Rueckeisen’s
Pittsburgh, Pa. 1866–1919

Located on Sixth Street just off Penn Avenue, Rueckeisen’s restaurant appeared as Pittsburgh’s economy and urban landscape were expanding, forcing eating patterns to change too. The restaurant fed business people of a century ago who lived too far from downtown to return home for lunch, people who missed meals served at their hotels or boarding houses, and travelers arriving over the Allegheny River via the Sixth Street bridge.

William Rueckeisen immigrated to the United States in 1851 from Witzenhausen, Hesse, Germany. After gaining work experience in an inn and a saloon, he bought a property on Sixth Street and opened the “Philadelphia Restaurant” in 1866. In the 1880s, he also imported and distributed beer from Milwaukee and Cincinnati. Rueckeisen returned to Germany around 1893, at which time Ernst Osthoff, an immigrant who had been working for him at the bar and in the kitchen, and William Nickel, a Pittsburgh native and Western University graduate, who was hired to keep the books in 1890, took over the saloon and restaurant. They retained the name Rueckeisen’s, although the place was also variously known as the Philadelphia Saloon, Philadelphia Restaurant and Oyster House, Café Germania, and Rueckeisen’s Café.

Scores of local merchants supplied the restaurant. The Roalman Brothers, butchers in Allegheny City, filled their orders for beef, veal, and pigs feet. Liberty Avenue grocer Fred Fichtel delivered tomatoes, lima beans, buckwheat flour, sugar, and white pepper. Both Ernest Kimmich, who supplied them with sausage, and the Knapp Brothers, who sold them fish, turtles, lobster, and clams, were located in the Diamond Market. Nickels and Osthoff procured five-gallon pails of horseradish and dill pickles from a business that remains prominent in Pittsburgh today: Heinz.

Rueckeisen’s proprietors regularly reprinted their menu to adjust their offerings and prices. Chef Max Schmidt and cooks Mary Miller and Felix Skorlski prepared lamb four ways, beef three ways, chicken two ways, and veal two ways. They made meals of black bass, blue fish, cod, haddock, perch, salmon, shad, trout, white bass, and white fish. The kitchen also served plates of pickled lamb tongue, pork, sausage, and liver. Farina soup and celery bouillon soup, among others, appeared from time to time, although by 1917 green turtle soup au Madeira was a regular bill of fare. A special but infrequent choice was Hasenpfeffer—braised rabbit.

In the 1910s, Nickels and Osthoff began emphasizing German foods such as Bismarck herring, cervelatwurst, and kalter aufschnitt. They may have done so to compete with the Bismarck Café next door or the nearby Vienna Restaurant. In 1918, the businessmen stopped ordering French camembert and roquefort cheeses, limiting customers to limburger, liederkranz, and swiss. Yet, the restaurant also attempted to meet somewhat
cosmopolitan tastes. Hungry folks could get sliced Spanish onions as a relish, Boston baked pork and beans, succotash, spaghetti a l’Italienne, and Irish stew.

However, the late 1910s were rough for Rueckeisen’s. Many German-Americans hoped Germany would prevail over its foes when war broke out in Europe, but they terminated this support when the United States declared war against Germany in 1917. William Nickel died in July 1918. That October, Pennsylvania’s Commissioner of Health ordered saloons, movie theaters, and playhouses to close to counteract the spread of influenza. Establishments that served food were permitted to stay open, but customers were not allowed to congregate at bars. Although by this time the restaurant included an upstairs dining room for families, saloon sales accounted for substantial income. Osthoff closed down. He reopened in November to liquidate his beverage stock by employing two bartenders and two porters, a drastic staff reduction from the 19 people on the payroll in 1913. Osthoff made his last ledger entries in February 1919, when Pennsylvania ratified the Eighteenth Amendment and the Prohibition Era began.

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This article is based on the Records of Rueckeisen’s Restaurant, Archives Service Center, University of Pittsburgh.