

Edited Interview with Anita Thoma at Il Primo Restaurant (24/1/2008)

Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire (MM) Anita Thoma (AT)

1. **AT:** So you see there is his photograph (pointing at her father's Swiss work passport) Florian Alfred Thoma, this is a work history, with his date of birth and in a way it was his passport
2. **MM:** So he was born in 1923?
3. **AT:** So he started off here as a pastry chef in Davos (looking through the book) goes through the different places and is signed off by the manager of the place or whatever, this is where he worked here in Ireland.
4. **MM:** Wow, Rockwell College, he taught there in the cookery school, I must check that with Jim Bowe because he worked there.
5. **AT:** Jim Bowe knew him well, because when I was in Cathal Brugha Street, Jim Bowe was teaching there at the time and he knew my father well. So there is some notes of medals he won at Hotelympia and stuff (pointing to awards page). He was pastry chef and baker in some places.
6. **MM:** These years are just after the war and some years during the war, of course Switzerland was neutral.



Figure AT.1: Swiss Society of Chefs Apprenticeship Logbook

7. **AT:** He used to tell the grandchildren stories of being asked to make a cake for Hitler and that he told them the fuck off (laugh) Anyway, it goes through it there and it is very interesting. He spends from 1948 to 1954 in the Royal Hibernian Hotel in Dublin, so six years and then goes to the Grand Hotel in Birmingham, and then on to the S.S. Oransay out of London, then to Chadwick House in Knowle (Solihull, West Midlands) before returning to the Royal Hibernian Hotel again as *entremetier* (vegetable chef). He then spent two years as chef in the Royal Marine Hotel in Dun Laoghaire before going over to London to work in the Oxford and Cambridge University Club in Pall Mall from 1957 to 1961. From 1961 to 1968 he was executive chef over six hotels for the Ulster Transport Authority, and from 1968 to 1972 he was head chef in Dromoland Castle and the Clare Inn in Newmarket on Fergus (Co. Clare). I think they were owned by the same people. And then he went to the Burlington Hotel when it opened in 1972, where he retired out of there.

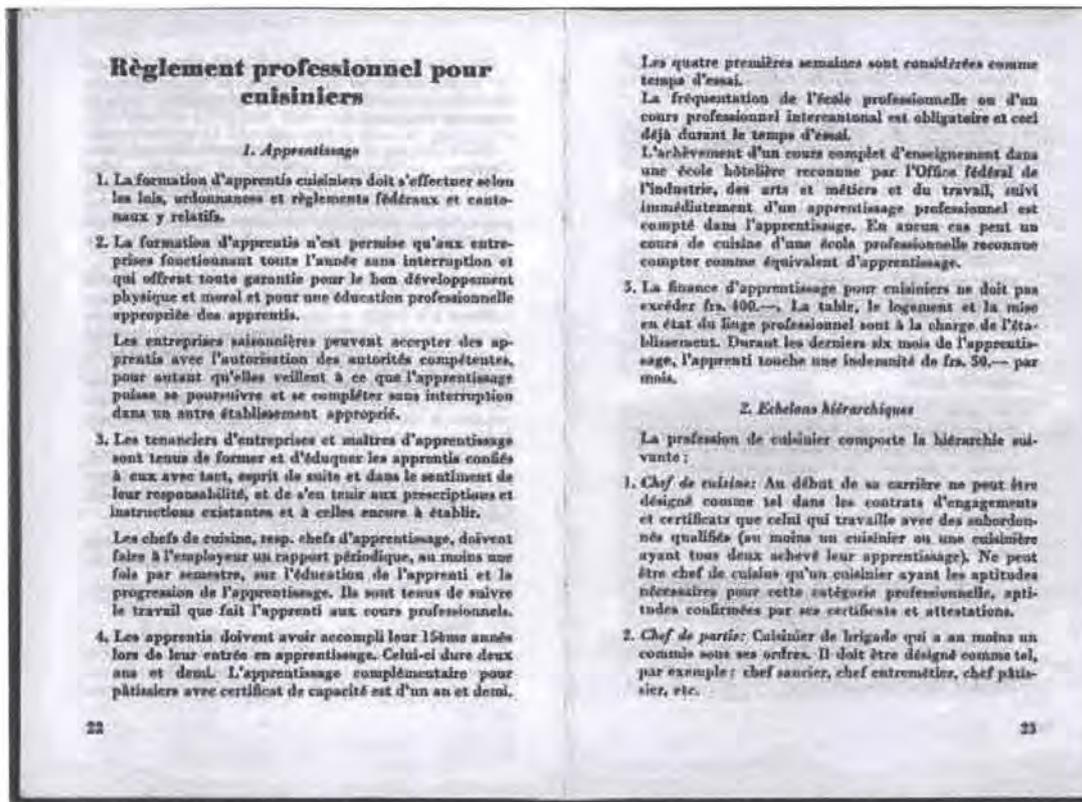


Figure AT.2: Thoma's Professional Apprenticeship Rules

8. **MM:** Oh, yeah, so he must have been the first head chef of the Burlington, because Pierce Hingston came then from the Intercontinental when Jury's took over around '73 or so.
9. **AT:** He was and then he left. I didn't find a huge amount of photos for you, they are all in the attic, this is a picture of him in Davos before he came to Ireland, that's him doing a butter sculpture.
10. **MM:** Do you know if there was any catering in his family?
11. **AT:** There wasn't really, his father was a gardener in a kind of estate and he died when my father was very young, he was only a small boy, it was after the First World War, the influenza (outbreak), my father was only about five or six because he was at school and they came to get him out of school, the father and some other guy were pushing a cart through the village in rural Switzerland, and the fellow in the front was shouting back at him 'why aren't you pushing?' and he'd collapsed and died, you know. They are just those kind of medals from Olympia, that's all I could find in a hurry, I hope they are of some use for you.
12. **MM:** Just about yourself, when were you born?
13. **AT:** I was born on the 14th June 1967 so I'm forty now, I was born in Clondalkin. My parents had moved from Clontarf to Clodalkin in 1961, I think. My mother was Irish, Maureen McGlinn, she was working in the Royal Hibernian as a waitress and that is how they met.
14. **MM:** Was she from Dublin?



Figure AT.3: Professional Workbook for Chefs and Pâtissiers

15. AT: Well, originally born in Achill but grew up in Sligo, but moved to Dublin when she was around seven or eight because her father died and her mother came to Dublin, looking for work, the granny worked in service and my mother went to work in hotels. I remember her saying the year she died, she got diagnosed with lung cancer and died eight weeks later, but asking her that year about meeting my father and she remembers her and her friend the day the Swiss arrived, because they came down into the kitchen, you know, that morning and they all looked very glamorous in their whites, and her friend said to her 'well what do you think?', and she said 'the little one at the end', because they were both like 5'3 or 5'4, I'm the tallest in my family.
16. MM: Your father was short in stature, but well rounded, or well built?



Figure AT.4: Work History February 1944 – April 1946



Figure AT.5: Work History May 1946 – December 1946

17. **AT:** Well, you know what they say, being a pastry chef, never trust a skinny chef! But it was a different thing in those days, his attitude to food was completely different from my experience of anyone else I ever met in Ireland, you know the disposable nature of food here and the real lack of respect for it, it was just a different thing, in those days if you were a chef, you were a professional, you know. I think that certainly dipped, when I did my leaving certificate, I went straight to Cathal Brugha Street and did the full time course there in 1984 and Joe Erraught was head of School at that time.
18. **MM:** I think Joe Hegarty had taken a year out and gone off somewhere; who taught you there?
19. **AT:** Jimmy Kilbride was there, Jim Bowe was there, Joe Erraught was teaching at the time as well. Every Monday morning we had P.J. Dunne in the larder kitchen, I suppose he is dead now? He was fantastic, I remember he said to me one day, because he was in his 70s when I was there, around 71 or so but they kept getting him to come back, but one Monday I remember standing in the kitchen and I had my hands in my pockets, and he said 'Thoma, take your hands off your brains!' (laugh) but he was a fantastic man, everything he did. I remember cutting my finger once and he just took the membrane off a kidney and put it on my finger, and it worked, and I tell guys that now and they are horrified, and my business partners say 'don't put it on any of our lot there, like they're fingers will fall off'.
20. **MM:** He is really what part inspired me to start this project, He'd told me tales of Jammet's and I thought if somebody doesn't tap into these peoples stories, they will be gone.
21. **AT:** Really, he was a fantastic man, and Michael Ganly was one of our lecturers as well, a very stern sort of man, a great lesson he thought me, I don't know if he had any army background because he was very regimental, but we used to have him for practical classes and it came to taste the food, and the guy beside me got him to taste the sauce and he says to him to taste it again, and he put the spoon back in again and that was the end of that.

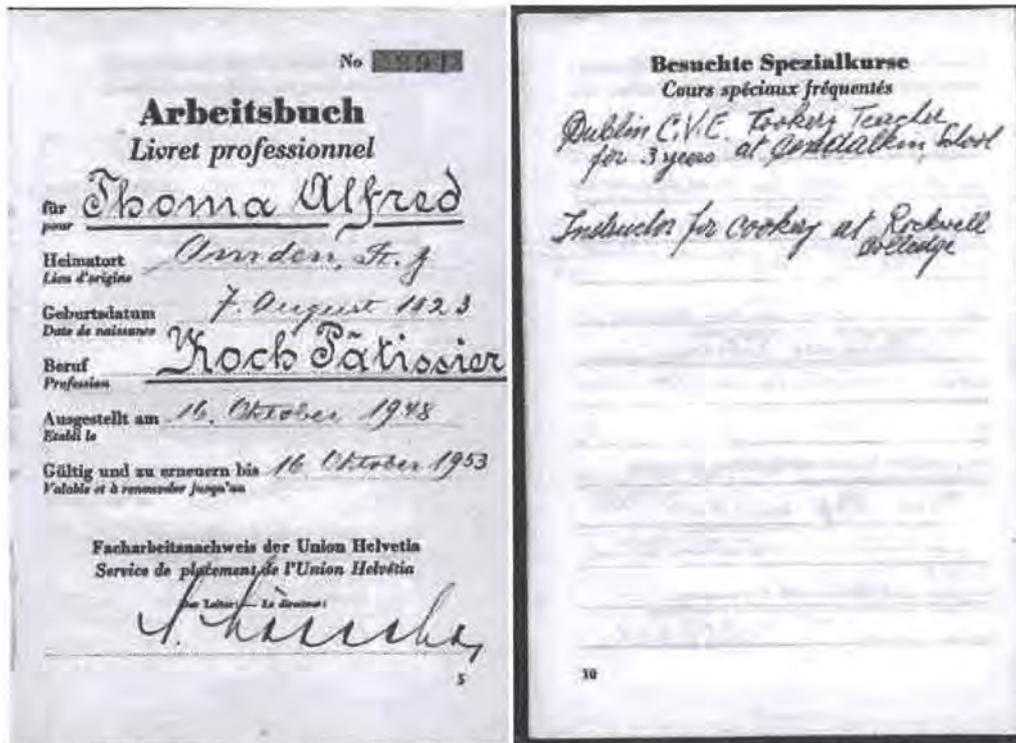


Figure AT.6: Alfred Thoma's Chef / Pâtissier Book with Teaching Experience

22. **MM:** Always wash the spoon because it's been in your mouth?
23. **AT:** He humiliated him with 'and you expect me to eat that now?', I'll never forget that, I've never in my life put a spoon into anything twice (laugh), and for pastry we had John Linnane, a gentle soul, he had been just a year or so there at that stage, a very nice man.
24. **MM:** Where did you go after that?
25. **AT:** I went to a few different places, what happened is that when I was finishing up in Cathal Brugha Street, Dave Edwards had come from Jury's to teach and he was setting up the Mater Private Hospital and there were some of us who were finishing up that year and he asked us if we'd go, so I did. It was supposed to be something different setting up a new place with new systems etc. So I stayed for two years there. I worked in a few various places, went over to Zermat in Switzerland for a while and then went over to live in Paris for a year and then came back.
26. **MM:** Had you worked in kitchens in any of these places?
27. **AT:** Yeah, I did, when I was over in Zermat, I worked a six month season in for Siler Hotels, they are a big hotel group in Switzerland. My sister was in Switzerland at the time but not there, I just went to work there for the experience and lived in the hotel, it is at the base of the Matterhorn mountains and you just went there to work. Six doubles a week and all the chefs, it was the first time in a kitchen that anyone had called me by my second name only, Thoma or Frauline Thoma, you know, it was my first taste of that really, and it was my first taste of working in really old buildings that had been maintained to a very high standard, some of these kitchens were a hundred years old and some of the pots were nearly as old but in fantastic condition. I sometimes say to the guys, you know, 'the outside of the pot needs to be cleaned too'. The respect for equipment was

just something I never experienced anywhere here, people just throw things out and buy another one.



Figure AT.7: Thoma's Work History

28. MM: In Paris, where did you work?
29. AT: I was just moving around doing different types of things, you know, I was trying to improve my French, I had done French at school, and obviously we had done kitchen French in college. So that is it, I came back to Dublin and did the first year when La Stampa opened, I think it was 1991. I did the first year there.
30. MM: Was that with Michael Martin?
31. AT: No, he came after, it was a guy called Terry Sheen. May Frizby owned it with Louis Murray in the first year and that was mad, but in between I had done a six months around the world. But that was mad because I had come from this very professional situation in Switzerland to that Dublin restaurant scene which was mad. People like being in work after having a few pints, all kinds of mad things, and music been played in the kitchen and that, it was crazy, it was like another world, I was lost.
32. MM: Where was Terry Sheen from, was he Irish?
33. AT: Yes, he's still around, I think he had worked for May Frizby in Café Fresca before. Michael Martin must have taken over from him, I left after a year.
34. MM: It had been Café Klara before that, but what was the standard in La Stampa like?
35. AT: It was the first one of those big rooms that Dublin are full of now doing rack of lamb, seabass, salmon, chicken and steak for big numbers, and it is a huge room, I always thought that the best thing about that place was the room. I think they tried initially, because they had a pastry chef, but they weren't making bread or that, you know.

36. MM: Where did you go then?
37. AT: I went with this guy that owned this place here, a German guy Dieter Bergman, who took over the building where Shay Beano was on Stephen Street, it was called Alfresco, so I worked there for about six or eight months. You need restaurateurs to be putting something back into it, not just running a business. He owned this place (Il Primo) until two years ago and then somebody else bought the building and we bought the business. After that he opened a place in Ballsbridge called 162 on the block there but I don't know. So many people open restaurants and have problems with tax, when I was opening this place I said one thing I would employ was an accountant, a solicitor, let the business people do the business and I'll do the other stuff. So I worked here for ten years, so it's a dream come true now.
38. MM: A huge change happened from 1986 to 2000, were you aware of Johnny Cooke and Patrick Guilbaud, Kevin Thornton and these people?
39. AT: In a way I was, but not really at the time. My take on things is that some chefs work in the restaurant business and that's what they do, then there are other people who are involved in the social scene of the restaurant business as well and they socialise with the other restaurant people around town, and certainly I wasn't into that at the time, and whereas I wonder now over the last number of years how you could be removed from that and work in a restaurant in Dublin because everyone talks about everybody all of the time, and everybody knows what's going on, they can tell you how many people you had in last night, and who's doing what.



Figure AT.8: Work History Continued 1946-1947

40. I remember going to a restaurant, I think it was run by a French man, called the Dauphin, and it was over the shops in Phibsborough, and it was the first time outside of being in college or being in Switzerland that I actually tasted food that I was trained to do. He was probably before his time in the late '80s or in the wrong location. Certainly over the last ten years I have been aware of what was going on in Dublin, I thought it was fantastic Dylan McGrath getting his star and Ollie Dunne as well, it is great for Dublin to have two more stars, it's great.
41. MM: Were you aware of Kevin Thornton having the Wine Epergne, or Alan O'Reilly out in Clarets or Colin O'Daly in The Park?
42. AT: A little bit, I was aware of Colin O'Daly because he had a bit of a profile when I was in college. And then Johnny Cooke came and it was everywhere, it was rock and roll.

Arbeitsausweise
Places occupées

Vom 20. Oktober 47 bis 13. November 47
du au

als* Pâtissier
comme Pa. Room
im fr. Moaf in Zürich
dans

Firmastempel und Unterschrift des Arbeitgebers:
Estampille de la maison et signature de l'employeur:

Eintrag vom Fachbereich Pa. Moaf.
der Union Hofsta

Vom Winter 1948 bis 31. März 48
du au

als* Alleinpâtissier
comme Pa. - Grädler
im Hotel Pa. Room in Kloster
dans

Firmastempel und Unterschrift des Arbeitgebers:
Estampille de la maison et signature de l'employeur:

Eintrag vom Fachbereich Hans Guler
der Union

Arbeitsausweise
Places occupées

Vom 3. Mai 48 bis 1. Oktober 48
du au

als* Alleinpâtissier
comme Hotel Continental
im au Lac in Montreux
dans

Firmastempel und Unterschrift des Arbeitgebers:
Estampille de la maison et signature de l'employeur:

sig. Graessly

Vom 1. November 48 bis 5. Feb. 1954
du au

als* Chef-Pâtissier
comme Royalibernian
im Hotel in Dublin
dans Ireland

Firmastempel und Unterschrift des Arbeitgebers:
Estampille de la maison et signature de l'employeur:

sig. H. Besser

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Figure AT.9: Work History 1947-1954



Figure AT.10: Workbook History 1954-1955

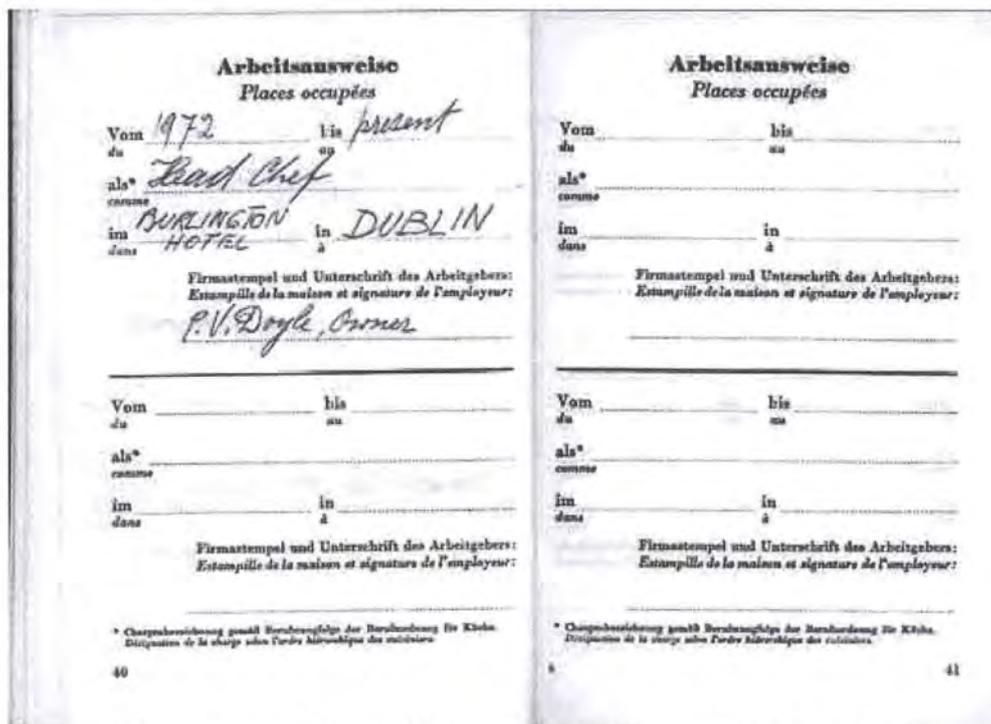


Figure AT.11: Work History 1972 Burlington Hotel, Dublin

End of Interview