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FOOD AND DRINK

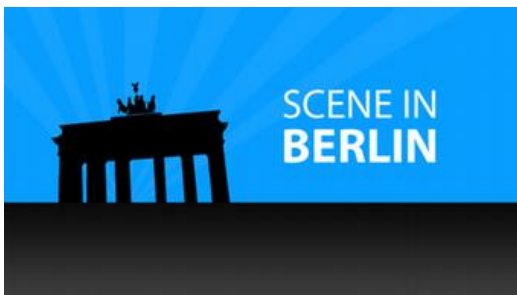
Digging into Berlin's supper clubs

From vegetarian feasts to traditional Asian delights, Berlin's underground dining scene dishes up the chance to try a wide range of flavors and get a peek at other neighborhoods.



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When I moved to Berlin last fall, my sister suggested I check out some supper clubs, in part because her friend Samantha runs the popular Krauted Haus, a mash-up of her favorite New York flavors and another friend's traditional German cookery. I immediately imagined taking up with this underground dining crowd, meeting Berlin's most artistic people while digging deep into the city's avant garde food goings-on.



Supper clubs are run by passionate cooks who invite groups of 15 or so into their homes for a private event, usually once a month. But it can be difficult to land a spot. I started hearing buzz a few months ago about a new private dining pop-up, Jung Grün & Blau. Everyone seemed to be chatting about Dylan Watson Brawn, a 20-year-old chef who has worked his way through Tokyo's RyuGin, Copenhagen's Noma, and New

York's Eleven Madison Park. Now, he's cooking in a private kitchen space in Moabit. A former pastry chef myself, you could say I was intrigued.

New kid on the block

Jung Grün & Blau launched in the spring and their limited seating, 16-to-24 diners per weekend, is already booked up through the project's end date on October 31. I didn't manage to snag a dinner reservation, but I sat down with the busy young chef for a chat about his project. He explained that

Jung Grün & Blau is not a supper club.

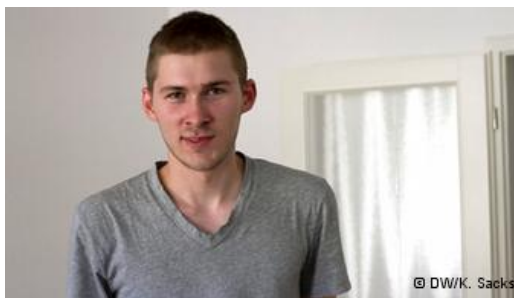
"People come to Berlin and they use a supper club as a way to network and socialize, and the food is second to the experience," Brawn said. "I think the food is first to the experience, and the conversation is instigated by the eating and by the pairing."

Unaware of the booming Berlin supper club scene, Brawn was inspired by time he spent cooking in Hong Kong and the private/home restaurant culture there. His events have made a big splash in Berlin, in part because of his young age and impressive history, but also because he's bringing a fresh approach to the dining scene in Berlin, combining high quality local products with his knowledge of traditional Asian and French technique.

Surveying the scene, I found that Brawn's fresh approach was the constant. From supper clubs to pop-ups to underground dining options, the wide scope in theme and food style expands Berlin's food scene tremendously. There are more established restaurants creating the guise of disguise, from the secret door at Cookies Cream to the backroom Cantina at Bar Tausend, as well as dozens of looser-run supper clubs, serving up everything from Chinese dumplings to Italian classics to modern raw vegan creations.

From chic to cozy

My first experience was a combination of the two styles. Brother-sister team Kristof and Mariana Mulack run Mulax in a private dining space in Kreuzberg. It's not their home, but it's also not a restaurant. They've coined it a "social network dining room." Kristof, who works a day job in the insurance business, was inspired to teach himself to cook after eating at Weinbar Rutz six years ago. His plates were incredibly impressive, beautifully styled and well thought out. Inside the club-like space, the overall experience felt like a fancy restaurant event.



Dylan Watson Brawn says "food is first to the experience"



Daniels Eatery in Berlin experiments with a cold-cucumber soup

At the Mulax dinner I happened to be sitting with a British-German couple, Caroline Grinsted and Tobias Zeller, hosts of Thyme Supper Club. After moving to Berlin from London, the couple wanted to continue hosting dinner parties like those they had thrown in Britain. With few friends in the city, and aware of some of the early Berlin projects like Palisaden Supper Club and The Shy Chef, they started

their own supper club. It's now one of the most popular in the city. On August 31, they hosted a launch party for a new project, Muse, in collaboration with another Berlin supper club, Zuhause. The plan, with a soft opening in early September, is for a lunch restaurant by day and supper club space by night, with Thyme and Zuhause hosting bimonthly events, including nights with other city supper clubs.

I got a taste of the Muse project a week later with a dinner at Zuhause, run by Irish-Canadian couple David O'Reilly and Kristi Korotash. They worked together on private boats before moving to Berlin, Dave as the chef and Kristi as a server. I found their menu also quite refined, and the overall experience was much more like what I expected a supper club to be. Their welcoming Kreuzberg apartment felt like a fun dinner party, and the other 12 diners, complete strangers, seemed to be instant friends. After dinner, hosts Dave and Kristi joined the table to chat with the group, bringing along a bottle of vodka. When I looked at my watch at 2 a.m., I couldn't believe it was so late.

Sharing secrets

A fellow diner at the Zuhause event suggested Speisenklub Neukölln, which hosts grand, themed affairs, like a Titanic menu served in a vintage store. Founder Cathrin Brandes was taking a summer break, but when I met her in her Neukölln apartment, she was in the midst of a plum alcohol infusion project, preparing for the next event. With her own restaurant consulting company, Speisenklub Neukölln is a great way for Brandes to keep her fingers wet in the world of culinary trends. Her events seem to capture the allure and intrigue of the underground dining scene, often held in special locations, such as the vintage store or an artist gallery in the Tiergarten. Her partner, Thomas Greb, creates impressive table installations for each dinner.



Sophien Café serves up caramel tarts

Newcomer Sophien Café also plans to use special locations to help create a unique experience. A French-trained pastry chef, Astrid Sophie Fleisch needed to step away from the professional culinary life for health reasons. Although she is now studying law, she wanted to keep food in her life. Her plan is to throw semi-regular tea parties, and she has already hosted a few including a garden tea party in a Wedding park, where she brought a lavish rug for guests to sit on and used fine china tea service.

While sipping the Chai tea she served in her Wedding apartment - just slightly sweet, earthy, and filled with spice, and nibbling on a caramel tart - I could imagine how special Fleisch's tea parties are. Her upcoming September event pulls on her experiences travelling in India and working with Indian flavors and recipes. I can't wait to attend.

A project of passion

Many who haven't experienced a supper club question why someone would invite strangers into their home or go to all this work. Jan of Fisk & Gröönnsaken, a German-run supper club that focuses on vegetable and fish cookery, summed it up nicely. "We don't earn any money," he said, "but don't lose any money. We have a hobby that doesn't cost us anything."

Like many supper club hosts, Jan and wife Melanie have no interest in making money from the project or opening a future restaurant. It is simply a passion project, and the donation - most clubs suggest a contribution of between 25 euros and 65 euros (\$33 and \$86) - is just enough to cover the costs.



The latest trend: cronut, a cross between croissant and doughnut

Because it is their passion, these chefs are interested in trying out a wide variety of recipes and styles, offering diners a unique look at culinary trends. Inside his well-styled Prenzlauer Berg apartment, former marketing executive Daniel Grothues puts a creative spin on the dishes he serves for his Daniel's Eatery events. At his "surf-and-turf" dinner, he pulled inspiration from Britain's top chef Heston Blumenthal, the end of summer vegetables and a recent trip to New York, giving his Berlin diners a taste of the latest food craze: the cronut - a cross between doughnut and croissant.

Daniel's was my latest foray into underground dining, but it won't be my last, because the supper club scene is a bit of rabbit hole. It's likely someone will suggest another and another and soon you'll want to sample all the different concepts. I'm on the waiting list for Jung Grün & Blau, hoping to catch a cancellation seat before October's final dinner. I'm also booked for several supper clubs in the upcoming months. I finally caught up with my sister's friend Samantha, and I'm looking forward to eating at her Krauted Haus one of these days. It may be a little more difficult than popping into the restaurant around the corner, but it's a great way to see such a different side of Berlin.

Berlin-based food and travel journalist Katherine Sacks blogs at katherinesacks.com and tweets at @LaVitaCucinare.

DW.DE

An American redefines BBQ in Berlin

Craving the sticky sweet pulled pork of America's smokehouses, DW's Katherine Sacks set out on a mission to find barbecue in Berlin. What she found was something completely different. (05.07.2013)

Berliners get hot al fresco for BBQ season

In summer, charcoal fumes and the spit and crackle of grilled meat are as much a part of Berlin as the Berghain club or the Brandenburg Gate. DW's Jefferson Chase investigates Berlin's smoldering BBQ culture. (18.06.2013)

Berlin's international smorgasbord

If your taste buds are looking for some exotic stimulation, the place to go is not a five-star restaurant, but Berlin's "fabric market." DW's Tam Eastley ate her way from Brazil to Nigeria - in the German capital. (26.04.2013)

Newcomers pep up Berlin's culinary desert

Admittedly, Berlin doesn't usually top foodies' must-see list. But lately, young entrepreneurs have been bringing in new, exotic flavors from vegan Vietnamese cuisine to passionately roasted coffee. (19.11.2012)

WWW LINKS

Jung Grün & Blau's website

Catch up on past editions of Scene in Berlin

Thyme Supper Club's website

Muse Berlin's website

Mulax' website

Zuhause's website

Daniel's Eatery website

AUDIOS AND VIDEOS ON THE TOPIC

Listen to the interview with Dylan Watson Brawn

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