Black Forest Cake
Bavaria’s Dark Chocolate Fairytale

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Black Forest Cake is one of the world’s most beloved indulgences. With its layers of chocolate cake soaked in cherry liquor, smothered in whipped cream, generously dotted with plump, dark cherries and dusted with chocolate shavings, the Bavarian treat is immediately recognizable from Tuscaloosa to Tübingen.

As the name implies, the origins of Black Forest Cake, or Schwarzwälder Kirschtorte, can be traced to the Black Forest, otherwise known as Schwarzwälder. There the trail is lost, strewn about like breadcrumbs in the dark, dense woods tucked away in Germany’s southwest corner. However, just as in the fairytale of Hansel and Gretel, a delicious surprise waits around the corner.

The sign outside Café Schäfer in the Bavarian town of Triberg says it all – “Black Forest Cake made from the original recipe of its founder Josef Keller. Here you can try the real thing.”

Konditormeister, or “Master of Pastry,” Claus Schäfer is happy to back up that claim. Without hesitation he pulls out the pride of the café, a worn, faded notebook containing Keller’s handwritten recipe for Schwarzwälder Kirschtorte.

“It is very old book from my father,” he explained reverently. “From 1924 — very old.”

Between two yellowed pages he had slipped a note. “We loved the Black Forest Cake,” it read. “We came all the
way from India to taste the original recipe.”

According to Schäfer, he has received accolades from as far away as Tokyo and Taiwan.

“So many stories,” he said. “One day, we received message from Rome. They want to invite me to come to Italy to create Schwarzwälder Kirschtorte for their marriage.”

Café Schäfer’s official history, succinctly explained on the café’s website, brochures and menus, states that Keller invented Schwarzwälder Kirschtorte in 1915 while working at Café Agner in Bad Godesberg. He soon opened his own shop in Radolfzell where Schäfer’s father, August Schäfer, inherited the recipe book while working as his apprentice. When August returned to Triberg in 1929, Keller’s original recipe came with him.

To this day, Café Schäfer claims to be the only place in the world serving the original Black Forest Cake.

“There are many Schwarzwälder Kirschtorte in the Black Forest,” Schäfer admitted. “But no one [else] knows how to make the details.”

Black Forest Origin

Walter Poganietz founded the Conditorei Museum in Kitzingen and maintains its website, conditorei-museum.de, one of Germany’s largest archives of documentation on the history of confections. He began researching the origins of the Black Forest Cake in 2001 after a museum in Rodolfzell contacted him for information on their hometown legend. He acknowledged that the book did belong to Keller but had doubts about his role as the dessert’s creator.

“On the Internet, in the literature of Schwarzwälder Kirschtorte, you everywhere read and hear Josef Keller was the creator of this cake,” he said. “But I must end your fairytales.”

Keller’s granddaughter, Heidi Keller, still lives in Radolfzell and agreed with Poganietz.

“A lot of dates are not right. He was serving in WWI on the French front,” she said. “And before, he was making his studies at Café Agner. But there’s no picture, no documents. It’s difficult to [verify] because that family is now all dead.”

Although Poganietz did not support Schäfer’s claim that Keller originated Black Forest Cake, he did agree with the timeframe. Because a dominant ingredient of the cake is whipped cream, he said its creation likely correlates with the invention of electrical refrigeration in the early 1900s. Whipped cream had to be kept at 41 degrees Fahrenheit for two days.

“Then it’s the best for you to make fantastic cakes,” he explained. “Until the 1900s, you cannot find in the old books whipped cream cakes because they couldn’t cold the cream.”

Poganietz also noted that during this same time fruit was not available around the world as it is today.

“You couldn’t transport cherries 100 km [62 miles] to other countries,” he explained. “So Schwarzwälder Kirschtorte could only be produced in regions where cherries were grown.”

The dessert demands authentic Black Forest cherries. Every cherry in Schäfer’s kitchen comes from Baden-Baden in the heart of the region, as do the cherries used to make the cherry liquor, or Schwarzwälder Kirschwasser, called for in the recipe. In fact, Schäfer said, the liquor industry does not allow cherry schnapps bearing the name Schwarzwälder Kirschwasser to be sold unless it is made with cherries grown in the region. As Poganietz said, “The cherries of the Black Forest are famous.”

The first documented reference to the Black Forest Cake was in 1934 in J.M. Erich Weber’s “250 Konditorei Specialitäten und Wie Sie Entstehen,” meaning “250 Special Cakes and How to Do It.” In his introduction, Weber described the recipes as new specialty cakes not found in nearby confectionaries. However, Poganietz speculated that the recipes were not actually new but
had been in existence in small corners of the country, allowing Black Forest Cake to be traced to an earlier date.

“[Weber] found this recipe, but where and which person was creator, this is impossible to find out,” Poganietz said adamantly. “It’s impossible.”

Poganietz found this reference when he began his research in 2001, but a decade of searching turned up no earlier listing.

In 1949, Adolf Heckmann’s “Der Junge Konditor,” or “The Boy Confectioner,” ranked Black Forest Cake among the 15 most famous specialty cakes. It was around this time that the dessert started its rise to the level of recognition and popularity it enjoys today.

As Poganietz explained, whipped cream was unavailable during World War II, and demand for the treat soared in the following years. Schäfer credited the surge to the return of visitors to Germany.

“Schwarzwälder Kirschtorte was unknown in 1929,” he said. “In the 50s and 60s after the war, tourism became popular, Schwarzwälder Kirschtorte became popular.”

Just prior to his death in 1981, Keller paid a visit to his old apprentice’s café. Schäfer described him as down to earth, saying, “He never thought Schwarzwälder Kirschtorte would become as popular as it did.”

Despite being widely credited for the culinary masterpiece, Keller soon moved on to other pursuits. According to Heidi Keller, Josef Keller had trouble opening a café after WWII because of his service in the German army.

“So my father learned [to be] konditor,” she said. “And my grandfather helped my father in the bakery. Later he made pralines. This was a hobby of my grandfather.”

Heidi Keller said the café’s Black Forest Cake was famous among locals, but it was not long before Keller’s pralines and meringues were famous as well.

The café closed soon after Keller’s death.

“The old people like cake and coffee; the young people, they want fast food,” She surmised with a shrug. “It was a high-up profession to be a konditor and not a baker; that was not the profession that he loved.”

Aside from one unsuccessful attempt by her brother, the line of konditors has died out, leaving Keller’s legacy, warranted or not, to Schäfer.

“It was not a moment or a day or one person when Schwarzwälder Kirschtorte was created. It was a period,” Poganietz said. “In this time of refrigeration, whipped cream was possible. In this region, cherries were available. Five or six recipes all had the name Schwarzwälder Kirschtorte; today it’s only one.”

So maybe the trail does come to its end, hidden by the dark enchanted forest. Maybe, as Poganietz believes, there is no single creator of the Black Forest Cake. Or maybe it’s meant to remain a secret, buried under layers as dark and rich as the cake itself.

“Everyone says it’s a wonderful story,” Poganietz said. “But it is a fairytale.”

Perhaps it is. But then again, what better place is there for a fairytale than an enchanted forest?