

Top table

Hilda Hoy discovers Ernst, a Berlin restaurant with a difference



Photos by Maidje Meergans

It's a chilly, misty morning in Berlin's northern district of Wedding, and the shutters have just come up on an unassuming storefront of grey concrete. A gleaming doorbell embossed simply with five letters – Ernst – is the only indication that this is Berlin's most hyped restaurant of the moment. Inside, sitting at the wooden countertop that wraps around an open kitchen, Ernst's chef and founder,

Dylan Watson-Brawn, rubs sleep from his eyes and sips on a green tea. Just 24, Watson-Brawn is soft-spoken under his black hooded sweatshirt, though his voice rises animatedly once he gets going on one of his favourite subjects: his restaurant's produce, and the farmers who grow it.

The culinary team he's assembled is busily unpacking the day's market haul: crates overflowing with cavolo nero kale

and dandelion greens; apples, walnuts and purple-blushed turnips; a sack of golf ball-sized potatoes with soil still clinging to them. For now, the mood is relaxed and unhurried. There are still eight hours to go until the doorbell begins to ring and guests start arriving for the single dinner seating of the night.

Something of a culinary wunderkind, Vancouver native Watson-Brawn began working ➤➤➤

in restaurants as a teen. By the time he landed in Berlin at 19, he'd already racked up experience at Tokyo's triple-Michelin-starred Ryugin and Copenhagen's Noma. He wasted little time making a name for himself in Berlin's gastronomy circles, launching a series of pop-up dinners out of his own apartment. This past August, Ernst finally opened as a permanent restaurant, a coolly understated space of polished concrete and sheer, flowing linen curtains.

But what sets Ernst apart is not only the story of its founder and his culinary talent, but also its innovative and rather gutsy business model. To score one of the coveted 12 seats at the counter per night, customers must first purchase a ticket via the restaurant's website. The full, non-refundable payment (€155 for the winter menu, €135 the rest of the year) is required upfront – all that's left to pay for on the night of are drinks. The advantages for the restaurateur are clear.

"This makes sense from a fiscal perspective. We don't have that classic restaurant's cash flow problem," Watson-Brawn says. "We get all the money from tickets up front. We're not buying from our suppliers on credit."

This liquidity enables him to continually invest in the asset he values the most: pristine, seasonal produce, the very best money can buy. "From April to the end of November, we always buy in surplus, when we have the best produce and the best prices. I'm very happy to buy 40 kilos of lingonberries now and preserve them to use later."

His business partner and co-chef Spencer Christenson trails in, shouldering the catch of the day from the local fisherman



The Ernst team

To get one of the 12 seats, customers must first buy a ticket online that costs \$184. All that's left to pay for on the night are drinks

who provides a regular supply of freshwater fish. Some days it's char, pikeperch, or eel that he nets – today it's trout, which were still swimming in the waters of western Berlin's Havel River until earlier this morning.

This embodies Ernst's core principle: serving only the freshest, most carefully raised produce and meat. Five nights a week, these are crafted into minimalist tasting menus of 20-30 courses, each of which is designed to let the essence of the ingredients shine through. A single wedge of butternut squash roasted over apple wood, fried tempura style, then served in a mushroom reduction. A globe of cured egg yolk nestled in a charred cabbage leaf. One fat cep mushroom, split and grilled with pine oil. It's a hybrid of French and Japanese culinary sensibilities, aiming for balance and poignancy rather than bold flavours.

Consistently having such high-quality produce is only possible because Watson-Brawn spent the last years diligently cultivating relationships with farmers. Often this meant showing up and helping out in the fields until he earned their trust. "Not only do we want their produce, we want their best produce. We want their insight."

The greens that arrived today were grown on a biodynamic farm north of Berlin. The marigolds drying over the stove – destined to become vinegar – were foraged from another. Everything in the Ernst kitchen comes straight from the source, though that doesn't necessarily mean local. A farmer in Sicily delivers lemons, persimmons, artichokes, and pistachios; a farm in Austria raises the Mangalitsa meat. Soon, a diver in northern Norway will be providing fresh scallops and sea urchins. No less dedication goes into the wine list. ➤➤➤

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Sommelier Christoph Geyler, who left double-Michelin-starred Rutz to join Ernst, regularly travels to biodynamic vineyards around the continent. Last year he spent four days at one in the Mosel Valley, pulling on a pair of muddy boots to help with the Riesling harvest.

Temporary pop-up food events or supper clubs, which is how Ernst started out, have exploded in Berlin in recent years. Though it wasn't always the plan to evolve into a full-time restaurant, Watson-Brawn calls those years a "test pilot" phase, during which he could refine his concept and, just as importantly, lay some crucial groundwork. Those years of building a brand, not to mention plenty of media coverage, are what now makes people willing to shell out money in advance for a seat at his counter. Since Ernst opened in August, the nightly dinner seatings have sold out many weeks in advance.

Above: Dylan Watson-Brawn and sous chef Paul Klein butchering a lamb in one of their supplier's farmhouses



There was "not a chance", Watson-Brawn says, that he would have opened Ernst under the conventional restaurant model. "We thought to ourselves, 'What are the most annoying things you have to deal with in a restaurant, and how can we use technology to move beyond them?'"

The ticketing system eliminates one of the biggest frustrations: cancelled bookings and no-shows. Image is carefully considered, for the sake of branding but also to manage customer expectations. That's why the Ernst website doesn't list the exact number of courses or depict any dishes, since the menu changes every night.

"The question always is: 'How can we present our restaurant to make sure the right people come, the people that really want to be here?'" he says. "I want people to come in with an open mind."

This also enables the Ernst chefs to retain their creative freedom and be uncompromising in their principles. Agility is built into the process: The menu

always depends on the produce of the day, and is often decided spontaneously in the hours leading up to the meal as the team banters and plays around in the kitchen.

Sous chef Paul Klein chips in with a story from this morning's market excursion. "Yesterday was a holiday, so the farmer got lazy and the chives he had today were from last week," he says. Other restaurants, with regular menu items to make, would have to take the substandard chives anyway. "But we can pass."

When this evening's 12 guests take their seats at the counter, they certainly won't be missing those chives. Not when there are so many other fresh, compelling things coming out of the kitchen in perfectly timed succession: fermented wild mushrooms, trout sashimi, a sweetly roasted Jerusalem artichoke, an exquisite tangle of fat-marbled Mangalitza ham. And there's still so much more to come – Ernst is just getting started. ❶