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## Shopping for food, one recipe at a time

BERLIN

Kochhaus aims for niche somewhere between groceries and restaurants

BY JAN OTAKAR FISCHER

A small store opened last month in the Schöneberg district here that appears to be unique in the world. The Kochhaus, or "house of cooking," occupies a renovated one-story, 1950s building at the intersection of two important streets, Hauptstrasse and Akazienstrasse.

Huge windows carry printed entreaties like, "Eat, child, otherwise you won't get fat." Inside the sleek, muted grey interior, small tables display fresh vegetables, fruit, spices, bread and wine. Coolers are packed with meat, fish, cheese, cream and other perishables.

"At first people weren't quite sure what we were offering," said Ramin Goo, 29, the founder and managing director of the Kochhaus. "Was it a restaurant? A delicatessen? A cooking school? Only when they came inside did they realize it was none of these things."

The Kochhaus is in fact a food store that encourages people to cook well for themselves by streamlining the usual steps necessary between the idea of a meal and its realization. It offers incentive, ingredients and advice, but in a new format.

Each of the 20-odd tables at the Kochhaus is devoted to a single recipe — there are three starters, two salads, one soup, four pasta or vegetable dishes, three fish and four meat main courses, and three desserts. Each table and its adjacent cooler provide everything needed to make a specific dish, and an artfully designed poster mounted on each table shows photographs of ingredients and the finished product. A folded recipe, a kind of illustrated storyboard for cooking, comes with the ingredients.

A scenario. A customer comes into the Kochhaus in the evening after a hard day at work. He is tired of take-out and restaurants. He wants to use his own kitchen. He considers the dishes proposed by the posters, chooses one he has never made before — say, tom kha gai, a Thai coconut soup with chicken and lemongrass — chooses the ingredi-

ents for two servings and checks out. At home, preparation is swift, the result is delicious, and there are no leftovers.

Mr. Goo was born in Freiburg, in the southwestern corner of Germany, to a German mother and Chinese-American father. His ideas about cooking were nurtured by his father's Asian-influenced dishes and the surrounding culinary traditions of Alsace and the Black Forest. But his main inspiration came from Palermo, where Mr. Goo worked in a hospital as an alternative to required German military service.

He loved the Sicilian approach to eating — "uncomplicated yet creative, flavored by the Mediterranean, oriented around friends and family." Mr. Goo was on leave from his job as a management consultant for McKinsey & Co., working on a Ph.D. on entrepreneurship, when he decided to turn his passion for cooking and his idea about one-stop, recipe-specific grocery shopping into a career.

"The Kochhaus was not exactly the model of a typical start-up in this day and age," Mr. Goo said. "Retail? Grocery? My friends were very skeptical. But the idea would not go away."

Mr. Goo put a team of four business colleagues together last year, all of



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAN OTAKAR FISCHER FOR THE INTERNATIONAL HERALD TRIBUNE



The Kochhaus, top right, has 20 tables, each laden with pre-portioned ingredients for a single dish, above. Center, at left, Ramin Goo, one of the store's founders, chatting with a customer. "At first people weren't quite sure what we were offering," he said.



all said they would come again.

Diane Weigmann, 36, carrying her one-year-old son Gustav, was on her fourth visit. "I live in the neighborhood and at first thought the Kochhaus was another gourmet deli," she said. "I never cooked by recipe before, but the first meal I tried made my boyfriend say he would marry me. I find the idea brilliant."

The Kochhaus already offers mostly organic produce, but is considering adding organic meat. It also plans weekly cooking workshops.

Ms. Stöber said that people have begun sending her photographs of the dishes they've made. Activity on the store's Facebook site, where it has more than 1,200 fans, is growing. Mr. Goo can often be seen in his store stocking tables and chatting with customers.

"Of course I took a close look at the food galleries of the KaDeWe (Berlin's famous department store) and Dean & DeLuca in New York," Mr. Goo said, "but we wanted to demonstrate that good food can be cooked by anyone, and it doesn't have to be expensive or complicated or elitist."

The Kochhaus might have emerged somewhere else in Germany or even in a different neighborhood of Berlin. "Berliners are famously more curious and open," Ms. Stöber said. "It is the best place to test new ideas. And we picked Schöneberg, which has one of the most ethnically and socially diverse populations in the city."

Ms. Stöber said their research indicated that "people in Schöneberg actually cook. They go to markets, they pay close attention to what they buy, and they enjoy eating."

The founders say they might expand eventually, but at the moment they are content to hope their only child grows fat and healthy.

whom were about 30 — including a cook from Heidelberg, Benjamin Rendtorff — and found three main investors for the project, each only peripherally involved in retail food distribution. The team spent most of early 2010 brainstorming about recipes, ingredients, graphics, guidelines, and location.

"We're certain there is no food store out there like ours, even though the concept is so simple," said Dorothee Stöber, 31, the Kochhaus marketing director. "The rules we make for ourselves are strict and easy to understand: no dish costs more than €10, about \$13, a serving; no dish takes more than one hour to prepare; there are no more than twelve steps to any recipe; there are never more than twenty recipes to choose from in the store, although two new ones are rotated in each week."

The Kochhaus keeps its costs low by selling individual portions, employing a small staff, using local ingredients whenever possible, and producing most of its graphics, packaging, and labeling in-house — though it engages the Berlin

Workshop for the Disabled to package most of its dry goods.

Simple doesn't mean commonplace. The produce on each table is spotlighted as if on a tiny stage. Most of the recipes include at least one exotic or unexpected element: rambutan fruit in Indian curry; King Oyster mushrooms in tagliatelle; marajuas in tomato-bread salad; dried flower petals in risotto. Most recipes are developed in-house; a few are adapted from other favorite cookbooks — a fried perch with avocado from Donna Hay is well-credited. Specific wine recommendations — Riesling is prominent — are carefully explained.

Customers may buy individual ingredients if they like, as well as equipment like pans, bowls, mixers, tongs, ladles and meat hammers. The consequences of any meal are also addressed by the discreet inclusion of dish soap, bandages, spot remover and toilet paper.

On a recent afternoon, most customers seemed intrigued. A 19-year-old student, two white-haired retirees and a middle-aged mother with her young son