

Culinary Art: La Vie by Thomas Bühner

02/01/2025 What do a German Michelin Star chef, an entrepreneur from Taiwan, and a chef de cuisine from Hong Kong have in common? An exquisite gourmet restaurant in Taipei. Because they have similar dreams, shared passions, and an appetite for new things.

The massive wooden door between the NOKE shopping mall and the “La Vie by Thomas Bühner” restaurant leads to a whole other world. One moment you find yourself on the bustling streets of Taipei with its bright lights and blinking neon signs, and the next in an elegant lounge with its high ceilings, natural tones of nut brown and stone grey, and a handful of golden elements here and there. But the first thing you notice is the peace and quiet.

“Welcome to Taipei,” says Una, a member of the service team who escorts you to the panoramic window. The restaurant seats 27 people. The tables, standing on delicate-green and light-blue carpets, resemble islands. These colors represent the rivers, lakes, and bays of Taiwan.

Ceremoniously, Una turns on the table lamp, kicking off the spectacular tasting menu featuring 11

courses.

Even the canapés resemble small works of art: filigree cookie rolls filled with pumpkin puree, croustades of sweet corn in the shape of delicate seashells, round doughnuts, garnish of smoked eel.

Once you begin savoring the delicacies with their fascinating flavors, textures, and sensations, you realize you're here for an experience rather than a meal. "We rely on a variety of flavors," says Thomas Bühner, who's seated at the table with us. He describes the multidimensional, aromatic cuisine they serve here like this: "It's nice when someone plays guitar around the campfire. Here, though, there's an entire orchestra performing with a variety of instruments – with subtle and quiet notes accompanied by loud and intensive ones – creating a composition like no other."

Composition is an apt word, as a variety of questions arise before the menu continues. What is Thomas Bühner doing in Taipei? Why did the German Star chef open a restaurant here of all places? To get to the bottom of these questions, we need to leave this location for a moment and embark on a journey.

Station number 1: Germany

Paderborn – an easterly drive of around one hour from Dortmund. This is where Thomas Bühner, who was born in 1962, grew up with his twin brother, and sister. His mother was a housewife, his father a clerk. Because he didn't know what he wanted to do with his life after school, Bühner underwent a career assessment at the Federal Employment Agency, which recommended he pursue a career in baking, cooking, or farming. "I want to be a chef – but a good one!" he told his parents. "And when I'm 30, I'm going to drive a Porsche!"

But things didn't necessarily go as planned to begin with. During his training at a restaurant in Paderborn, his instructor slapped him across the face with a rubber spatula when he failed to get every last bit of snail butter out of the bowl. "Quit," his parents told him, wanting to protect him. "No," said Bühner, who wanted to prove himself to his boss instead. He performed so well that he was able to shorten his training period and was hired at a Hilton Hotel in Düsseldorf, which had three restaurants, including one with a Michelin Star. "Crazy," he thought.

In the years that followed, Bühner worked with some of the best chefs in Germany – and eventually became one himself. He acquired his first Michelin Star in Dortmund in 1996, when he was 34 years old, and bought his first Porsche the year after. "A 911, generation 964, black, both inside and out." Bühner earned his second Star in 1998.

Eight years later, he went to "La Vie" in Osnabrück and transformed it into one of the best restaurants in the world, with three Michelin Stars continuously shining brightly above it as of 2011. But they ultimately fizzled out in 2018 when the steel company that financed the gourmet temple restructured its businesses and chose to give up the restaurant. This was the first time that Bühner was confronted with the realities of high-end dining. Star-studded cuisine is usually only profitable with the right

sponsor as a partner.

“At first, I didn’t have a plan,” says Bühner. But then he made a decision. Rather than running the next restaurant right away, he decided to travel the world – as a guest chef and adviser for fine-dining projects.

Station number 2: Taiwan

And that’s how he ended up in Taiwan in 2019. A five-star hotel in the southern part of the island had asked him to create a gourmet restaurant. Bühner, already a fan of Asia, agreed and had the opportunity to get to know Taiwan. He loved how friendly everyone was, the variety of products, and the topography of the island, whose tallest peak towers nearly 4,000 meters high, with more than 60 other mountains over 3,000 meters in height. “Taiwan is unbelievably green,” says Bühner enthusiastically. And there was something else that appealed to him here – a tangible feeling that told him to “just do it.”

It was this spirit in particular that brought him together with his current business partner Ray Wu, founder and CEO of the Suntek Motor Group, one of three Porsche trade partners in Taiwan. Wu and Bühner met at a business meeting and soon realized, “We have the same idea.” They both wanted to bring Taiwan’s best-known restaurant chain to Germany. So they got together and developed a concept.

However, the coronavirus pandemic ended up throwing a wrench in the works. It didn’t seem like the right moment for the restaurant chain to make a big leap. But then something else happened in the meantime. The two men got on like a house on fire. We ask them what they appreciate about each other. “Where others see problems, Ray sees opportunities,” says Bühner. “He’s an entrepreneur through and through, not to mention open-minded and brilliant.” Wu in turn says, “Thomas is more than just an amazing chef. He thinks like an artist.”

The two of them kept in touch – and then Wu sent Bühner an email in 2021. “Hey,” he wrote. “If we can’t bring the restaurant idea from Taiwan to Germany, why don’t we bring your restaurant idea to Taiwan instead?” Bühner gave it some thought and then responded, “Why not? Let’s talk!”

Station number 3: shared passions

How this adventure together came about is better explained by a trip with the two men to the southern part of the island, where Ray Wu and his Suntek Motor Group not only operate a new Porsche Studio in Tainan, but also a racetrack.

“Even as a kid, I dreamed of working with Porsche,” says Ray Wu, a dynamic, 55-year-old man who loves to laugh. But this wasn’t a path he was born into either, having grown up in one of Taiwan’s poorest neighborhoods. But he had a goal: the automotive industry.

So he founded a motor club during his studies and eventually started up his own business. “It’s a dream brand,” he says. But Ray Wu wanted to go further and offer his customers even more. An entire lifestyle with extraordinary experiences. “People here tend to associate Germany with cars, in particular, and machines,” says Wu. “But I wanted to show that it’s so much more than just that.” And for him, that also includes gourmet dining and the enjoyment that comes from an experience like that.

The cars are raring to go at the racetrack, a 3.5-kilometer, FIA grade 2 circular course. The two men don their helmets and give each other a pat on the shoulder. Wu climbs into the special edition, which Porsche Exclusive Manufaktur developed to mark the 50th anniversary of Porsche in Taiwan – a 911 Carrera GTS (992) in Irish Green.

Suntek won the charity bid for this car at auction. It pays homage to the first Porsche sold in Taiwan, a 911 E in the year 1972, which at that time sported a Viper Green paint job, invoking the island’s wooded ridges. Bühner takes the 911 GT3 RS (992) – at home in Germany, he drives a GT3 Touring in Agate Grey Metallic. With the engines roaring, they bolt off and complete lap after lap, before returning with triumphant smiles on their faces.

They enjoy their passion on the track together. And together they’ve developed a whole new concept for “La Vie.” “Where do you even begin?” asked Ray Wu when they went to work on planning the gourmet restaurant. “We need to write down what we want,” said Bühner, jotting down, “An avant-garde, flavorful European cuisine. With products from Taiwan and the best the world has to offer.” They also wanted the restaurant design to reflect the island’s landscape. And they both quickly agreed that Xavier Yeung should be involved.

Bühner, who had already worked with the talented chef de cuisine from Hong Kong, had come to realize, “For me, Xavier is like a brother in spirit.” A common denominator was important. Rather than working in the kitchen of the new “La Vie,” Bühner would assume the role of patron, overseeing the restaurant concept.

Yeung agreed. We ask the friendly, 37-year-old chef with experience at two- and three-Star restaurants in Hong Kong and Macau what inspires him when he’s cooking and developing his seasonal menus. Thinking for just a moment, he mentions wonderful products, vibes like hot summer days, and Taiwan’s night markets.

Station number 4: the night markets

It’s just about impossible to understand the island unless you’ve visited a night market at least once. “The night market is much like a miniature version of Taiwan,” says Ray Wu during the nighttime drive through Taipei in the Panamera. There you’ll find lots of what the island has to offer in a very small space.

Plus, it’s a unique and wonderful sensory overload.

Clouds of steam hover over the cookshops at the Raohe Street Night Market in eastern Taipei. Just 600 meters in length, the street it's located on is densely populated with stands, people, impressions, and smells. You'll find oyster omelets, fried octopus, bubble tea, dumplings, and fruits of all kinds such as pineapple, guava, durian, and papaya. You can test your luck at the slot machines along the sides of the street, or consult one of the many fortune tellers who work here and have their turtles or caged birds draw the tarot cards for them. In short, a night market is an explosion of atmospheres and aromas. And that's precisely what it has in common with the food at "La Vie by Thomas Bühner" – even if it does look completely different.

Station number 5: back to the restaurant

The half-open restaurant kitchen soon begins delivering one dish after another to the table, many of them almost too beautiful to touch. Take the oyster plate, with its island of algae jelly adorned with caviar and sea grapes, floating on a sea of white foam extracted from the Japanese citrus fruit daidai, the oyster tartare concealed directly underneath. Another dish resembles a cheerful flower bed, with golden-yellow mussels, couscous, and curry.

"Next we'll take a trip to the Basque country," says Xavier Yeung, serving a plate of kinmedai fish alongside a filled baby octopus, tangy chorizo, and a fine chili emulsion. Everything is a masterpiece, with flavors that linger on the palate. And then Yeung does something daring: He prepares a rabbit dish, which is unusual for the Taiwanese palate.

"We try to create a balance between European cuisine and local flavors," says Yeung. He and Bühner get together on a regular basis to discuss the menu. Bühner tells him about dishes he's eaten around the world and sends him recipes, always adding, "Now it's up to you to make it your own." He has every confidence in his chef and his creations. Thomas Bühner will be traveling again in a few days – first to Beijing, where he's been managing the "Rong by Thomas Bühner" restaurant since the end of 2023, then to Bangkok, and finally to Istanbul, where "Taste by Thomas Bühner" opened its doors in November 2024. A second "La Vie by Thomas Bühner" will follow in Düsseldorf in April 2025. Just listening to everything he has going on is enough to make you dizzy. Sometimes his friends ask him, "Don't you think it's too much?" "No," he answers and then grins. "Life is an adventure. You just go as far as you can."

Info

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Consumption data

911 GT3 with Touring Package (WLTP)*: Fuel consumption combined: 13.8 – 13.7 l/100 km; CO_2 emissions combined: 312 – 310 g/km; CO_2 class: G

911 Carrera GTS (Predecessor model)

911 GT3 RS (WLTP)*: Fuel consumption combined: 13.2 l/100 km; CO_2 emissions combined: 299 g/km; CO_2 class: G

*Further information on the official fuel consumption and the official specific CO_2 emissions of new passenger cars can be found in the "Leitfaden über den Kraftstoffverbrauch, die CO_2-Emissionen und den Stromverbrauch neuer Personenkraftwagen" (Fuel Consumption, CO_2Emissions and Electricity Consumption Guide for New Passenger Cars), which is available free of charge at all sales outlets and from DAT (Deutsche Automobil Treuhand GmbH, Helmuth-Hirth-Str. 1, 73760 Ostfildern-Scharnhausen, www.dat.de).

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