

The Nordic World Ski Championships in Oberstdorf 2021 - as seen by a former pro

Cooking or sports: Frank Übelhör always gives it his all

The former professional winter athlete now runs a sustainable wellness and health hotel in his home village of Maierhöfen, where he runs the kitchen himself. Yet he has remained true to his sport: whenever he's not at the stove, he's outside getting some exercise.

Frank Übelhör is sitting at a table in a black chef's jacket with the Hotel Krone logo embroidered on it. It's been 20 years since he left behind his career as a professional Nordic skier, yet he still comes across as fit and sporty. He has been in charge of the kitchen and the hotel at the family business in Maierhöfen in West Allgäu since 2000. and is a trained chef.

He gets out into the fresh air whenever he can. Whether he's doing sports or looking for wild herbs, mushrooms and berries in the forests and ravines on the local mountain or in the Eistobel Gorge. "The main thing is to keep moving," he says and laughs. "That's why back then I took the pragmatic decision to learn my trade as a chef in Oberstdorf. By working shifts, I was able to train professionally in cross-country skiing during daylight hours, while my friends only arrived after work with their headlamps. That's what I call freedom. For the mind, too. I can always switch off when I'm doing sport. And I always got time off for competitions at the weekend," says the 48-year-old.

He won several titles in cross-country skiing between 1987 and 1993. The sport's evolution towards a more dynamic freestyle, the skating style, suited him very well. After his apprenticeship as a chef, he trained as a mountain paramedic with the military. He was able to simultaneously pursue his athletic career, and competed successfully as a bi-athlete in the battalion and division championships.

Beer or sport - that was the choice, and the choice was sport

Übelhör came into his career by way of his very sporty family. He was never "forced" into it. His father, Hans Übelhör, was a Nordic combined skier and took part in many Nordic combined championships - often on the Iberg near Maierhöfen. That was during the post-war period. "You really only have two options here in the country: either you hang out in pubs with a beer in your hand or you do sport. For me, there was only the second option," says Übelhör.

He travelled a lot in the years following his athletic career, which he actively ended in '94/'95. He felt it was important to develop his own culinary style after completing his apprenticeship. He calls this period his "travelling years". "As a chef fresh out of my apprenticeship, at first all I really knew was the craft itself. I didn't have the courage to break certain 'rules'. I simply didn't have the experience. I wanted to get that somewhere else. So I went to the Caribbean, Bermuda and Italy. Once I was back home, it was pointless to offer lobster, for example. Nobody can afford that. That's why I got 'back to my roots' and started reinterpreting German cuisine, which was at a low point at the beginning of the 2000s. A lot of things were put on the plates in a modern and stylish way. I still challenge my guests today with influences from my travels. You can taste that in my dishes. It might be the use of veal shank instead of pork shank or the plentiful use of herbs from the hotel's own garden. That's better than too much salt. That would be unhealthy. Staying open to new things means a lot to me," says the 48-year-old.

Sport, health and nutrition go hand in hand

"For me, sport and nutrition go hand in hand. Both have a positive influence on body awareness and consciousness. As a former professional athlete who once had to eat 4,000 calories a day, I know what I'm talking about," he says. "That's why it was an obvious choice for me to carry on with my parents' hotel after my 'travelling years'". We are now in the seventh generation. The property used to be farmland with an inn and a small guest house," he says. Pointing his finger to the room where we are sitting, he continues: "This room here, our new 'fireplace lounge', can be traced back to 1769 when it was the original farmhouse with its own alpine pasture. This building was here before the church and we celebrated its 250th anniversary in 2019."

You would never suspect that. Only the historic stable arches and the old wooden boards on the wall give any indication that we are in a very old part of the building. "We sanded down the old wooden elements and used them as wall panelling. This lends an authentic charm and reminds us of our roots," says the 48-year-old.

Health is very important to him and his wife Sandra: in their hotel they offer healthy cuisine, yoga and wellness. For those who want to go all out here, an alkaline diet is the best choice. Frank Übelhör prepares vegan dishes for these guests. Vegetarian dishes and meat dishes are, however, also available. But meat is never served with the traditional herb butter. Frank Übelhör likes to experiment and may garnish it, for example, with a chutney he has made from fruit grown in a meadow orchard near the hotel.

Slow food is the foundation

The meat is sourced from the pool of suppliers belonging to the regional initiative LandZunge. He co-founded this supplier company some time ago. The cattle that Allgäuer Kälber EG slaughters under the label are a special cross between Allgäuer Braunvieh and Blond d'Aquitaine. As an aside: Germany's Slow Food e.V. initiative has designated the Allgäuer Braunvieh cattle breed as an "ark passenger". These "ark passengers" are primarily farm animal breeds or crop species that are threatened with extinction because they are not competitive under current economic conditions. On the pasture on the Iberg, which belongs to the Übelhör family, hotel guests also experience the hotel's own cattle, which Frank Übelhör then serves as alpine grazing beef in autumn.

Even with such a head for business, his top priorities are always to act sustainably, to continue doing his sport and, of course, to follow the Nordic World Ski Championships on TV. "I'm keeping my fingers crossed for the Allgäu locals and of course I'm glad that we're going strong here," he says. At the same time, his gaze wanders wistfully outside to the snow-covered winter landscape and he says with a laugh: "Right now I feel like going cross-country skiing or ski touring."

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