

## Culinary Research on a Bicycle in the Alsace

By Ingrid & Steve McMenamain

We have always travelled. At first we carried backpacks. Then we chartered sailboats that served as our waterfront hotel room. We always travelled for pleasure and always on socially sanctioned vacations. But that all changed when we took over Versailles. Now we travel on business and we don't wear a suit. For those of us who grew up with the New England work ethic, the notion of enjoying ourselves on a business trip is loaded with guilt. So it was with mixed feelings that we made our pilgrimage back to France. At first we were consumed with the move from 315 to 339 Greenwich Avenue. Then we realized our customers wanted something fresh, something French and something authentic. This called for immediate field research. Where should we go? After a quick review of Bistro history we learned there were 3 destinations. First, there is Paris for the obvious reasons. Then there is Lyon where there are more Bistros per square meter than anywhere. And then there is the Alsace where it is said the Bistro was born. The word bystro means hurry-up in Russian. In 1815 Russian Cossacks entering France through the Alsace who wanted to be served quickly would shout bistro. More importantly, the Alsace has hills so we can burn off the calories on a bicycle. When should we go? Ingrid's birthday is July 14<sup>th</sup>...also Bastille Day, the French 4<sup>th</sup> of July. The die was cast. **DuVine Adventures** organized a custom cycling trip to visit Bistros, vineyards, patisseries and cafes. We would fly to Paris, take the high speed train to Mulhouse and ride bicycles north to Strasbourg. In Paris we hired a culinary guide named Nico. He was 72 and a retired food wholesaler. We met Nico at 4am at Rungis, the giant Paris food distribution center. Rungis is as big as Monaco.



1 Rungis Fish Market near the Paris airport

The fish hall is as big as 8 football fields and kept at a cool 35 degrees. The meats market was almost as large and as clean as a hospital operating room.



**2 Seasonal berries in the Fruit Hall at Rungis**

After Rungis we began our hit-and-run culinary tour of Paris. Our mission was to visit the small bistros that served moderately priced simple meals in a modest setting. We were looking for unpretentious



cooking with robust earthy dishes, and slow-cooked foods like cassoulet.



3 Typical Paris Bistro

We were also interested in the latest fashions in pastries. Pastry competition in Paris is cut throat. Patisseries aggressively protected their cases from photographers. So we bought the most interesting

pastries, took their picture and staged a tasting in the lounge of our hotel with our fellow guests.



#### 4 Individual pastries at Hure on the Left Bank

Our first stop after Paris was Jungholtz and the **Romantik Hotel Spa Les Violettes**. In 1905 French law forbade the use of the word *Champagne* outside of that region. The wonderful sparkling wine of Alsace is Cremant. We cycled through miles of vineyards growing the riesling, pinot blanc, pinot noir, pinot gris



and chardonnay grapes used for Cremant fermentation.



5 Cycling through vineyards near Katzenthal, France

On the Route du Vin we visited the tiny French-German hamlets of Guebwiller, Buhl, Murbach, Orshwihr, Soultz-matt, Osenbach, Bueberschwihr and Eguisheim...once named the most beautiful town in



6 Eguisheim, named the most beautiful town in France.



France. We stopped for two nights in Keysersberg at Le Chambard where we visited some excellent family run bistros like Au Lion d'Or. Katzenthal, Ammerschwihr, and Keintzheim



#### 7 Turckheim, scene of fierce fighting in WWII

Nearby towns along the Route du Vin of Turckheim, Ingersheim, were the scene of bitter fighting between American and German troops in the final days of World War II. The Germans, hopelessly outnumbered, fought to the last man to hang onto territory that France had annexed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.





In this area we visited scores of vineyards or *caves*. However we were most impressed with Domaine de l'Oriel in Niedermorschwihr. Claude Weinzorn's family has been producing wine in this hilly region since 1640, the same year Greenwich was founded.



In World War II their giant fermentation barrels were damaged by American bombers but quickly repaired in time for the harvest. To say that Claude is passionate about his craft is an understatement. In his cluttered office we tasted over 30 different wines. Each wine had a remarkably different flavor due to moisture, sun and most importantly, mineral content of the soil. He would put a piece of limestone in one hand and a wine grown in that soil in another. We tasted wonderful Rieslings, Gewurztraminers, Pinot Blanc, Muscat and Pinot Gris. These white wines were aromatic, floral and



spicy. Some were sweet and smooth.



#### 8 Thannenkirch Touring Hotel & Spa

From here we pushed on through Riquewihr, Hunawehr, Ribeauville, Thannenkirch, Saint Hippolyte, and Kinzheim. Check it out on Goggle Earth! Our last two nights were spent in the luxurious spa Hostellerie des chateaux.



#### 9 Ribeauville a typical Alsatian village.





**10 Duck, sauerkraut & spaetzel in Obernai bistro**

From there our driver whisked us to Zurich for an 8 hour flight to JFK. Our field research was complete. Several new Versailles bistro dishes were discovered and many ideas for new pastries were cataloged. We lost a few pounds on this energetic adventure. And we vowed to explore another region for our customers and our neighbors. Please stay tuned!





11 Escargot in the wild