

GLÜHWEIN AND OTHER GERMANIC TREATS IN THE LAND OF NOËL BY MERIL MARKLEY

Being from colder climes than Houston, and having lived in Germany and Austria with their enchanting Christmas seasons, I have never quite adjusted to the holidays in Texas where the mercury always seems stuck in the 70s. So a December business trip to France with my husband, Michael, offered prospects of reinvigorating our Old World Christmas spirit with a few days in Alsace.

The Alsace region of France boasts rolling hillsides covered wall-to-wall by the vines that are the source of its reputation as one of the country's centers of viticulture. Fought over for centuries between the French and the Germans, Alsace promotes the best of both nations when it comes to mulled wine ("Glühwein"), food, and good holiday cheer.

We chose as our initial destination the region's capital, Strasbourg, and as our base of operations the Petite France district, separated from the rest of the city by canal and river. Tanneries and slaughterhouses were centered there in medieval times and many of the half-timbered buildings from that era still exist. Our hotel, the De L'Europe, was an amalgam of just such older structures located a few minutes by foot from the Place Kléber, the city's huge main square with a giant Christmas tree at its center.

Having arrived on our wedding anniversary, we asked the concierge to propose a special dinner of something typically Alsatian. She arranged an evening at the Maison des Tanneurs, a restaurant along the nearby canal. Housed in a half-timbered building constructed in 1572 for the tanners from which its name derives, the restaurant has offered the best of the region's cuisine and wines for over 60 years. We were seated at a corner table with a commanding view of the main dining room but by a window where we could watch the snow falling on the cobblestones outside.

Michael and I had the day's specials as our starters -- onion tarte and a salad of scallops. For the main course, Michael had the venison special with various sauces based on chestnuts and on red berries. I had veal kidneys in a rich cream sauce with mushrooms. Both were accompanied by "spaetzle," rich little nuggets of dough which are ideal for absorbing the sauces of any dish they accompany. Lighter and more flavorful than any we had ever tasted, these became the standard against which all others were measured as we ate our way across the region.



Being red wine drinkers, especially when consuming game or organ meats, we opted for the Pinot Noir from Hügel et Fils, a family whose involvement in the wine industry of Alsace dates back to the aftermath of the Thirty Years War, in the village of Riquewihr. As we quickly learned, it's better to stick with the whites in Alsace if you are accustomed as we are to full-bodied reds. While the Pinot Noir went well with our meal, it reminded us of the need to recalibrate our taste buds

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when we set foot in France, since wine made from its cherished grape varieties bears little resemblance to what we are used to back home.

As we also learned that night, portion sizes in Alsace lean toward the hefty and the Germanic side of the region's heritage. Both of us were challenged in finishing each plate laid in front of us. Not to be put off, however, Michael ordered Poire Belle Hélène for dessert, unable to pass up pears poached in wine (presumably white) paired with a rich dark chocolate sauce over a dollop of vanilla ice cream. After that, the manager presented us with a cake topped with sparklers in celebration of our anniversary. He extinguished the lights and our fellow diners applauded us, once they figured out that no electrical failure was involved! As we left, utterly stuffed but contented, the manager pointed out a plaque signed by Buzz Aldrin and mentioned how Houstonians are always honored guests, even if they have not traveled in outer space! We strolled back to the hotel amidst gently falling snowflakes and marveled at the gothic spires and the rooftops from which icicles dangled, all bathed in the hazy glow of Buzz Aldrin's moon.

As in so many cities we visit, the search for Michael's favorite pastry shop involved a relentless but unscientific sampling of numerous locales in Strasbourg. Early on, I learned that the traditional plum tart or "Zwetschkuchen" was in season and so I embarked on a similarly rigorous hunt for the best in town. As it turned out, our two quests converged on the same winner – Patisserie Winter near Place Kléber. The addition of orange zest to the plum tart gave it a zing unlike any other, complementing the sweet crust and slightly tart flavor of the firm and juicy fruit. Our enthusiasm for the tarte led to meeting the establishment's owner, Georges Winter, the third-generation patissier in his family to run the business (and all named Georges!). He took us on a tour including the subterranean kitchens where the pastries and light meals are made, along with the chocolate factory housed on the premises. Amidst the tiny rooms, low ceilings, and ancient beams, we admired his dedication to running a modern business while preserving a historic building.



Our next stop was Colmar, where it was even chillier and snowier than Strasbourg. This regional gem is renowned for canals and architecture from medieval times, including gabled and half-timbered buildings with towers and crenellations ideal for Christmas highlighting. Meeting up with our French friends Delphine and Jean, their son Alexandre, and their dog Flip, we spent hours strolling around but stopped repeatedly for Glühwein to stave off the bitter cold. Sweetened red wine, heated with a cinnamon stick, star anise, cloves, nutmeg, plus lemon and orange zest, Glühwein is a staple of the Germanic lands in winter and indispensable for anyone wandering frosty Colmar!

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Catering to tourists from other parts of France, as well as nearby countries, meant that Colmar was packed with visitors during our stay. We enjoyed observing their creative and unique approaches to keeping warm and safe, especially the brightly colored fur hats and the sandal-like contraptions, with crampons, strapped onto boots by ladies of a certain age. Alexandre was especially fond of an intriguing outdoor ride for children involving hobby horses “galloping” through a mini-forest of spruce and ending with a splash of snow in the face.

Oh to be eight again and captivated by this winter wonderland! With dogs welcome too, we all piled happily into the Winstube next to our hotel for a late dinner of Alsatian specialties including pumpkin cream soup, deer stew with chestnuts, locally made foie gras, and more spaetzle, all accompanied by a Pinot Gris from Hügel et Fils.

Some serious tourism awaited us the next morning as we joined Jean on a trek to Haut-Kœnigsbourg Castle in the Vosges Mountains. Driving there through tiny villages, we marveled that each had at least one tall structure topped by a nest of storks, the iconic bird of the Alsace region. We ploughed through traffic jams with cars from all across Europe exploring stops on the famed Alsace Wine Route, despite the frigid temperatures and snowfall the night before.

With its commanding view of the Alsatian Plain, the strategic outcropping where the castle is perched has housed some sort of fortress since the first “Königsburg” or king’s castle was established in the 12th century. The current version was a pet project of Kaiser Wilhelm II who oversaw its restoration and additions in the medieval style during the first decade of the 20th century while Alsace was part of Germany. Since World War I, when Alsace became part of France again, this castle with the curious Frenchified spelling has been a major tourist attraction.



Throughout, the interior decoration reminded us of stage sets for Wagnerian operas. Frescoes and tapestries conjured a medieval world of knights and maidens where we half expected to encounter Tannhäuser or Elisabeth of Thuringia amidst the pageantry. Drafty, as any legendary castle should be, the penetrating cold soon took its toll and drove us to the fortress’ snack bar/gift shop for restorative Glühwein.

Some serious eating awaited us that afternoon in the town of Eguisheim where a leg of the Alsace

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Wine Route passes the Restaurant au Vieux Porche. Being our last meal in Alsace, we all opted for the inevitable “choucroute au poisson,” a fish version of the traditional cabbage, potato and sausage dish whose name dates back to the 17th century as a corruption of the German word “sauerkraut.” To accompany this, we had a Pinot Gris from the renowned Zinck winery located next door to the restaurant.



Behind schedule and rushing us to the Colmar station for our train back to Strasbourg and on to Paris, Jean took a wrong turn. We found ourselves climbing higher and higher into the vineyards dusted with snow, where GPS and cell phone signals had long since abandoned us. The sun was setting behind the hills, and as twilight enveloped us we had visions of losing our bearings completely, forced to spend a frigid night among the vines but without the benefit of Glühwein! Finally, we spotted the spires of Colmar in the distance and arrived there in the nick of time for our journey to Paris and the comfortable predictability of our old neighborhood and favorite eateries in the City of Light.

Next time, springtime in Germany at the center of its red wine business.

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Maison des Tanneurs, 42, rue du Bain aux Plantes, 67000 Strasbourg, Telephone 03 88 43 79 70,
www.maison-des-tanneurs.com

Pâtisserie Winter, 25 Rue du 22 Novembre 67000 Strasbourg, Telephone 09 65 29 62 86,
www.patisserie-winter.fr

Restaurant au Vieux Porche, 16, rue des Trois Châteaux, 68420 Eguisheim, Telephone 03 89 24 01 90,
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The Alsace Wine Route, <http://www.vinsalsace.com>

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