

## Austrian entrepreneurs hope for success in Minn.

By BRITT JOHNSEN , Associated Press

March 30, 2009

ST. CLOUD, Minn. - Austrian Thomas Oelsboeck was standing in line at a food stand in New York City, salivating for a schnitzel. The sign said it offered wienerschnitzels. He was there in 2000 on vacation and looking forward to the Austrian treat.

So Oelsboeck, now owner of a new authentic Austrian restaurant in St. Cloud, was confused when the man behind the stand asked him if he wanted sauerkraut on his hot dog.

No, I want a wienerschnitzel; I'm not paying for this, Oelsboeck told him.

But it is a wienerschnitzel, the man said.

No, it isn't, he argued.

Oelsboeck will exhaustively defend the schnitzel any day. He came straight from Vienna, Austria, to Waite Park, where he and his brother Michael Oelsboeck last month opened Austrian Schnitzel Headquarters — the only Austrian restaurant in Minnesota.

The pair came to St. Cloud in August after more than two years of putting together a business plan.

Thomas Oelsboeck — who, along with his brother Michael, is a die-hard Minnesota Vikings fan — is also a former player and coach for a championship-winning Vienna football team. So coming to Minnesota isn't as unlikely as it seems.

A trained cook and natural businessman, he will tell you just about anything you want to know about the wienerschnitzel, a battered and fried piece of chicken, pork or veal. So opening an Austrian restaurant isn't as strange as it sounds.

And when Thomas Oelsboeck says in his noticeable Austrian accent that he's not afraid to say the word "wiener" — which he offered matter-of-factly, adding he knows what it means here in America — you might know he'll gladly tell you a lot more about who he is, how he got here and what he hopes to do in the St. Cloud area.

Oelsboeck looks like the linebacker he was for many years. He's stocky and about 5 foot 11 inches, with a beard. When he speaks, it's clear he's from Austria — not like Arnold Schwarzenegger, much clearer and less harsh — and he's as welcoming and cheery as a Minnesotan.

After high school in Vienna, a person can either go to a university or become certified in a trade. Oelsboeck became a certified chef and waiter.

He started investigating what it would take to open a restaurant in the U.S., something he had talked about for years.

Michael Oelsboeck — 10 years younger, about an inch shorter, looking like a little brother — decided he wanted to come along. So the two traveled to the U.S. in 2006, looking first at opening the restaurant in Florida.

Thomas' former sister-in-law, Barbara Winne, studied aviation at St. Cloud State University. Winne, a pilot for Mesaba Airlines, still considers Thomas a brother, although he and her sister divorced in 2005. She carries fond memories of his cooking and his company when she was a teenager and lived with him and her sister.

So during their U.S. trip the guys came to St. Cloud. It was October, and the leaves were deep oranges, reds and yellows. On the flight into the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport, they looked out the window and fell in love with the land.

"I think it's Minnesota, man," Thomas said to Michael.

"I love the snow, and I love the cold," Thomas Oelsboeck said. He loves when it's freezing outside and toasty inside, where he can curl up with a blanket, drink hot cocoa and watch TV. He also said Vienna looks a lot like St. Cloud, only without as many hills or mountains.

Because of Minnesota's mostly European heritage, including nationalities such as Polish, Norwegian and German, the guys are sure they stumbled on the perfect location. That and the open-minded and friendly vibes from Minnesotans.

"I have it all here," Thomas Oelsboeck says of Austria, pointing to photos in his restaurant as he gazes around the room. He posted more than 100 pictures reflecting Austrian history and culture. "I have it in the pictures, I have it in the stories."

Oelsboeck is a proud supporter of all things Austrian, including the schnitzel.

It's not like a hot dog at all, he explains. The breaded and fried meat is often served with a salad.

"Wiener" in Austria means Vienna citizen, Oelsboeck said. Wiener is short for wienerwurst, literally meaning Vienna sausage, according to Merriam-Webster dictionary.

Thomas Koenig is an Austrian native and research fellow at the Center for Austrian Studies at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. Koenig says Austrian food is very heavy — his American girlfriend says it's fattening and often extra salty. A great wienerschnitzel in Austria, for example, is often fried in pig fat, he said.

That's not necessarily a dig on Austrian food. After all, he says, McDonald's is also filling and fattening.

Customers rave about the local Austrian restaurant's authenticity. When Winne eats the food, "it makes me homesick," she said. Customers tell Oelsboeck about how it reminds them of trips to Vienna or Melk.

Oelsboeck has spent many hours testing recipes and figuring out what customers like. The first week he offered a buffet so they could test the food. Response from the community has been more than satisfying, Oelsboeck said.

But not everyone goes home with full bellies. They've gotten some feedback from people

who are angry the restaurant is not German. One couple walked in, discovered the restaurant doesn't play German music, and stormed out saying they were never coming back.

Austria is not to be confused with Germany. They speak the same language, but it's a different dialect. The difference in its language is much like the difference between British English and U.S. English.

Thomas Oelsboeck had just closed his restaurant for the day, wearing a "Got Schnitzel?" shirt and grabbing a Red Bull energy drink (the company is headquartered in Austria).

Business has been steady, he explained after his day. Some come curious about the eatery, which is sandwiched between a bar and a dollar store. Some walk in immediately recalling vivid memories of what a schnitzel tastes like — people like war veterans and exchange students from a program at St. John's Prep School. Others — like Adrian Rick — come hungry and looking for a new place to eat.

Rick has been to the restaurant many times. He won't say exactly how often he's stopped in; he's afraid his wife would find out how much he's eaten there without her.

He is part German, like his family and his ancestors, and enjoys authentic German food and unique diners. He has never been to Austria. The northern Minnesota native found out one day last summer that his favorite German restaurant — a little place near Delano — had closed. Later that day Rick saw the sign for the Austrian Schnitzel Headquarters in Waite Park. It promised to open soon.

Several months later, the 50-year-old says he likes to take people to a place where they'll be surprised. He's taken business clients to the eatery. He's taken co-workers. He's shown the place to family and friends. And Oelsboeck knows him by name.

"These are the things that keep us going," Oelsboeck said.

His close attention to people could help Oelsboeck succeed in the St. Cloud business community during a deep recession. If not for the authentic schweinsbraten (pork roast), then perhaps he'll succeed because of his enthusiasm for Austria and dedication to St. Cloud.

"We're here on a budget. We left everything at home," he said. "This is our baby. We want to make it right."

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Information from: St. Cloud Times, <http://www.sctimes.com>

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