



WORDS ELISABETH KING

ALSACE, WHERE HISTORY AND WINE TOURING BECKON

ALSACE has it all - social, culinary and artistic history, incredible physical beauty and the best gewurztraminer on the planet. In fact, the most Germanic region of France is one of the few wine regions in the country that boasts the star quality of its white varietals. Pinot gris, muscat, gewurztraminer and riesling are the big four and the top bottlings have Grand Cru status. And deservedly so under names that are the proverbial music to the ears of wine lovers the world over - Hugel, Trimbach and Beyer.

Now is the time to grab a discounted airfare to Paris if you can spare the time. From the French capital, Strasbourg, the capital of Alsace is easy to reach in only two hours and 20 minutes, thanks to the super-fast TGV trains. Why the rush? Throughout autumn and well into November, every wine village from Eguisheim to Riquewihr seems to put on a wine festival and the best way to sample this largesse is to set aside some time to tour the Alsatian Wine Route (www.vinsalsace.com).

The 170km route weaves through over 50 wine locations that punctuate the postcard-perfect Vosges foothills, and the website handily offers a schedule of events. So it's easy to draw up a plan that covers every wine style from federweisser, as young wine is known in a province where the local Germanic dialect still holds sway, to a Riesling Ste-Catherine from one of my favourite Alsatian estates, Domaine Weinbach in the Kaysersberg Valley, where you might meet the dottily charming hostess, Colette Faller, if you are lucky.

I always prefer to start any visit to Alsace by immersing myself in the cosy but sophisticated atmosphere of Strasbourg, but it makes a great finale to a wine tasting holiday, too. For the casual visitor, in-depth cramming may not be required but a cursory knowledge of the history of the city is highly recommended. The futuristic and hulking presence of the European Parliament, Council of Europe and Court of

Human Rights buildings are hard to miss, but the charms of the city's historic centre offer the most interest, from Marc Mimram's pedestrian bridge over the Rhine, to the German town of Kehl, to the half-timbered houses dating back to the 15th century.

A 'free city' of the Holy Roman Empire until it was annexed by France in 1681, Strasbourg is also a famous university town which lured the likes of Gutenberg and Goethe. Long a meeting point of the Latin and Germanic worlds, this 'crossroads of Europe' location made the small Alsatian city with a population of just under 500,000 a shoe-in as the site of the European Parliament because of its chequered history.

Many make the day trip just for the choucroute garni - a steaming pile of sauerkraut, potatoes, sausages and pork.

In one of history's great ping-pong territorial tussles, Germany reclaimed Alsace after emerging victorious from the Franco-Prussian War of 1871, but was forced to return the region to France following its own defeat in World War I. After France surrendered to the Germans in 1940, Alsace changed hands again to become Elsass, a part of Hitler's Third Reich, then was handed back to France for the second time in less than 30 years following his downfall. Yet in spite of trauma, or because of it, Strasbourg sits easy with its image of itself - German thoroughness teamed with French flair.

Being tossed back and forth has its advantages. The pink sandstone Gothic cathedral, the world's tallest building until 1874, benefited enormously from employing artists from both sides of the

Rhine. Tourists flock to this architectural masterpiece from all over Europe to witness the performance of its Renaissance astronomical clock when it puts on its daily show at 12.30pm. It's a grisly comment on the ephemeral nature of life, from a cock crowing to Death striking the last chime.

In fact, there's a historical footnote at every turn in Strasbourg. Goethe often frequented the wood-beamed taverns of the rue des Freres, a warren of mediaeval alleyways where the great philosopher/dramatist rubbed shoulders with tanners and fishermen. Jacques Chirac, the former French president, dined at Chez Yvonne on the rue du Sanglier, a favourite haunt of local journalists and polities. But you can walk into any low-beamed winstub, as traditional Alsatian wine bars are known, that has a painted sign swinging over the door and be assured of a warm welcome, good food and a top-notch beer or wine.

German tourists flood into Strasbourg on weekends, especially during the Christmas markets, one of the oldest in Europe. Some of them come to browse through the boutiques on the quai des Pecheurs and the quai des Bateliers, but many make the day trip just for the choucroute garni - a steaming pile of sauerkraut, potatoes, sausages and pork that truly flies the flag for French/German partnership. The most atmospheric place to enjoy this treat that calls for a major appetite is the Maison Kammerzell, a landmark half-timbered building near the cathedral where you don't need to have a drink or two to feel like the floors are sloping. They are.

Strasbourg's only city-based winery is in the Place des Tripiers. You can't miss it; there's a giant wine vat outside. Restaurants serving up choucroute, flammekueche (a flat, pizza-style tart covered with onions, bacon and a dozen other toppings), foie gras and other rib-sticking Alsatian dishes are plentiful on the centuries-old Place du Marche Gayot as well. The staff and students

of the Ecole Nationale d'Administration, an elite academy for future politicians and public servants, often lunch here during the day. At night, a more casual atmosphere prevails as office workers unwind over an after-work aperitif or glass of riesling. Yet Alsace has more Michelin-starred restaurants than any other region of France, including the two-star Au Crocodile, where chef Emile Jung rules the kitchen and serves the most memorable food in town.

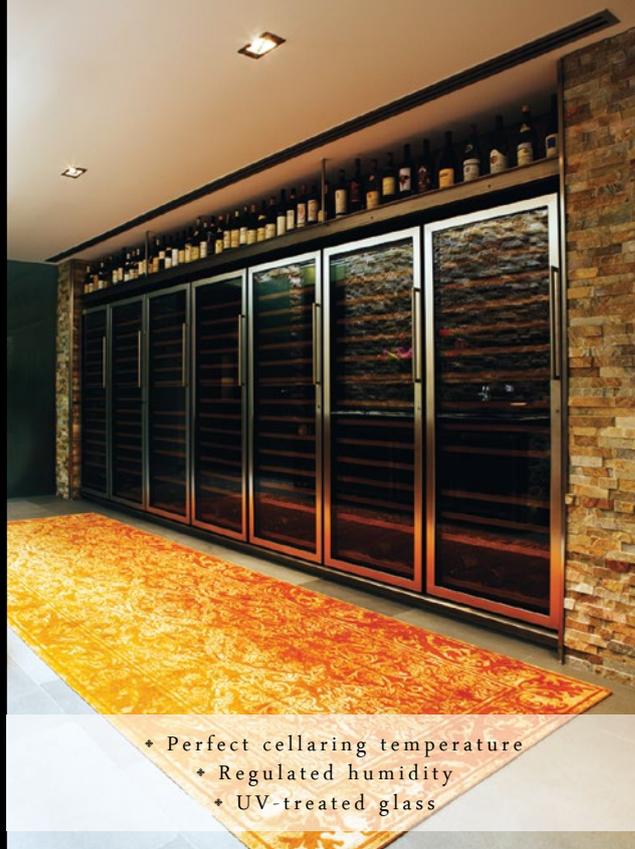
Seventeenth century gossipmongers whispered that Armand de Rohan, Prince-Bishop of Strasbourg, was the illegitimate son of Louis XIV, following his mother's short-term affair with the Sun King. Who knows, but he certainly had a Versailles-style taste in architecture if Strasbourg's Palais Rohan is any yardstick. One of the most impressive buildings in the city, it houses three museums, including the Musee des Beaux Arts, a beautifully edited collection of 17th century French, Italian and Flemish paintings. While the steel and glass frame of the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art of Strasbourg (MAMCS), set amid the historic old town, houses the works of Monet, Paul Klee, Kathe Kollwitz and other 20th century masters.

I always make a point of making a detour to the town of Colmar to see the Isenheim Altarpiece in the Unterlinden Museum. In one of the most famous triptychs in Europe, the tortured images are considered to be unrivalled in depicting the agony of Jesus on the cross. Commissioned by the Antonine monastery of Isenheim, the two sets of wings were painted by German artist Mathias Grunwald from 1506 to 1515. Almost an allegory of the survival instincts of Alsace itself, the altarpiece was hidden during the French Revolution to save it from destruction. And during both world wars, both the French and German governments made the preservation of the altarpiece a national priority. Now that's worth raising a glass of riesling to. 🍷

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