



Gingerbread & Gewürztraminer

Alsace may be France's smallest region but it packs a punch when it comes to food and wine, says Tamara Thiessen

FRANCE

“L’Alsace est chou!”

proclaim the signs as we wind through countryside marked by medieval huddles of red-tiled roofs, church spires, fountains and flower boxes.

The jingle has a double sense – *chou* means adorable, but also cabbage. In Alsace, cabbage is king. Much of the region’s agricultural wealth was founded on the humble brassica, which underpins its iconic regional dish, the *choucroute garnie*. Alsace’s answer to sauerkraut is not for the faint-hearted. It comes on plates piled high with cabbage, potatoes, onion, bacon and big chunks of pork.

Arriving at Strasbourg’s international airport of Entzheim and passing by the capital of cabbage production at Krautergersheim (where 1,500 plates of sauerkraut are served up during the Fête de la Choucroute every September), visitors will quickly get a whiff of Alsace’s hybrid identity.

Thanks to its history, the region is innately tri-cultural: very French, a little bit German and a whole lot Alsatian. Between 1871 and 1945, Alsace was volleyed back and forth across the Rhine five times. Its food traditions embody its contradictions more strongly than anything else.

Here, the most famous dishes are not entrecotes and crème caramel, but *choucroute*, *kougelhopf* - a moulded brioche of macerated fruits - and *flammekueche* or *tarte flambée* – a crispy wood-fired rectangular crust topped with lashings of fromage blanc (fresh white cheese), crème fraîche, sliced onions and smoked ham.

Heading south from Strasbourg, the 170km Route des Vins sweeps in over 100 picturesque villages in the foothills of the Vosges mountains. Each has its own typical tastes and ‘messti’ – festivals celebrating the cultivation of wine, hops, cabbage and onions, and fabrication of *kougelhopf*, mirabelle plums, Munster cheese, *bretzels* and *baeckhoffa* – another hearty spud and meat casserole.

My first stop is Obernai where the summer Estivales d’Obernai festivities are underway on the patisserie-girded market square (the sweet of tooth should not bypass Patisserie Gross, 66 rue du Général Gouraud). The Place du Marché is a crush of impossibly pretty, pastel-toned, half-timbered colombage houses and Renaissance stone dwellings with lacquered roof tiles, decorative friezes and geranium-packed balconettes.

THE PERFECT TART

The annual Foire aux Vins is also in full swing inside the Hôtel de Ville, with dégustations of Alsace wines such as Riesling and Gewürztraminer, the two predominant grapes.

“The four *seigniors* of Alsace wines,” one winemaker tells me, “are Riesling, Tokay-Pinot Gris, Muscat and Gewürztraminer, which all fall under the AOC (appellation) Vin d’Alsace.”

At Winstub Le Freiburg, a heart-and-rooster decked wood and stone den on the main strip (46, rue du Général Gouraud) I go gourmand, starting with a savoury gratinéed tarte flambée of Emmenthal cheese, onion and cream, and finishing with a sweet cream, apple and cinnamon tart.

The key to a perfect, almost paper-thin tart, says Sacha Bender, owner and cook, lies in sticking closely to tradition. “*Flammekueche* means flamed, referring to the lightly charred outer crust. Starting out as a worker’s dish in the 1930s, they kept a bit of dough aside as they made bread, and used the time while the stove was warming up to cook the tarts which they ate direct from the shovel. Today we still serve them up straight from the oven on a wooden board.” Cheery wine and food cellars, the winstubs embody Alsace’s spirit of *gemütlichkeit*, or cosiness. ►



**CLOCKWISE
FROM TOP LEFT**
Flammekueche;
the Route des Vins;
choucroute garni;
wines and cakes;
decorative balcony





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The bear in Andlau; Obernai; Mirabelle plums; Kougelhopf



Alsace wines have the 'naturalness of youth'

Even the animals here love a tittle. The bear statue in the main square of Andlau munches on a cluster of grapes. Alsace wines are exceptional because they have the 'naturalness of youth', says the village's star vigneron, Rémy Gresser. "We have a non-interventionist philosophy, avoiding any manipulation of the fruit during winemaking, including oak casks." The fresh, fruity and spicy Gewürztraminers, he says, "make a perfect partner for zesty Asian dishes."

Every time Riquewihr was assailed by enemies, winemakers doggedly rebuilt it so it would be more attractive than before. "The pearl of Alsace's vineyards", a cluster of red roofs nestled among slopes of vines, is a true medieval bijoux of sculpted, wood-beam houses, ornate overhanging windows, courtyards, wells and fountains.

La Grappe d'Or (1 rue des Ecuries Seigneuriales), with red-and-white chequered tablecloths, is a good place to quaff a glass of the prized local cru, the Riesling of Schoenenbourg. I do just that with a slice of *fondant tarte à l'oignon* – onion and crème fraîche tart. Alsace is queen of tarts. Rustic, chunky and real, blueberry, greengage, apple and pear. The same fruits infuse the fortifying eau-de-vie spirits.

WAY TO GO

● An eight-night Alsace Wine Trail walking holiday with **Headwater** through vineyards, forests and villages costs from £878 including transfers (01606 827239, headwater.com). **Cycling for Softies** offers short and easy Alsace cycling holidays based in a four-star, family-run hotel from £696 for three nights (0161 248 8282, cycling-for-softies.co.uk). **Tourism Alsace** has information about getting around and planning your trip (tourisme-alsace.com).

RIESLING REVOLUTION

The distinguished, family-run maison Hugel & Fils has graced the village since 1639. I chat to winemaker Etienne Hugel, who says: "Because of Alsace's identity problem, there has been a lot of confusion between Alsace and German wines."

Nonetheless, Hugel continues, a "Riesling revolution" is underway, and Alsace's dry, full-bodied Riesling is distancing itself from traditionally sweet and sticky German wines to establish itself as a gastronomic wine par excellence.

In the neighbouring fortified town of Ribeauvillé, Pierre Trimbach - the 'roi of Riesling' - is a 12th generation winemaker at the Domaine Trimbach, founded in 1626. While Riesling is the flagship wine, he believes delicious Pinot Gris, with its mix of herbaceous, pollen, smoky and forest floor notes is a good Chardonnay alternative.

Every June, the citizens of Ribeauvillé spend an entire Sunday debating whether their village can lay claim to the birth of the Kougelhopf. The toasted, almond-wreathed cake, shaped like a crown, is the festive symbol of Alsace, and often downed with an aperitif or dessert wine. At the Pâtisserie Confiserie Schaal & Co (28 Grand'Rue), I buy packets of petite chocolate-dunked *bretzels* and soft gingerbread *pain d'épices* - traditionally Christmas cookies, but good at any time of the year.

My trip winds up among the ramparts and conical hills of Eguisheim. The birthplace of Pope Saint Leon IX has several sights named after him – a chateau, square and fountain. Under a characteristically decorative wrought iron sign, I enter A La Ville de Nancy, a wood-beamed bistro strung with drink coasters from across the world.

As I tuck into a plate of pickled choucroute with fish, the owner tells me that the Fête des Vignerons will descend on the village in August. It seems to me, though, that the festival spirit is alive in Alsace all year round. 🍷