

patrons who have carved their names into the time-worn tables. In honour of Keller, the upstairs wine cellar has been named after him.

Across the little square from the Oepfelchammer, a plaque on a white-shuttered house informs us that Lenin lived here before hastily returning to Russia in 1917. Lenin's Niederdorf slumbers and his revolutionary dreams were no doubt frequently disturbed by the Oepfelchammer vocals, but then Russia during the 1917 Revolution turned out to be a far noisier place.

No connection with Lenin, The Red House is a Niederdorf cabaret in the basement of a thirteenth-century inn. With two porno movie houses for neighbours, The Red House tries harder by promising 'Fun, Sex and Cool Drinks'. An intriguing sequence which I haven't felt inclined to investigate since this is one of Niederdorf's most expensive nightspots.

Less than a kilometre in length, Niederdorf-Strasse has a fascinating range of cuisines that includes Indonesian, Chinese, Turkish, Spanish, Indian, German, Italian and French. And of course, Swiss cooking is alive and well — outstanding, in fact — in the Niederdorf.

And that brings us to the Restaurant Kronenhalle. On the Limmatquai, my wife and I must have appeared lost as we tried to decide on the shortest route to the Kronenhalle. A well-dressed gentleman walking by stopped to ask if we needed help. I was about to say 'no thanks' when I impulsively decided to ask him if he could recommend a good restaurant. Without any hesitation, he replied 'The Kronenhalle, of course.'

The hundred-year-old restaurant is a gathering place for artists, musicians, actors, and writers, and a favourite haunt of bankers entertaining their best clients. But despite its patrician reputation, any customer who can afford the not inconsiderable prices is made to feel welcome.

The mahogany-panelled walls are jewelled with a dazzling array of master paintings and sculpture that would make any art museum envious. For gourmets, even a quick scan of the menu offers promises of equally exciting culinary treasures with home-made *pâté de foie*, fillets of sole Walewska, and partridge with grapes. First-time patrons at the Kronenhalle often face the dilemma of what to enjoy first — the Picasso on the wall or the *piccata Milanese* on the table, the Matisse still-life of a plateful of oysters or the real-life snails on their own plate.

The Kronenhalle art collection, only part of which is displayed at any one time,

belongs to the Zumsteg family, proprietors of the restaurant since 1920. Mostly by twentieth-century masters, the art treasures include works by Bonnard, Braque, Cezanne, Chagall, Giacometti, Klee, Matisse, Miro, Monet, Picasso, and many more.

For lunch we chose to sit in the 'Chagall Room', so-called because the artist's huge canvas of gladiolas on a blue background dominates the first floor rear section of the restaurant. The Chagall Room is a happy medium between the noisier Brasserie section in the front and the hushed, heavier atmosphere upstairs.

We resisted the speciality of the day, *bollito misto* (boiled beef, tongue, sausage, bacon and bone marrow) being ladled from an enormous pot on a trolley, and chose instead a perennial Kronenhalle speciality, river trout smothered in a rich sauce of cream, white wine and *fines herbes*. A mild white wine from the famed Swiss Vaud around Lake Geneva nicely complimented our fish.

While we were waiting for the main course, *filet patron*, Lily, an amiable waitress who has been at the Kronenhalle for thirty years, intermittently chatted with us about the restaurant's clientele. She reminisced about the night Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington celebrated after a successful concert by jazzing it up at the sedate Kronenhalle until well after dawn. And of the time when Artur Rubenstein dined very formally with the distinguished Zurich city fathers, each knowledgeably advising him on the best speciality of the house. But the maestro ignored them all and called for Lily. 'Lily, my darling,' he said, 'you choose for me.'

Rubenstein's favourite dishes, Lily confided, were *matjes* herring and *Wiener-schnitzel*. Encouraged to reveal other customers' special likes, Lily got as far as disclosing that Chagall was keen on *leberknödel* soup and *pot au feu*, and that Isaac Stern was keen on saddle of venison, when our *filet patron* arrived sizzling on its platter. With the juicy five centimetre-thick steaks we had an inspiring bottle of red *Dôle*, a Swiss blend of Pinot Noir and Gamay, two Burgundian grapes brought to the Valais region by the ancient Romans. Relishing our *filet* and wine, surrounded by the soft colours of Bonnard and Monet landscapes, we felt totally relaxed in this elegant ambience.

After a crisp endive and cress salad came a feathery light *mousse au chocolat*, surely the *piece de resistance* of our meal. Served with brandy snaps and cream topping, the ethereal *mousse*, created from a closely guarded recipe, climaxed the two-and-a-half-hour luncheon. The bill, including wine and service, came to a lofty

Swiss Fr 140 (US\$83). As we left the Kronenhalle, 'Mutter' Hulda Zumsteg, the warm-hearted, almost-legendary proprietress, still active at eighty-six years, showed us the green leather guestbook overflowing with compliments from well-wined and dined patrons. The pages, embellished with scores of artists' sketches and drawings, were an autograph collectors' dream.

On the subject of gastronomy in the Niederdorf, three other first-class restaurants must be mentioned. Located in the historic guildhouses (*Zunfthausen*), the decor, charming atmosphere and cuisine of these dining rooms recapture the best of the past. They are the *Zunfthaus zur Schmieden* (blacksmiths' guild) in the Marktgasse, *Zunfthaus zur Saffran* (spice-dealers' guild) on the Limmatquai, and *Zunfthaus zur Zimmerleuten* (furniture makers' guild) on the Limmatquai. Traditional Zurich specialities include the ever-popular *Geshnetzeltes* (veal with mushrooms in cream sauce) and *Leberspiessli* (skewered calves' liver).

Throughout the Niederdorf, in these restored guildhouses, at the ubiquitous beer-and-bratwurst snackbars, even in that alcohol-free tearoom, the Swiss reputation for 'good food and service' is diligently upheld. Of course, there is always a tale to tarnish any reputation. Rumour has it that one Niederdorf dining place years ago served up a stew in which bobbed an ingredient looking suspiciously like a truncated thumb. When the chef was reportedly seen a few days later with four fingers protruding from a thick bandage, the eating house was promptly dubbed, and for many years after was still called, 'The Bloody Thumb'.

Whatever else is found in Niederdorf, violence is not. Except for occasional rowdies, the streets are as safe as any in this generally law-abiding city. Niederdorf is alive with night people and *nachtmusik* until the small hours; the midnight closing time of a few years ago has been extended to 2 am and is not strictly enforced.

Just to show how times have changed, my wife and I tried going to sleep at 2 am in our Niederdorf hotel, just as an impromptu rock session got underway in the little square below. The rhythms were electric, the music makers impressive, but at 2 am I preferred Morpheus to Orpheus. Despite our pleas, neither the hesitant hotel manager nor the tolerant policeman could silence the irrepressible minstrels. While the band played on, I even considered paying them Fr 20 to go home. Finally, they left at sunrise and we got one hour of peace. Please don't get me wrong. I still love the Niederdorf. ♫