

A place of history

The Zurich Development Center is located on the site of the original Bircher-Benner Clinic, founded in 1903. Dr. Maximilian Bircher-Benner was a pioneer in holistic, natural healing – body, soul and spirit. He believed that diet, exercise, work and spiritual peace were essential to healthy living. His treatments helped patients rethink their diets and lifestyles by bringing them in harmony with the “forces of nature” – air, water, sun and earth. Birchermuesli, a recipe created by Bircher-Benner, is enjoyed around the world and recognized as the essence of healthy Swiss food.

The campus of the Zurich Development Center is made up of the original Bircher-Benner clinic buildings, three chalets and Dr. Bircher-Benner's private residence. Considered “hotel architecture in the mountains,” they were designed to reflect a natural environment. The original chalets have been carefully preserved and updated with new structures tailored to provide a modern, flexible space for conference activities.



Max Bircher-Benner

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Maximilian Oskar Bircher was born in Switzerland on August 22, 1867. As a young boy, he showed an early interest in illnesses, leading to his childhood nickname "doc." After studying medicine in Zurich, the young doctor opened a general practice in Zurich's industrial quarter. In 1892, he married Elisabeth Benner, a teacher from Mulhouse, France.

They took Bircher-Benner as their family name and had seven children together. After the death of Max Bircher-Benner's sister, her four children joined the family. During the first year of his practice, Bircher-Benner fell ill with a mild case of jaundice. By eating a diet of raw apples, the doctor is said to have fully cured himself.

Following the successful treatment of a woman with chronic stomach problems using a similar diet, the Doctor became more and more

convinced of the healing power of raw fruits and vegetables. Between 1895 and 1900, he conducted numerous nutritional experiments with raw vegetables on himself, his family and even his patients. He finally developed a recipe that has become a classic around the globe, Birchermuesli.

In 1897, Bircher-Benner closed his practice and left his young family in the care of his parents-in-law while he traveled around Europe to continue his medical studies. In November of the same year, Bircher-Benner returned to his family in Zurich and opened a small private clinic specializing in dietetics and physical healing methods. The unconventional doctor was soon caring for his first six patients.

In 1904, he moved his practice and founded a sanatorium in the villa district of Zurichberg, a sunny south-western location. The center was



called "Vital Force," taken from the German lifestyle reform movement which proscribed that people should pattern their lives to live in harmony with nature.

The family-run operation extolled itself as the "clinic for inner illnesses and health problems of body and soul." Its reputation and ideas soon spread beyond the borders of Switzerland and found their way into the growing popularity of the natural healing and lifestyle reformation movement. Patients came mainly from Germany, Russia and Holland. They included princes and industry moguls, musicians and writers.

A new approach

The nutritional value teachings of Bircher-Benner were in stark contrast to standard dietary theories of the time. For most, protein-rich foods were considered to have the greatest nutritional value. Meat, eggs, butter, pasta, white bread, beer and wine belonged to the most important food groups. Only food that had been cooked was considered free of bacteria and fit to eat.

Bircher-Benner, and those supporting the natural healing movement, thought that food was not only a means to satisfy hunger, but rather the way to a healthy body and mind. Meals should contain little or no meat, with potatoes, dark bread, milk and milk products.

When Bircher-Benner presented his nutritional theory to the Society of Doctors of Canton Zurich in 1900, this influential professional society disputed the scientific nature of his theory by stating: "Bircher has crossed over the borders of science".

Rejection from his peers led Bircher-Benner to publish a paper entitled, "The basics of nutritional therapy based on the energy in food", in which he exhaustively detailed his observations on energy and poor nutrition. In the "Vital Force" sanatorium, treatment included a nutritious diet, physical methods of healing and psychotherapy. Bircher-Benner was convinced that only harmony between the body, soul and spirit could lead to health and vitality.

Dr. Bircher-Benner died on January 24, 1939, at the age of 72. He did not live to see the opening of the "People's Sanatorium for a Lifestyle based on Nature." Thanks to the donation of a patient, this sanatorium, run according to his methods, was opened later that year in Zurich. Also in 1939,

the "Vital Force" Sanatorium was renamed the "Bircher-Benner clinic" in his memory.

A legendary pioneer

Fifty-five years later the Institute for the History of Medicine at the University of Zurich founded the Bircher-Benner interest group. Its goal is to preserve and spread the holistic medicine and natural healing discoveries of Maximilian Bircher-Benner. To commemorate the life and work of the great nutritional reformer, a Bircher-Benner museum and a Bircher-Benner archive have been planned.

While Dr. Bircher-Benner only received widespread recognition from the medical world late in life, he did experience a small amount of recognition during his lifetime. In the fall of 1937, he was called to London to lecture at the "School for Tropical Medicine and Hygiene." Over the course of his professional career Bircher-Benner's reputation went from jeered outsider to a renowned pioneer of modern nutritional science. On October 7, 1956, the "International Society for Nutrition and Vital Energy Research" in Hanover awarded "a Bircher medal as a lasting honor to the doctor and nutritional physiologist, Dr. Max Oskar Bircher-Benner, founder of vegetarian nutritional therapy, which is in accordance with a harmonic nutritional effect based on the power of unified thought."

The doctor once considered a "fanatic, charlatan, bungler, money-grubber, polemic, troublemaker, raw vegetable freak, vegetarian, raw vegetable eater, raw vegetable apostle" is now hailed as one of the great Swiss visionaries of the 20th century.

