

FROM ALSACE WITH GLUG

Thanks to its sought-after biodynamic wines and tempting regional cuisine, Alsace is a must for curious gastronomes. **Fiona Sims** travels the Alsace wine route with a British chef who just can't get enough. Photography by **James Bedford**

The cuisine of Alsace, on France's eastern border with Germany, is distinctly salty, smoky, porky and cabbagey. And British chef Ed Wilson loves it. "I'm going in hard," he grins, knife and fork poised in front of a large earthenware casserole brimming with diced meat and sliced potatoes. He is tucking into the "baker's oven" – or "baeckoffe" in Elsässisch, the Alsatian dialect – a hotpot of pork, mutton, beef and potato marinated in wine for a few hours and cooked in, you've guessed it, a baker's oven.

We've come on a food and wine tour around the popular tourist trail known as the Route du Vin, which runs through the Rhine Valley at the edge of the tree-lined Vosges mountain range. It's Ed's first visit to this fertile land – or "terroir" as the French refer to it – that's an inspiration for his hugely popular London restaurants.

We're here to sample some of Alsace's dishes, products and wines. Specifically, we're talking the *vins du jour* on every sommelier's wish list: biodynamic and natural wines. France produces more biodynamic and natural wine than anywhere else in the world, and the majority of them are from this beautiful part of the country. You'll find a good number on the menu at Ed's restaurants, Terroirs (tel: +44 (0)20 7036 0660, www.terroirswinebar.com) in Covent Garden, and the newly opened Brawn on Columbia Road, both of which have been lauded for their gutsy French cooking. Think hearty dishes and well-sourced ingredients, helped along by Terroirs' head chef Pascal Wiedemann who himself hails from Alsace.

We base ourselves in Colmar, Alsace's third-biggest town, after Strasbourg and Mulhouse – a picturesque place full of old-world charm, cobbled lanes and painted houses whose



Biodynamic winemakers see the vineyard in the context of a wider pattern of lunar and cosmic rhythms



LUNCH BUNCH

- Ed tucks into foie gras at Foie Gras du Vignoble in Epfing
- A flare sets wings flapping
- Pierre's son and daughter take a break from picking



window boxes overflow with geraniums.

One of our first stops is at Domaine Bernhard & Reibel (www.domaine-bernhard-reibel.fr) in nearby Châtenois, where we share lunch with organic winemaker Pierre Bernhard and I get an education in the region's food and drink.

We eat *chouchoute*, or sauerkraut as those familiar with the German version call it. Chouchoute is the region's signature dish, and it's no wonder considering Alsace's German history – the area has been back and forth between Germany and France many times in the past few centuries, the last exchange taking place at the end of World War II. Chouchoute is essentially cabbage, finely shredded, layered with salt and juniper, then left to ferment in wooden barrels. It's traditionally served with a variety of pork cuts and a line-up of different sausages, but also with fish (usually salmon and zander) and other meats.

Such dishes present a big draw to gastronomes coming to Alsace, but it wouldn't be the same without the wine. Renowned by experts the world over for their aromatic fruitiness and compatibility with many kinds of food, Alsace whites are outstanding – from powerful Rieslings and flowery Gewürztraminers to comeback kid Sylvaner and pretty Pinots (blanc, gris and noir).

But Ed and I are after the biodynamic and natural angle. Put simply, your biodynamic winemakers see the vineyard in the context of a wider pattern of lunar and cosmic rhythms. There are no synthetic fertilizers or pesticides used here – instead, they use a range of special preparations to boost the soil, which are diluted, then applied in homeopathic quantities



according to the position and influences of the sun, moon and stars. Result? A sought-after structure and minerality in the wines.

Natural wines are made with no added sugars or foreign yeasts, no filtering and, crucially, no sulphur dioxide – which is used by 99% of today's winemakers as a preservative and a disinfectant. This ingredient is said to be the contributing factor to those morning-after-wine headaches.

The only headache I am getting is from Ed firing a flare gun to scare off some birds from the vines. However, as Pierre tells us, it's wild boar not birds that are more of a problem when it comes to the grapes. "One year they ate two tonnes," he says. "They love the Gewürztraminer grape first, followed by the Muscat second – it's the floral aromatics and higher sugar content that does it." Thankfully, this year the boar have left some grapes for us and we taste a selection of *crémants* (sparkling whites) and older Rieslings that pair brilliantly with the chouchoute.

Leaving Châtenois, we walk off lunch with a two-hour hike through typically steep vineyards and dense forest until we arrive at one of the biggest attractions in Alsace, the Disney-esque castle of Haut-Koenigsbourg (www.haut-koenigsbourg.fr), looking incredible with towers and keep surrounded by swirling mists. It's a stunning place, but we >

MERCI BEAU-CHOU!

- Bucolic scenery greets us along the Route du Vin
- A typical harvest lunch of chouchoute and sausages



have more eating and drinking to do. Next up is a visit to local producer André Ostertag, one of the top biodynamic winemakers in the world, whose winery lies in Epfig, a half-hour's drive from the castle. After working our way through his jaw-dropping wines, Ed asks André why he thinks biodynamic winemaking is so popular in Alsace.

"We've always been concerned about the environment in Alsace, and organic grape growing has always been popular here. So it's a logical move over to biodynamics," he tells us.

After finishing our tour of his vineyard we head back to Colmar for the night and spend the next day nosing around some of the local food shops in search of regional delicacies.

We buy some *kugelhopf* – the brioche-like cake taking pride of place as Alsace's signature pastry – from top patisserie Coco-LM (www.coco-lm.com). And we snap

up some classic *bredala* cookies for later. These are a Christmas speciality, and hugely popular at Colmar's Christmas market. We also stop by wine shop La Sommelière (www.lasommeliere.fr), where we meet shop owner Marc Tempé – a biodynamic winemaker himself – with biodynamic wines the main focus of his stock.

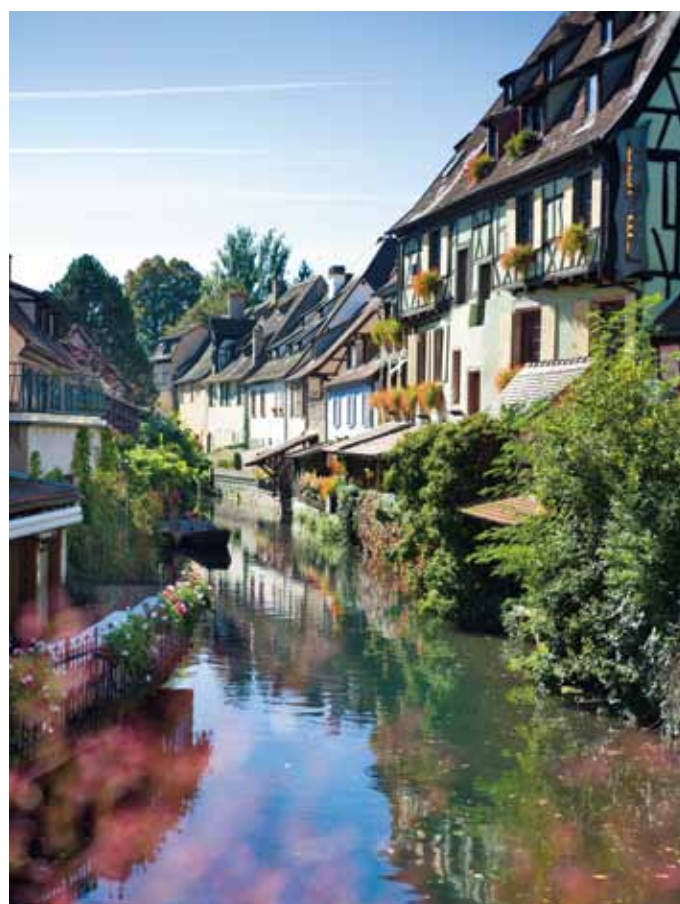
However, Colmar's latest pride and joy is the food market, recently renovated having been abandoned decades ago and used as a car park until earlier this year. Alongside fruit and vegetable stalls, and endless ranks of sausages, we discover La Fromagerie St Nicolas (www.fromagerie-st-nicolas.com), and sample various pungent, washed-rind Munster cheeses, made using milk from the Vosges.

The nibble of Munster sets our appetites off, so we call in at La Krutenau (1 Rue Poissonnerie, tel: +33 (0)3 8941 1880) for some



TALKING TERROIRS

- Ed gets a lesson on Alsace wine
- Kugelhopf till you drop
- Regional specialities await at Brasserie L'Auberge, in Colmar's Grand Hôtel Bristol



Eating here is a culinary pilgrimage for anyone who takes food seriously, and it doesn't disappoint

flammekueche. This is basically Alsace pizza – super-thin dough rolled out into a rectangle or circle, slathered in a mix of crème fraîche and fromage frais, thinly sliced onions and diced smoked bacon.

For the rest of our trip we journey back and forth from Colmar on the Route du Vin, up to Haut-Koenigsbourg and down to Thann in the south near Mulhouse. We pass through endless terraced vineyards and medieval villages, and find numerous opportunities for tasting – buying quite a few bottles along the way.

In Epfig, we eat incredible locally produced foie gras (another regional delicacy) at Foie Gras du Vignoble (tel: +33 (0)3 8885 5296, www.foie-gras-vignoble.fr) paired with some biodynamic whites. In Itterswiller, we munch on *civet de sanglier* (wild boar stew) and other treats at a restaurant housed in the Hôtel Arnold (tel: +33 (0)3 8885 5058, www.hotel-arnold.com), while gazing out over hills covered in vines.

We stop off for a tasting at one of Ed's favourite natural and biodynamic winemakers, Pierre Frick in Pfaffenheim, and discover that if you walk or cycle you can get even closer to the vines without going on any special tours just by following the well-mapped *sentiers viticoles* (vineyard paths). For me, some of the older white wines from the Grand Cru

vineyards were the most delicious, the jewel in the crown of Alsace wines.

On our last night it was only natural, being with a top chef, that we rounded off our trip at one of France's top restaurants to try the best of Alsatian cuisine. L'Auberge de L'Ill (tel: +33 (0)3 8971 8900, www.auberge-de-l-ill.com) lies in Illhaeusern, just north-east of Colmar. The legendary eatery won its third Michelin star in 1967 – one of the longest-running three-starred restaurants in the world.

Eating here is a culinary pilgrimage for anyone who takes food seriously, and it doesn't disappoint – as course after finely-tuned course rolls out of chef Marc Haeberlin's kitchen. "The simplicity of it is the elegance – and brilliance of it. You've got to remember that this is the foundation of all cookery. It's like tasting history," Ed tells me as he downs Haeberlin's signature whisper-light mousseline of frogs' legs, followed by veal sweetbreads with handmade noodles, originally created back in 1968.

We then sit back and watch as the waiter deftly flambées the best crepes I've ever tasted, stuffed with pastry cream and served with cherries soaked in kirsch. A digestif? I don't think I could swallow another drop. 🍷

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT ALSACE WINES, VISIT WWW.ALSACEWINES.CO.UK

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Fast facts

GETTING THERE:

The city of Strasbourg lies just an hour by car from Karlsruhe-Baden airport, and Colmar an hour and a half. Ryanair flies to Karlsruhe-Baden from Alicante, Barcelona (Girona), London (Stansted), Porto and Rome (Ciampino) during the winter. Hertz (www.hertz.com) is Ryanair's exclusive car rental partner and provides special rates for Ryanair passengers.

STAYING THERE:

The cutest, most comfortable little place to stay in Colmar is a chic little boutique hotel named Le Colombier (doubles from €106, tel: +33 (0)3 8923 9600, www.hotel-le-colombier.fr). You'll find it in the old town in a building dating back to 1643.

ALSACE SPLASH

Pretty houses overlook the canal in Colmar