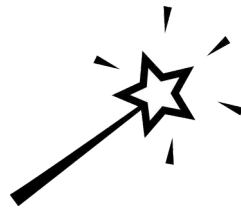


THE WIZARD OF THE KITCHEN

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THE WIZARD OF THE KITCHEN



**How a Dutch Chef Became a Pioneer
in British Culinary Education**

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ISBN 9789403639710

First published in the Netherlands in 2018.

Original title: De kookschool van oom Iwan. The Dutch Chef in Post-Victoriaans Engeland

English edition published in 2021 by:

Cicero Publiciteit (via Mijnbestseller.nl)

www.mybestseller.co.uk

www.ciceropubliciteit.nl

Layout: Iwan Kriens Jr.

Translation: Katja ter Brugge, www.bgenglishservices.nl

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Iwan Kriens (fourth from the right) during a gala dinner in the 30s. The French chef Auguste Escoffier is on the far right. Sir Isidore Salmon is standing next to him. The lady two places left of Iwan, is Lady Honywood. Both Escoffier, Salmon and Lady Honywood were members of the Consultative Committee of the London County Council (LCC) Cookery Technical School at the Westminster Technical Institute.

INTRODUCTION

It is an intriguing picture. No one knows exactly where or when it was made. The only man I recognise is the man with the beard, my Uncle Iwan. There he stands, in full evening dress. His gaze is serious and is focused on the camera. On his lapel he carries a mark of distinction. In fact, take a better look and you will see that more men are wearing a badge or a medal. Uncle Iwan is surrounded by ladies and gentlemen in evening dress in a chic restaurant. It is like a scene from a roaring twenties film. What was he doing there and how did he end up living among the British upper classes? Who was this man who exchanged dreary and gloomy Holland for elegant Paris and exotic Algiers and eventually settled in Edwardian London?

The Dutch family Kriens from The Hague is a family with a very colourful history. A very extensive family, with branches all over the world and a pedigree that goes back all the way to knights in medieval Switzerland. There is enough drama to fill an adventure book with. One of the family members that greatly appeals to the imagination is Uncle Iwan (1871-1957). The story goes that Iwan ran away from home when he was fifteen years old because he wanted to become a cook, something his father did not approve of. A bit of a maverick he must have been. And yet, it was Iwan who was to set up a cookery school in London after years of wandering through Europe. Incredible though it may seem, the story certainly appears to be true. There is evidence in a number of family photos, one of which shows Uncle Iwan in the company of the world-famous chef Auguste Escoffier during a gala dinner.

Much to my surprise no one had ever made any attempts to find out about Uncle Iwan's history. Where does one start? Thanks to the Internet, it is no longer necessary to visit all kinds of archives and image banks to search for material. Simply type in a name on your computer and see what comes up! In 2011, my husband, a namesake and second cousin of the illustrious uncle, was searching the web for his own website, which had miraculously disappeared due to computer problems. Having Googled his own name he found a press release, referring to a book in which - to his great surprise - his name was mentioned. The book, entitled *Sweet Peas, Suffragettes and Showmen. Events that Changed the World in the RHS Halls*, turned out to be about the exhibition building of the Royal Horticultural Society in London. The RHS Halls are located next to Westminster Kingsway College, which houses England's oldest cookery school. The halls were opened in 1904 and were used not only for flower shows, but also for numerous other exhibitions and events, including cookery exhibitions and demonstrations. The press release my husband had stumbled across referred to 'the famous Dutch chef Iwan Kriens', who used to give cookery demonstrations at the RHS Halls. As we found out Iwan Kriens had been headmaster of the London County Council (LCC) Cookery Technical School at the Westminster Technical Institute for 27 years. The school, which nowadays goes by the name of Westminster Kingsway College, still has

an impressive reputation and can boast names like Sophie Wright, Jamie Oliver and Ainsley Harriot among its alumni. This chance discovery was to be the beginning of our research into the life story of Uncle Iwan.

We contacted René Dee, the author of the book on the RHS Halls we had found. It was René who introduced us to Westminster Kingsway College, which subsequently invited us to a visit. Much to our delight we were received as guests of honour, were treated to a sumptuous lunch at the school's restaurant, The Vincent Rooms, and were presented with a copy of *Carry on Cooking. Catering for a Century in Westminster 1910-2010 Westminster Kingsway College Departments of Hospitality & Culinary Arts*, a book on the history of the school. The book provided more information about Iwan Kriens and showed pictures we did not know. Thus the mysterious Uncle Iwan slowly but surely came to life.

It was through René Dee's book about the RHS Halls that we also became acquainted with a fascinating club of cookery fanatics, the Universal Cookery & Food Association (UCFA), in which Uncle Iwan appeared to have played a prominent role. We now Googled Iwan's name more frequently and found several newspaper articles that had been dedicated to him, in which he was described as 'the wizard of the kitchen' and 'the best cooking instructor of Europe'. As time went by we became more and more curious. We discovered that Iwan had written two books: *The Economy of Carving*, about cutting meat at minimum loss, and a wartime cookery book, entitled *The Victory Cookery Book*. The latter was co-written together with one Mrs C.S. Peel. Naturally, we immediately thought of Emma Peel, the sexy assistant to secret agent John Steed in the '60s television series *The Avengers*. The life of 'our' Dorothy Peel proved no less interesting, as will appear later on in my book. We were fortunate enough to find both books in second-hand bookstores. One of them turned out to be Uncle Iwan's own copy of *The Victory Cookery Book*, with handwritten comments and observations!

Interestingly enough, the recipes from Iwan's wartime cookery book and the writer's ideas on healthy food have hardly dated, although some ingredients have gone out of fashion, such as sago and semolina. They are generally simple recipes, using seasonal vegetables and foods that at the time were available only on rationing coupons, and only in small quantities, if at all. The authors show great inventiveness and creativity in finding alternatives for ingredients that were either not available at the time, or scarce. The book contains a number of basic principles for cooking a healthy and nutritious meal. Superfoods as we now have them, did not exist yet, but Iwan Kriens and Dorothy Peel were already aware of the unique features of certain vegetables and cereals. The importance of drinking water, the medicinal effect of a homemade broth, the advantages of steaming instead of cooking vegetables and fish, the role of carbohydrates and minerals, all of which topics

that nowadays are presented as totally new or innovative ideas by trendy chefs and health gurus, can be found in this simple cookery book from 1918. Due to the limited use of wheat and milk and a creative use of alternative ingredients, some of these wartime recipes would today still be suitable for people with food intolerances.

Characteristically, all of the recipes stress that any kind of wastage should be avoided. After all, fuel, water and food were scarce as a result of the First World War. One hundred years later this idea is still very topical, not because of a war situation, but because of climate change and because the natural resources of our planet are being depleted. If the family history in itself was not sufficient reason for me to write a book about Iwan Kriens, it was this modern element that inspired me to tell the life story of this completely unknown Dutchman, who, at the beginning of the twentieth century, trained English chefs and waiters for jobs in the high-end hotels, restaurants and institutions. A strong-willed man who, together with his colleague and co-writer Dorothy Peel, taught the English to survive the war on a ration of potatoes, rice flour, corn flour, tapioca, vegetables, only a little meat and the occasional egg. As a matter of fact, food rationing proved beneficial for the nation as a whole. During the war the British generally lived healthier lives than before the war, if only because they now consumed a great deal less sugar. The 1918 rations for sugar, meat and fat are similar to the total intake recommended by the Health Council today. At the same time, labourers and housewives who were doing heavy work in and around the house, without the help of our modern machines, were using more calories than their modern-day counterparts would do nowadays.

I decided to include a number of recipes from *The Victory Cookery Book* in my book. Not surprisingly, I would have to try them first! I soon discovered that this would be a time-consuming task, so I asked a few friends to test and evaluate all sorts of dishes and recipes. I felt like Julia Child with an army of amateur cooks around me. This resulted in an elaborate and vivid E-mail exchange on measuring (the cookery book uses the original English sizes with gills, quarters, pints, lb's and oz's), oven temperatures (none of the recipes indicate how long something should be in the oven nor at which temperature), ingredients (what is *Allspice* and where does one buy it?) and all kinds of methods of preparation. The result is a small anthology, taken from *The Victory Cookery Book*. Innovative, not too difficult and simply delicious, also in peacetime.



Family portrait of the Kriens family, around 1892. Standing (from left to right): Uvar, Otto, Iwan, IJmer. Seated (from left to right): Arie, Frits, Hermine, Eliza. On the wall a portrait of Ernst, who had died a few years earlier.

At home he avoided the kitchen at all cost. He considered it his wife's domain. However, in the outside world, Dutch-born Iwan Kriens was regarded worldwide as a culinary authority during the first decades of the twentieth century. His students lovingly called him 'papa' Kriens, an honorary title they bestowed on him because of the way he coached his pupils. Iwan Kriens not only taught them to cook, but he regularly also gave them well-intended paternal advice.

The Westminster Technical College Hotel and Restaurant School¹, of which Iwan would be headmaster for 27 years, was established in London in 1910. The school not only wished to bring British gastronomy to a higher level, but also aimed to offer young people more opportunities for pleasant, well-paid and challenging work. The training offered good job prospects to young aspiring chefs that would allow them to prosper and increase their position in society. Unlike many of their peers, the pupils of this hotel school were given a wonderful opportunity to develop themselves. They would learn a craft they could be proud of, and were introduced to a world that most of them were not familiar with.

The young Iwan had never known such encouragement. Quite the contrary. When his father found out that he had no intentions of following a proper training like his six brothers but that instead he aspired a career in the kitchen, Eliza Kriens was not amused. He did not even want to discuss it. What else was there to do for a strong-willed, 15-year-old lad but go his own way and run away from home?

Iwan was the third son of Jozef Eliza Kriens (1835-1899) and Hermine Bölling (1838-1898). The Kriens family worked in the shipping industry. Eliza's father Arie had been a shipbuilder in Nieuw-Lekkerland, near Rotterdam. Eliza was trained as a mechanical engineer. After his studies he travelled through Germany as *Wandergesell* for some time in order to work, gain experience and see something of the world. In Haspe, a small town in North Rhine-Westphalia, he met his future wife Hermine. They got married on 30 July 1867 in the bride's hometown and subsequently settled in an upstairs apartment at Huygenspark in The Hague, the Netherlands. It was a pleasant, lively neighbourhood, near the centre of town and close to a train station that connected The Hague to Rotterdam and Amsterdam. A horse-drawn tram stopped within walking distance and provided fast access to Delft and the seaside resort of Scheveningen.

In 1868, the couple's first child was born: Arie Carl Friedrich. The young parents decided that they would have five children altogether and that each child should bear a Christian name beginning with a vowel. And so it came to pass. After Arie there was Ernst August

¹ The London County Council Cookery Technical School at Westminster Technical Institute underwent several name changes over the course of the years. In this book the name Hotel and Restaurant School is consistently used for ease and readability.



Huijgenspark 58a in The Hague, 1910. The Kriens family lived in the house on the left, on the first floor. The building next-door is a police station.

A COLOURFUL FAMILY

All seven sons of Eliza and Hermina Kriens had a remarkable future ahead of them. Arie married Eleonora Koene, daughter of Adrianus Koene, the wealthy owner of Rotterdam's *Grand Hotel Coomans*, where young Iwan started his career. After their marriage, the couple moved to the Dutch East Indies, where Arie worked for the Trade Association Amsterdam. Health problems forced Arie and Eleonora to return to the Netherlands. On the way home they stayed in Barcelona for a while and Arie got settled there as a businessman. In 1906 he was offered the position of Dutch consul and in 1929 he became Governor in Barcelona.

The younger brother Ernst went abroad too. He joined the New African Trading Company in the Congo. He arrived in Banana, a small seaport on the Atlantic coast, in January 1889, but was to die of yellow fever, nine months later, aged only twenty. Otto became an artist, married Jeanette Guldemond and settled in Rijswijk. Uvar became a civil engineer and married Jo Bevier de Fouw. He suffered from depressions and passed away in 1948. IJmer spoke German fluently and found a job as an accountant at the Company for the Exploitation of Oil Wells in Hannover. Later he worked as a correspondent and translator for various companies in the Netherlands. IJmer married Truus Burgerman, a popular amateur artist. Frits became an architect and never married. He was in poor health and died of a brain tumour at the age of 54.

Otto (1869), to be followed by Iwan Hermann Amalius (1871), Otto Gustaf Adolf (1873) and Uvar Paul Eugen (1875). By this time all vowels in the alphabet had been used, but as life would have it, two more sons would be born. Number six was IJmer Leo Harald (1878). This was still okay, because, according to the parents, the Dutch IJ can be regarded as another vowel in the Dutch alphabet and could be used perfectly well. When a seventh son was born in 1881 however, there were no more vowels left so he was called Willem Frederik Karel, Frits in short. The boy was named after the second son of the Dutch King William I, Frederik, who had died in that same year. Prince Frederik had been Grand Master of the Order of Freemasons. Eliza Kriens, a Freemason himself, was a great admirer of the Prince, who had donated his city palace in The Hague to the Order, after which it was converted to a Masonic Temple. Eliza, who carried his Masonic insignia with pride, was a regular visitor.

Growing up with six brothers can be quite a challenge. Although not all the Kriens brothers got along equally well, Iwan and his younger brother Otto proved to be kindred spirits, perhaps because the two boys had had to fight their way against a father who was not particularly happy with their professional choices. Iwan and Otto both aimed for careers with a low status and few prospects. Whilst young Otto had his mind set on a life as a painter and was to enrol in the Academy of Fine Arts in The Hague, Iwan wanted to be a cook. But there was no formal training for this kind of profession at the time. One had to learn by doing.



Iwan's father, Eliza Kriens (1835-1899)

Training years

Iwan's culinary career began in 1886, when he left his childhood home to become a cook. He received his education and practical training in several hotels and restaurants, starting at the very bottom and steadily working his way up. From dishwasher to chef. His first position was not far away from home, at the *Grand Hotel Coomans* in Rotterdam, a modern hotel with a tearoom, a restaurant and a bar. The hotel owner, Adrianus Koene, was related to his father and lived in The Hague, just like the Kriens family. Relationships grew even closer when Iwan's older brother Arie married Adrianus' daughter Eleonora Koene. Iwan worked at the *Grand Hotel Coomans* for three years, from April 1886 to March 1889. The hotel had opened in 1874. With eighteen rooms, the hotel was modest in size. By the time Iwan came to work there, it had expanded to seventy rooms.