



I'm mesmerised by a bottle of the world's oldest barrelled wine. There's the impressive date of its creation, 1472, written on its glass,

and the centuries have turned the white wine inside an eerie orange. Oh, and there's a skull beside it, believed to belong to the cellar's first overseer at the 12th-century **Strasbourg Hospice** (vins-des-hospices-de-strasbourg.fr).

This unexpected cellar (free to visit) owes its existence to past patients who paid for their care with swathes of the world-class wineries that still carpet Alsace – the hillside vineyards rising from a fertile plain shielded by the Vosges mountains. The wine provided income for the hospital for centuries – and still does, with about 140,000 bottles sold from the cellar each year.

Sadly, I didn't taste the 15th century wine – it's only been served three times since filling that mesmerising bottle, the last being when France's General Leclerc had a liberation libation to celebrate the Nazis quitting Strasbourg in 1944. "And the pH today is too acid," says cellarmaster Thibaut Baldinger, ruefully. "It would burn your throat."

A PLACE APART

A medieval hospital selling fine wine is typical of Alsace's blurring of boundaries, aided by its tangled historic clinch with its neighbours. Founded as a Roman town, Strasbourg spent much of its history see-sawing between French and German rule. Happily, today it's a gorgeous multinational melting pot, where the EU Parliament provides a striking waterside focal point for river cruises. "Many people call themselves Alsatian first, European second, then French third," says my guide Clémence.

Alsation cuisine strikes its own notes too. Ask for 'snail' here and, rather than escargots, people may offer fleischschnecke – literally 'meat snail', made with minced beef →

IT'S FRANCE, but not as you know it

The Alsace region on France's eastern borders with Germany and Switzerland has a language, character and culture all its own. Add world-class wines and hearty cooking, and this is a destination that needs to be top of your visit list. Norman Miller travels to Strasbourg and Mulhouse, and tells a tale of two very different cities

PHOTOGRAPHS NORMAN MILLER



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT The Petite France quarter at the heart of the city; Alsatian architecture in Mulhouse; quinces and more at Mulhouse's bustling weekly market; Les Chauvins serves up innovative Alsatian tapas; view on the Alsace wine route; ancient wine at Strasbourg Hospice



CLOCKWISE FROM THIS PAGE Textiles at Musée de L'Impression sur Étoffes; art centre La Fonderie; diners outside a café in the Petite France quarter; the city has its own local cheeses; smart-casual dining in the wood-panelled Maison des Tanneurs

rolled in dough, sliced, then cooked in broth. There are obvious Teutonic influences, but pickled cabbage is cooked in wine to soar beyond sauerkraut as choucroute (see p124) – a yielding base for smoked ham hock and local sausages.

I took Strasbourg's foodie pulse on Rue des Orfèvres, which is lined with specialist shops for meats, local booze and baked treats such as almond and raisin kougelhopf. In cheese mecca **Maison Lorho** (maison-lorho.fr), I nibbled the medieval monks' cheese, munster (its strong aroma belies a subtle taste) and eye-catching tomme aux fleurs sauvages – beautifully coated with edible flower petals. I explored the medieval half-timbered houses around the water-laced UNESCO-listed Petite France quarter, where **Maison des Tanneurs** (maison-des-tanneurs.com) is a wonderful lunch option – a 16th-century former tannery, offering classic Alsace dishes. But I had other plans.



hungry traveller.

SAVOURING STRASBOURG

I worked up an appetite with a visit to the magnificent 15th-century pink-hued Gothic **Strasbourg Cathedral** (the tallest medieval building in the world), then a quick spin around the adjacent 18th-century **Palais Rohan**, once the residence of a French noble family (it's known as mini-Versailles), which now houses no fewer than three museums. Lunch was at **Les Chauvins** (restaurant-les-chauvins.fr), where chef Yannick Bangratz spins hearty Alsatian dishes as lighter modern tapas. "It's a way to appreciate 'farmhouse' cooking but show how our food can evolve," he explains. There's history too, as Yannick tells how his harengs à l'alsacienne, served with black radish sauce, was inspired by the fishermen who used to bring their herrings to Strasbourg to barter.

Nearby, **Au Fond du Jardin** (aufonddujardin.fr) is a tearoom that showcases cakey complexity to terrify any Bake Off contender. Dapper owner Laurent Renaud

makes a huge variety of madeleines. "At the moment, I have 143." Even aficionado Proust might have run out of adjectives for examples such as 'Casablanca', an edible artwork of aquamarines, lush greens and earthy browns made with fresh pistachio, candied lemon and spices. There are 60 artfully blended teas too – so no asking for a mug of builder's with two sugars, d'accord?

You can't leave Strasbourg without dining at a winstub, and **Chez Yvonne** (restaurant-chez-yvonne.net) was an 1870s pioneer of these French ripostes to German bierkellers, where patriots could quaff Alsace wine in wood-paneled cosiness and savour traditional dishes such as coq au riesling.

Before heading off, I grabbed something for the journey from **Mireille Oster's** (mireille-oster.com) big shop at the far end of Pont St-Martin. Oster has travelled the globe in search of exotic ingredients for 44 different types of gingerbread, including some that nod to its

Chinese origin as food for travellers called mi-kong (honey bread).

A CITY ON THE UP

A short train ride south lies Alsace's second city Mulhouse, which has a 1,200-year history as, variously, a free imperial city, then Swiss, then German, but is now a poster child for urban regeneration. Its transformation from a struggling backwater to one of France's most vibrant towns, with a new tram system, widespread greening and spruced-up façades, is inspiring. Mulhouse celebrates its industrial heritage with superb museums: textiles at the gorgeous **Musée de L'Impression sur Étoffes** (musee-impression.com); vintage cars at the **Schlumpf Collection** (citedelautomobile.com); railways at the **Cité du Train** (citedutrain.com).

Mulhouse has also repurposed old factories into creative hubs. **La Fonderie** now houses the **Kunsthalle** (kunsthallemulhouse.com), a contemporary art centre,

while the textiles complex **DMC** is a hive of artist studios – check out open days (ateliers ouverts) and wares sold in city-centre artisan shop **LebÔcal** (odesignmural.fr).

Its foodie profile has soared too, aided by new microbreweries and places such as buzzing boho café **Tilvist** (tilvist-coffeashop.fr) that complement the weekly farmers' market, eastern France's largest.

CARBS, ALE AND CLASSICS

Mulhouse provides more classic Alsatian nosh, starting with a sort of pizza: tarte flambée (aka flammekueche). Beneath the murals at 17th-century **Le Gambrinus** (legambrinus.com), I ripped into squares of crisp dough slathered with onions, speck (smoked ham) and crème fraîche, perfectly matched with amber ale – this is France's brewing heartland, where the beer guild dates back to the 13th century.

Dinner the next night at **Auberge des Franciscains** (auberge-des-franciscains.com) gave me a taste

of Alsace's riff on fish and chips – earthy fried carp from the lakes of Sundgau just south of Mulhouse. Chips come with an obligatory salad whose vinegar dressing I'm told is vital to soften any fish bones that might stick in your throat.

On my last morning I drive along part of Alsace's **Wine Route**, its world-renowned vineyards linked by country roads through pretty

villages, stopping regularly to take in the hill views.

My final stop on the drive is Thann, where vineyards tumble down a hill to the fast-flowing River Thur, along which ancient buildings nestle into the wooded hills below brooding mountains. There's much to savour in Alsace – just remember to say "E Güeter!" when you eat rather than "bon appetit". →

MEET THE PRODUCER



Séverine Schlumberger oversees the family-run wine estate **Domaines Schlumberger** (domaines-schlumberger.com) in the town of Guebwiller. As we tasted a range of white wines, from peachy pinot gris to lush, aromatic gewurztraminer, she explained the challenges of the region. "Our terroir is special but difficult – mountains and sand, like a steep dune by the beach, but the

resulting Alsace riesling or pinot blanc is the perfect white wine for food."

I love gewurztraminer, and my host shared some exquisite examples, including an organic 2015 late harvest. Séverine told me of a test done by French parfumeurs with a top Chanel fragrance and an Alsace gewurz. "In the perfume, they found 70 aroma molecules – in the wine, 300." We clinked glasses and sipped again. *Schlumberger wines are available from The Wine Society (thewinesociety.com)*

CAFE PHOTOGRAPH: ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

Choucroute garni

SERVES 4-6. HANDS-ON TIME 15 MIN,
SIMMERING TIME 2 HOURS 45 MIN

KNOW-HOW Bauernwurst is a strongly smoked rustic sausage. If you can't find it, omit it and use an extra knackwurst in step 4.

Knackwurst sausages (also known as knockwurst) are short and thick, made of pork and/or beef, with garlic added. If you can't find them, use bockwurst from Aldi or ocado.com, bratwurst from Aldi or good-quality frankfurters – we like Uneathed Bavarian frankfurters, from Waitrose.

- 1 ham hock (also known as the knuckle; ask your butcher if you can't find one at the supermarket)
- 3 tbsp goose fat or lard, plus 2 tsp
- 1 large onion, sliced
- 1 garlic clove
- 1 bay leaf
- A few fresh thyme sprigs
- 10 each juniper berries, cloves, coriander seeds and white peppercorns
- 2 x 410g jars sauerkraut (we like Dawtona from Tesco or Krakus from Morrisons), rinsed
- 500g piece smoked bacon, skin removed and cut into large chunks – ask your butcher – or use chunky lardons
- 1 bauernwurst sausage (see Know-how)



APRIL AVERAGES

- **HIGH TEMP** 16°C (25°C in August)
- **LOW TEMP** 4°C (-2°C in February)
- **RAINY DAYS** 9 (12 in May)
- **SUNSHINE HOURS/DAY** 6 (7 in May-Aug)

- 500ml dry Alsace riesling
- 4 knackwurst sausages (or use bockwurst or frankfurters – see know-how)
- 200g smoked bacon lardons
- Boiled or baked potatoes to serve
- Horseradish sauce and/or mustard to serve

1 Put the ham hock in a pan of cold water, bring to the boil, then simmer for 1 hour. Drain well.

2 In a hob-safe casserole, heat the

3 tbsp goose fat/lard, then lightly brown the onion. Stir in the garlic, herbs and spices, sauerkraut and a little water. Simmer for 15 minutes.

3 Add the 500g smoked bacon, drained ham hock and bauernwurst, then add 250ml water and the wine.

4 Cook uncovered for 1½ hours over a medium heat (or, if you prefer, transfer to a roasting tin and cook in the oven for the same time at 160°C/140°C fan/gas 3), adding a splash more wine or water if it's looking dry.

5 When you're ready to serve, bring a pan of water to the boil, add the knackwurst sausages, then poach for 7 minutes, off the heat. Meanwhile, in a separate pan, heat the 2 tsp goose fat/lard and fry the lardons until crisp.

6 Serve the sauerkraut mixture with the knackwurst and lardons along with potatoes and horseradish sauce or mustard.

PER SERVING (FOR 6) 517kcal, 42g fat (11.4g saturated), 28.3g protein, 3.1g carbs (2.6g sugars), 3.4g salt, 3.6g fibre

NEXT MONTH
Four great European weekend break destinations



WHERE TO STAY

MULHOUSE

• **Hotel Kyriad** In the pedestrianised heart of town, this hotel has had a recent makeover. Doubles from £70. hotel-mulhouse.com

STRASBOURG

• **Hotel Hannong** (left) Smart rooms blend modern design with 1920s grandeur. There's a rooftop wine bar too. Doubles from £80. hotel-hannong.com

HOW TO GET THERE

There are no direct UK flights to Strasbourg. BA and Easyjet fly from London to Basel-Mulhouse airport, from £57 return. Trains run from London to Strasbourg via Paris (fastest journey times around 5 hours), fares from £120 return. Trains to Mulhouse from Strasbourg take 45 minutes; fares from £20 return.