was awarded his third Michelin star in late 2015. The other chefs come from Spain, Italy, France, Belgium, Austria, Germany, and the Netherlands, with a combined total of twenty-four Michelin stars between them. With the recent attention on the stress and pressure

Photos by Simon Vogt and Heinz Unger

that follows Michelin-starred chefs, including the news of the suicides of Benoît Violier this past January and Homaro Cantu in April 2015, it's easy to assume the Epicure might be an intense, competitive, and joyless affair. But in fact the mood is quite convivial. The chefs are relaxed, personable, and seem, in many cases,

as if they are on vacation: sunbathing on the spa's patio, snapping pics of the hotel's artwork, and taking the funicular down to Zurich to experience the variety of tastes in the *Altstad* or "old town."

The cuisine of Switzerland is something of a misnomer. With its disparate mix of culinary influences

from neighbors France, Germany, and Italy, Swiss cuisine has long been a mashup in search of a national identity. For many, the thought of Swiss food conjures images of communal pots of molten cheese and high-calorie fare such as raclette: melted cheese scraped tableside onto plates of gherkins, pickled onions, and dried meats. Anthony Bourdain has stated that he would never do a show in Switzerland and, for good measure, added, "their cheese sucks." But chefs like Nieder and Knogl have been leading the charge to change this reputation by focusing on simple, yet eclectic combinations of ingredients and flavors. And while the Epicure is not intended to challenge our ideas about food and where it comes from (like some other chef-driven festivals including René Redzepi's MAD Symposium, a gastronomic Burning Man/South by Southwest conference), it is meant to bring attention to the country's new "refined ideas" regarding modern tastes and techniques.

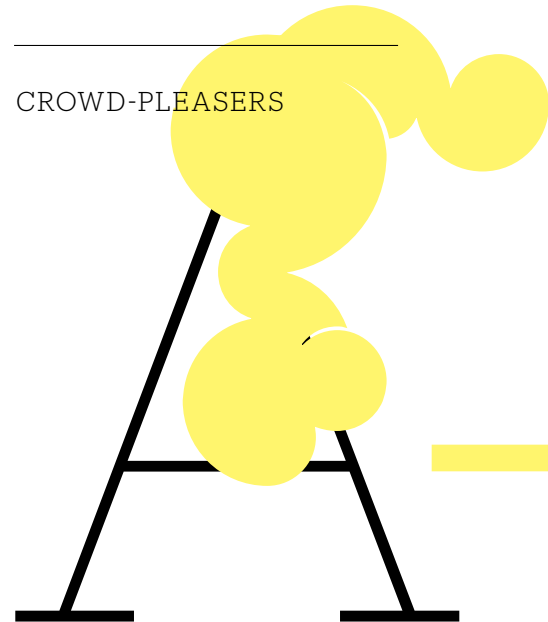
The stage for the Epicure is the grande dame of Switzerland hotels, a property that, much like Nieder's cuisine, blends unexpected and often contradictory elements to create a refined, elegant, and sometimes provocative experience. The Dolder Grand was built in 1899 as a *curhaus*, or health spa. The design of the original building is part medieval fortress and part nineteenth-century chateau. In 2004, the hotel closed for a major renovation and reopened four years later with the main building restored to its original grandeur along with an opulent spa that Oprah has called "the best spa ever," and two modern, curved annexes that stream out from both sides of the original building like burley glass and steel shoulders. "We like to say the *grande madame* has a new beautiful scarf draped around her," a hotel employee can be overhead telling one of the guests.

This juxtaposition of antique and

modern, classical and contemporary, extends beyond the architecture to the hotel's gallery-worthy art collection, which is one of the most carefully curated and highest caliber collections of any hotel in the world. The more than one hundred paintings and sculptures placed in and around the property are all unidentified, although a self-guided iPad tour is available for the curious. While some of the pieces are easy to miss, the Dali in The Restaurant, or the Gerhard Richter in the lobby hallway, for example, others demand attention, like the giant toadstool by Takashi Murakami and Andy Warhol's thirty-six-foot-long *Big Retrospective Painting* suspended above the hotel's front desk.

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CROWD-PLEASERS



AFTER THE CULINARY BACCHANAL that is the Epicure's "Final," the group of writers who were flies on the wall in Nieder's kitchen two days prior sat in the Dolder's lobby lounge and discussed the experience while surrounded by the works of Jean Tinguely, Robert Motherwell, and Miquel Barceló. Of the twelve

dishes presented at the Final, not to mention the countless trays of *amuse*, dessert, and cheese presentations, and a surprisingly large selection of Davidoff cigars, there were some clear-cut favorites: Wagyu-Beef with Japanese vegetables and egg sauce by Masanori Tomikawa of Yamazato Restaurant in Amsterdam; oxtail with

brown butter, smoked bone marrow, and Blue Mountain coffee by Onno Kokmeijer of Restaurant Ciel Bleu also in Amsterdam; and scallops with pumpkin, tamarind, and tandoori by Christoph Rüffer of Restaurant Haerlin in Hamburg. But the hands-down favorite was from pâtissier Yann Duytsche— from the chocolate

Photo by Heinz Unger



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1. On a clear day, the Grand Spa Terrace offers views all the way to the Alps.
2. Ceviche by Christian Bau, head chef of Victor's Fine Dining by Christian Bau, a thirty-four seat, three-star Michelin restaurant found on Germany's western border

DOLDER GRAND

The grande dame of Zurich hotels

HOTEL

The 117-year-old hotel reopened in 2008 after a four-year, \$400 million renovation that added two new wings, a ballroom, and a 43,000-square-foot spa. Accommodations range from single rooms to the four "Top Suites," which include an 1,800-square-foot Rolling Stones-inspired escape. The suite features a private kitchen, a spacious bathroom in black equipped with a whirlpool, sauna, and steam shower, and a ten-person meeting room.

THE SPA

Oprah Winfrey has described it as "the best spa ever." Winding stone walls create a canyon-like space for the pool, while separate men's and women's spa areas feature saunas, steam baths, kotatsu footbaths, aromapools, steampots, cold-water basins, and stand-up sunbeds.

THE ART

One of the most impressive private art collections of any hotel in the world can be found here. More than one hundred sculptures and paintings, all understatedly unidentified, can be found throughout the hotel's public spaces. Works include pieces by Warhol, Dali, Anish Kapoor, Keith Haring, and Gerhard Richter.

THE EPICURE

Scheduled for September 14 to 18, 2016. Tickets go on sale in spring 2016 for the third annual Epicure, newly expanded to include five days of culinary indulgence.

www.thedoldergrand.com

shop Dolç par Yann Duytsche near Barcelona—that paired Azélia-Chocolate with roasted Canarian bananas and roasted hazelnuts creating a beautiful, delicate, and absolutely decadent experience.

As the writers discussed the dishes (and tried to calculate how many calories they had consumed over the past

few hours), coffee, wine, and sparkling waters were served along with small bowls of homemade potato chips, lightly fried and salted and cut so thin they were almost translucent. These chips were the simplest and most unadorned food we had seen in days.

Like everything else that had been placed before us, we devoured them. **!**