

RICKY SAWARD

A STAR MADE OF VEGETABLES

In early June, the LOUIS in Saarlouis and We're Smart invite their guests to an unusual lunch: four leading chefs, a single, entirely plant-based four-course menu. The host is Sebastian Sandor, cooking alongside Ricky Saward, Sebastian Frank and Timo Fritsche, while Frank Fol presents the Green Guide 2026. As a long-standing partner of We're Smart, KACHEN is among the guests, and we have come meaning to speak to all four.



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It does not quite work out that way. After the meal, the chefs disperse, each joining a different table of guests, and in the bustle it's not possible to speak to all of them. Conversations with Sebastian Frank, Tino Fritsche and Sebastian Sandor will have to wait until another time. However, we were very happy to catch up with Ricky Saward.

Saward is the only one who has brought his family. As we talk, his four-year-old son sits on his lap for a while and joins in. Asked what he likes to eat most, the little one thinks hard: pudding first, then strawberry and chocolate ice cream. Saward smiles and lets him have his say. For a moment the man who runs one of Germany's most uncompromising kitchens seems, above all, like a father on an afternoon off.

THE MENU BEGINS IN THE FOREST

Saward runs the Seven Swans in Frankfurt, the world's first vegan restaurant to hold a Michelin star. No spices except salt, no cocoa, no lemon, nothing that does not come from the region. How much of that survives a guest appearance like this one? *"A hundred per cent. I brought everything with me,"* he says. It's true that he gathers around 80 percent of his menu himself by bike, outdoors, often alone. He can tell you the day he found each plant, what the weather was like, and which tree it was growing next to. This is not mere posturing; it is a foundation. Over the year he grows more than three hundred varieties





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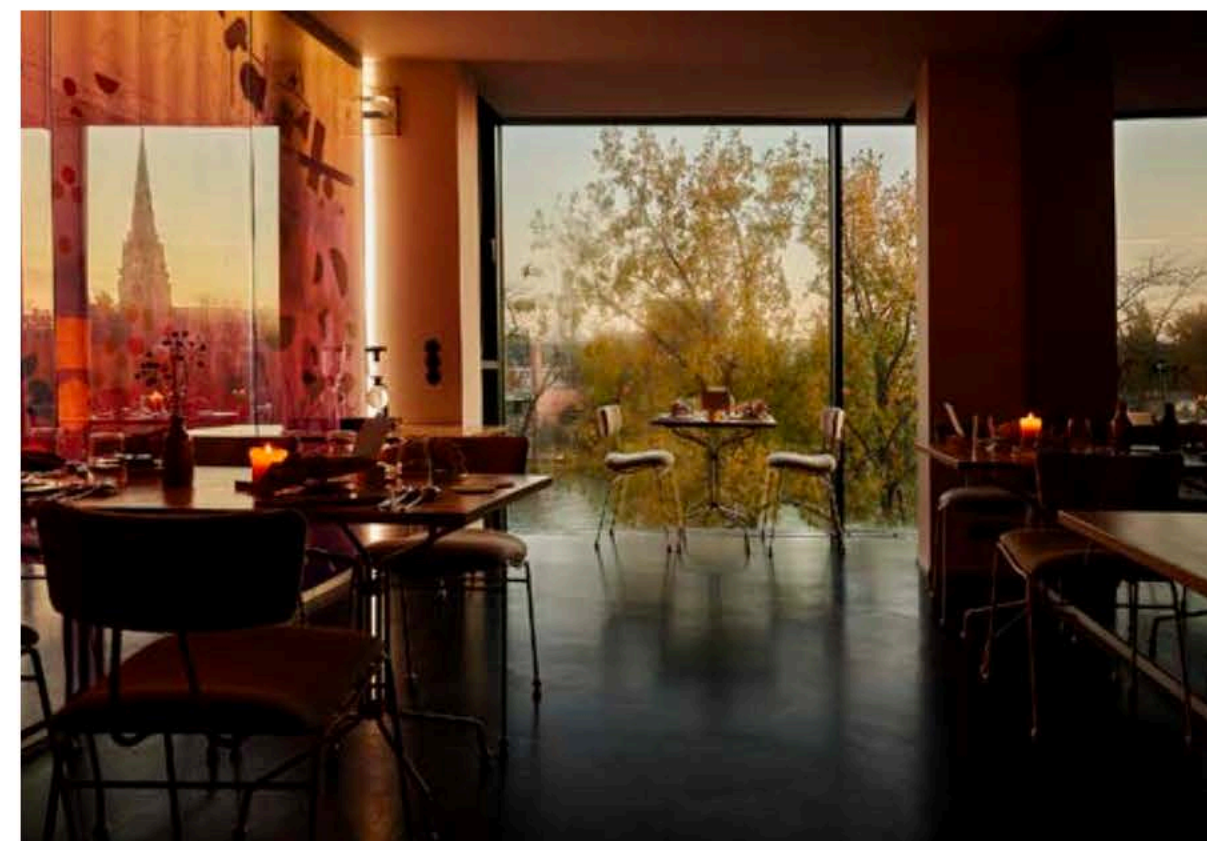
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himself and forages five hundred more, much of it pickled and fermented for the lean winter months. The rest he learns by trial and error. Once he bit into a leaf he had taken for sorrel and spent the next half hour with a burning mouth, as though he had bitten into nettles. That, he says, is part of it too. *"The more you force yourself to do without, the more ways you find elsewhere."* Without lemon, he draws his acidity from verjus, from unripe fruit, from an ornamental quince.

That search also brings home to him how much is disappearing. Where a few years ago he knew fifteen wild rock-cherry trees around Frankfurt, two are left. The rest have dried out. He does not want to convert anyone, and he keeps politics out of his restaurant. But he tells his guests what grows outside and has long been forgotten: lime leaves, young oak leaves, field maple. *"Anyone who buys salad in spring has only themselves to blame. It all grows out there."* That this knowledge is vanishing annoys him. Now and then he stands in a vocational college and cooks with the apprentices, because plant-based cooking is still smiled at there by the older hands. In Austria, he says, you can already take a vegan qualification; in Germany that is a long way off. His own clientele proves him right. It is young, mid-twenties to mid-thirties, and has no more appetite for lobster and caviar.

WHEN THE SOUP TASTES OF CHILDHOOD

What Saward likes best is to cook with memories. Not the spaghetti bolognese of childhood, but the smells and feelings almost everyone carries within them, the scent of freshly cut grass, of straw bales torn open. From pickled mushrooms he draws a clear soup that tastes round and familiar without



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being nameable. He hardly announces it anymore; the guests get there on their own. It reminds them, they say, of the chicken broth they were given as children, ill on the sofa. That is exactly the point. A taste everyone knows, one that lectures no one and still goes straight to the heart.

For a long time, the viability of this approach was by no means a given. When Saward arrived at the Seven Swans in 2018, the small vegetarian restaurant already held a Michelin star. He stepped in only as sous chef at first; then the head chef did not come back, and suddenly he stood at the top himself, an unknown who had never run a kitchen. *"Do what you like. You won't keep the star anyway,"* the former owners told him. He took it as a spur, kept the star, and turned the restaurant fully vegan in 2019. In the years that followed he cooked for two or three guests some evenings, on others the restaurant stayed shut, and more than one diner stood up mid-menu and left. Today the Seven Swans is booked out years in advance, with a long waiting list. He owes this success in part to his stubborn way with guests. He calls it educating the guests. *"We raised our own audience."* Here everyone is on first-name terms; people are supposed to feel at home, not part of some elaborate stage set. With the asparagus he will sometimes serve you a hot dog and take the cutlery away, no matter who you are. *"Nobody eats an Ikea hot dog with a knife and fork either."* Behind the this easygoing approach, though, lies an almost solemn seriousness. A plate of food, Saward says, is the most private thing he gives away. *"I'm very much serving up a part of myself to my guests."*