

Our Annual Food and Drink Issue

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Home is Where the Harvest Is

Food and Wine From Southern Germany's Vineyards

BY LIZ TARPY

Henrich Gretzmeier sticks an upside-down broom decorated with colorful strips of cloth in the ground outside the courtyard of his house in Merdingen, Germany. It is the fall harvest, and the broom is a signal to locals that his family's restaurant is now serving homemade food and wine, straight from their farm and vineyard.

In the courtyard, diners eat at wooden tables surrounded by potted plants, bales of hay, and wandering cats. Grapevines clutch to the terra cotta walls and creep over trellises. Inside, communal tables hold chattering groups of friends and neighbors drinking wine and nibbling at cheese. From the kitchen, Frau Gretzmeier cheerfully feeds the hungry crowds with what the harvest dictates. Typical dishes include *Flammkuchen*, a thin-crust tart topped with *crème fraîche*, onions, and bacon; *Hobelkäse*, paper thin slices of hard, aged cheese piled high on wooden boards; meat platters of homemade liverwurst and blood sausage. *Schweller*, a new potato salad with

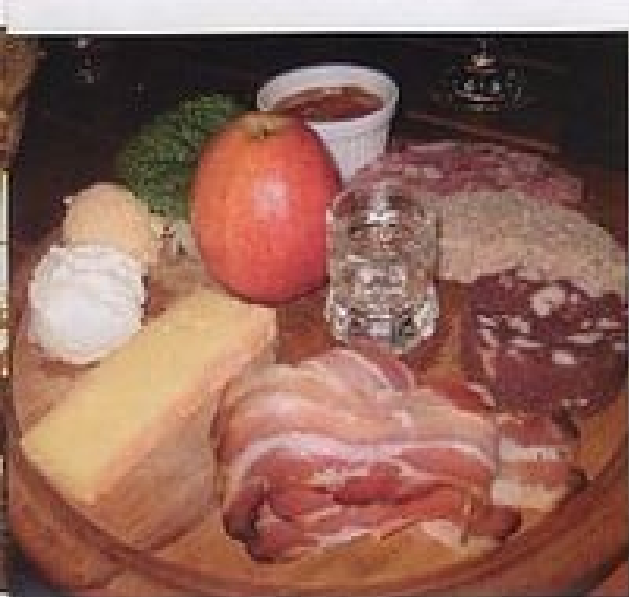
chive quark (a fresh, curd-like cheese), accompanies a glistening slab of fresh ham. All meals come with a basket full of her *Bauernbrot*, the dense, slightly sour, crusty "farmer bread" typical of the area.

As a complement to the hearty food, customers drink wines from grapes grown in the Gretzmeiers' ten-hectare vineyard (about twenty-five acres), located just up the road from their house in the village. Blue Spätburgunder, Grauburgunder, White Burgunder, Auxerrois, Chardonnay, Gewürztraminer, Müller-Thurgau, Red Muskateller, Regent and Cabernet Sauvignon are the varieties Heinrich grows best. He also produces sparkling wines (Sekt) in the "method *Champenois*"—or very slow fermentation in the bottle and two to three years of ageing in the presence of yeasts. As an alternative to wine, liquors (*Schnapps*) are available, distilled from the farm's wild pear and plum trees and bushes full of fat berries.

This is not just any quaint country restaurant. Heinrich Gretzmeier and his family run one of the many *Strauss*, or small, seasonal, farm restaurants found in southern Germany's



Top left: Locals enjoying some food and wine in the courtyard of the Gretzmeiers' *Strauss*. **Top right:** An inside shot of the Gretzmeiers' dining area. It was a beautiful day so most of the patrons were on the balcony or in the courtyard. **Above:** This colorful broom at the end of the Gretzmeiers' street is the age-old symbol that their *Strauss* is open for business.



wine-growing region. Due to the area's rich, volcanic soil and temperate weather, winemaking has been important here for centuries. However, the *Straußis* have remained relatively unknown to anyone outside the community.

The Gretzmeiers live and farm in the picturesque village of Meringen, located in the hills of the Tuniberg (a small mountain in the Rhine Valley between Germany's Black Forest and France's Vogesen mountain range). As with most of the *Straußis*, the entire family is involved in the farm life, sharing the weight of the work in order to ensure the financial future of the farm. The Gretzmeiers are no exception. "In our family we all stand together. That's what family business means," says the oldest son, Jacob. At age nineteen, Jacob is learning winemaking from his father, but is also an apprentice at one of the best vineyards in southern Germany. This makes Heinrich very proud.

This is one of the draws of a *Straußi*—the community you live in is the community you dine with. However, the bounty of the tables is not reserved only for southern Germans. Travelers looking for an authentic, local experience just have to be prepared to do a little exploring; *Straußis* can be tricky to find, though the area boasts just under six hundred of them. Most gas stations or tourist offices offer a small annual brochure listing addresses, specialties, and hours of operation (you could also check www.straussi.net if you speak German). However, the best way to enjoy these traditional restaurants is to take a hike in the forest or rent a bike and venture down a dusty dirt road just wide enough for cattle, always on the lookout

for that broom. Your diversion from the main road will reward you with friendly, local folk eager to share the hearty, traditional foods of their region, sipping wine in an informal atmosphere. You could even practice your southern German dialect if so inclined!

Some *Straußis* have a small shop, or *Bauernladen*, adjacent to the farm to supplement the family income. Within the Gretzmeiers' *Straußi*, you can purchase, at very reasonable prices, seasonal fruits and vegetables, homemade apple juice, or bottles of their wine and *Schnapps*.

The Gretzmeiers farm their land with respect for the traditions while moving their business into the future with ecological innovations and technology. "I guess you could call me an experimental traditionalist," Heinrich begins. "As an experimentalist I like to be inspired by new ideas—like producing Champagne-like sparkling wines—ideas that you first have to be open to, to be able to imagine. And as a traditionalist, I follow the tried-and-true ways of production: my red wines are aged at least twenty-four months in wooden barrels before they are bottled."

Not every restaurant or vineyard in this area, however, is a *Straußi*; Heinrich and his family must follow certain laws to run their establishment. They must register with the local land ministry for a specific permit to run their restaurant as a *Straußi*. Further restrictions dictate that the restaurant can open for only sixteen weeks annually (usually split between the fall and spring harvests) and seat no more than forty people. Additionally, the menu at a



Top left: A typical meat and cheese plate found at a *Straußi*—all made on or near the farm. **Center top:** Homemade pork sausage with potato salad. **Center bottom:** A view of Meringen from the balcony through a yellow umbrella. **Top right:** Elvira Gretzmeier's specialty: crispy *Flammenkuchen* with snails and wild ramps. **Above:** The official *Straußi* sign.

FOR A TASTE OF STRAUSSIS AT HOME...

The following are a few typical recipes for those who may not have the opportunity to visit a German Strauss.

CREAM OF PUMPKIN SOUP

2 tablespoons safflower oil
1 large white onion, diced (about 2- $\frac{1}{2}$ cups)
3 tablespoons minced ginger
 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup white wine
1 quart low-sodium chicken stock
1 (29-ounce) can pumpkin puree
 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup heavy cream
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper

Heat the oil over medium heat. Add the onions and ginger and cook, stirring frequently to prevent browning, until soft—about 15 minutes.

Add the wine and cook for 2

minutes to let the alcohol evaporate. Add the stock. Stir in the pumpkin and bring mixture to a boil. Lower heat and let simmer until heated through, about 5 minutes. Add water or additional stock, if necessary, to adjust consistency.

Puree mixture with a hand-held immersion blender, or transfer to a blender in batches. Add the cream and season with salt and pepper, to taste.

Garnish with a dollop of crème fraîche and sprinkle with toasted caraway seeds, if desired.

Yield: ten cups.

WURSTISALAT

The Swiss will often toss in strips of Emmentaler cheese. Serve with crusty brown bread and a salad for a satisfying lunch or light dinner.

1 (1 pound) German ring sausage (such as Lyoner, if available)

$\frac{1}{2}$ large white onion, sliced in half moons

1 cup chopped half sour pickles (about 4)

2 tablespoons safflower oil

1- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons white wine vinegar

Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper

Slice the sausage into thin, long strips. Toss in the onions and pickles.

In a separate bowl, whisk together the oil, vinegar, salt, and pepper, to taste. Pour over the sausage mixture. Toss to combine.

Yield: about four cups.

FLAMMKUCHEN

The fat from the bacon soaks into the dough as it bakes, creating a flavorful crust without a hint of sogginess.

1 teaspoon yeast

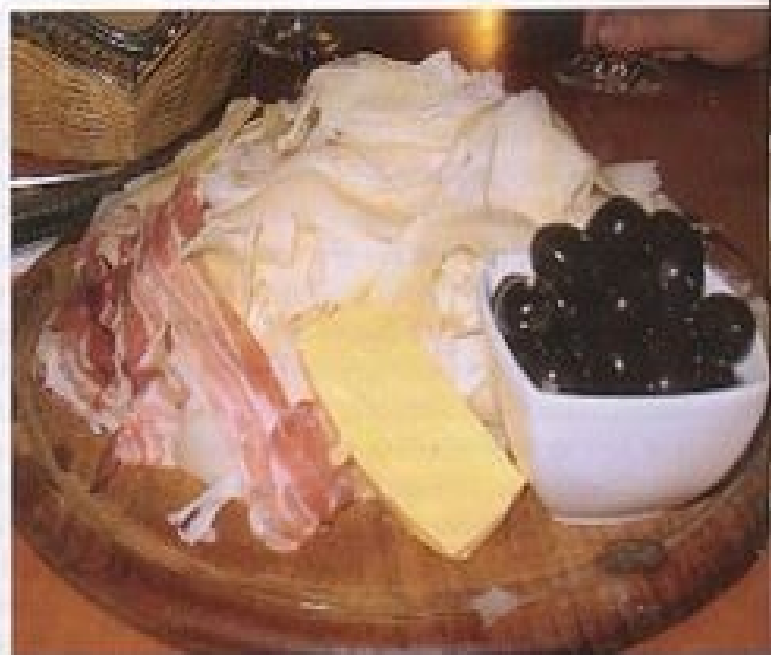
1 cup plus $\frac{1}{2}$ cups unbleached all-purpose flour

1 cup warm water

Strauss can only consist of wine from that farmer's vineyard, cheese and meat from their cows and pigs, and greens from the gardens (or from other farmers in the area).

Local lore has it that the history of these regulations date back to King Charlemagne's reign. It is believed he broke convention and allowed farmers to sell their wine for a small profit—wine they had been making only to fill the landowners' pockets. To signify the new selling period to their neighbors, the farmers hung upside-down brooms on their barn doors. (The term *Strauss* is derived from the German word for bunch of flowers, or *Strauss*, as the upside-down brooms resembled bouquets). To this day, the back roads of southern Germany sprout colorful brooms every fall and spring. Over time, simple offerings of bread and cheese or fresh sausages accompanied the wine, also a tradition that stuck.

Many of the farmers have a long history with the land. Heinrich Gretzmeier took over the vineyard from his father in 1986, and transformed it into one of the first sustainable vineyards of the region. Using traditional production techniques in combination with innovative and environmentally-sound farming practices, Heinrich bridged the



gap between running an ecologically friendly vineyard or a lucrative business. For example, he leaves the undergrowth beneath the vines to draw insects that in turn nourish the plants and attract bees; he makes the rows between the

$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon kosher salt
2 (8-ounce) containers crème fraîche
1 cup sour cream
Salt and freshly ground black pepper

1 medium yellow onion, halved and thinly sliced (about $1\frac{1}{2}$ cup)

5 slices thick cut bacon, diced small (about $5\frac{1}{2}$ ounces)

Sprinkle the yeast over 1 cup of flour, add the water, and stir well. Cover with plastic wrap and set aside for about 30 minutes. The mixture should have bubbles on the surface.

Stir the salt and remaining $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups flour into the yeast mixture, adding more flour by the spoonful if the dough is too sticky. Cover, and let rise to double in volume, about $1\frac{1}{2}$ hours.

Preheat the oven to 450° F.

Combine the crème fraîche, sour cream, and salt and pepper, to taste. Set aside.

Turn the dough onto a floured

surface, form into a ball, and cut in half. Stretch one ball of dough to fit evenly into a greased quarter sheet tray ($9\frac{1}{2}$ inches by 13 inches). Do the same with the other ball of dough.

Spread half of the crème fraîche mixture onto the dough. Arrange half of the onion slices on top. Sprinkle half of the raw bacon pieces on top. Repeat for the second pan. Bake for 12 minutes. Rotate the pan, and continue baking for about 15 minutes more, or until the bacon is crisp and brown, the crust golden, and the crème fraîche mixture bubbling.

Remove from oven and allow to cool slightly before cutting and serving.

Serves: Four to six.

OBATZTER

This pungent, creamy cheese spread is best served on hearty crackers or bread.

1 (8-ounce) wheel Camembert, with or without rind (see note)

1 tablespoon softened, unsalted butter

2 tablespoons chopped red onion, soaked in cold water for 10 minutes and drained

$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon sweet paprika

1 teaspoon toasted caraway seeds

Mash the cheese and butter with the back of a fork until smooth and creamy. Add the onion, paprika, and caraway seeds and stir to combine thoroughly.

Yield: $\frac{1}{2}$ to $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups, depending if you use the rind

NOTE: if the rind is particularly soft, it is fine to mash into the cheese and butter. It does not drastically change the end consistency, and yields more spread. If you prefer to not use the rind, it is easiest to cut off when the cheese is chilled.



Opposite: A pile of Habelkäse, or thinly sliced, hard, aged cheese. Especially good with Heinrich Gretzmeier's chardonnay! **Above:** The Strauß is very much a family affair.

vines wider to allow the wind to naturally dry the fruit and prevent molding. This guarantees the natural health of the vines, and in turn, the quality of the wines. "The taste of life in the vineyard accompanies me through all the different aspects of my work," Heinrich smiles. "I am often astounded at what nature has to offer when she's given the freedom to do her thing." Herein lies the distinctive character of the *terroir*, climate, and culture shine through to create a unique dining experience.

The Gretzmeier *Strauß* is open seasonally from mid-March to mid-May and from early August until the end of October. Opening times: Monday to Friday at 5:00 p.m.; Sundays and holidays at 4:00 p.m.; closed Saturdays. **61**

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