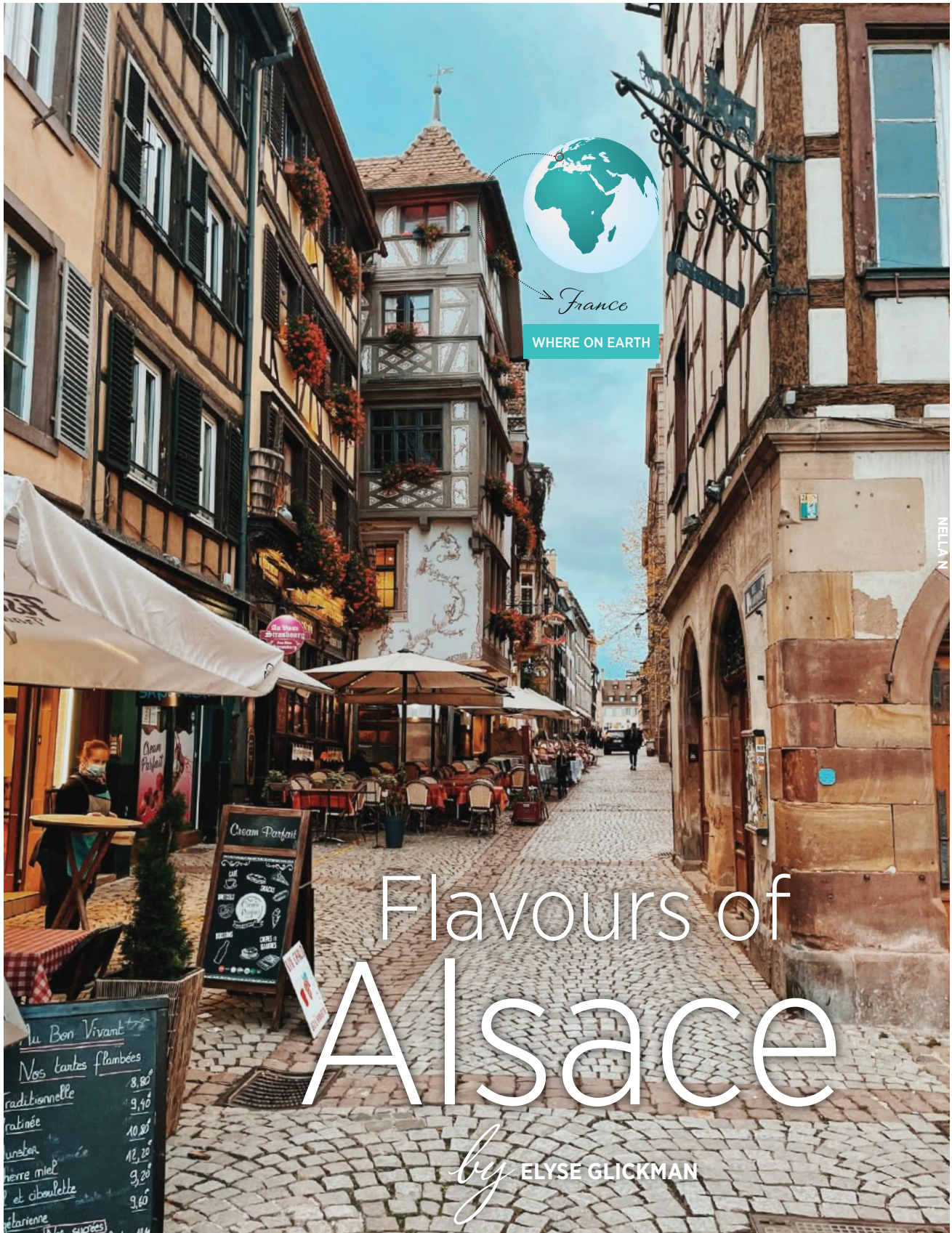




Flavours of Alsace

by ELYSE GLICKMAN



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ALONG THE RHINE, Viking and other cruise lines have responded to the demands of their increasingly food-savvy passengers with the inclusion of immersive food experiences in every port-of-call. They run the gamut from winery tours to craft brewery crawls and dinners, cooking classes, farmers' market tours, and history tours that include a few bites and sips for good measure.

The seven-hour **Christmas Flavours of Alsace** tour by Food & City Tours, Strasbourg that I joined during Viking's Christmas Market Cruise down the Rhine, is a seasonal version of the Flavours of Alsace tour offered during the rest of the year. Designed by Food & City Tours founders Virginie Holm and Patricia Szychowiak, the tour's main stops are strung together thematically emphasizing intermingling French and German influences.

With Strasbourg's charming storefronts and the layout of its streets, it is easy to fall down a rabbit hole of alluring displays and aromas. With the mid-December timing of this tour, factoring in a maze of 300 Christmas Market chalets, guide Gerard wove the best representations of seasonal food traditions into the day's itinerary. Specific chalets were included for their hot *gluhwein* (mulled wine, made with traditional red plus white and rosé versions appealing to modern tastes) and *bredele*, or Alsatian

Christmas cookies in every shape and flavour imaginable. Other chalets were singled out for their generous samples, friendly vendors and affiliations with brick-and-mortar shops.

En route to a picturesque bridge leading to the island heart of the city, Gerard pointed out a few bakeries, fromageries and restaurants for us to bookmark for future visits. Following a historic orientation to Strasbourg using a three-dimensional map, he kept us focused on key food-related points of interest in the Petite France historic quarter. Strasbourg Cathedral, the "North Star" of the UNESCO World Heritage city, remained in view no matter what direction he led us. Our first stop was Le Fournil d'Austerlitz, whose windows were dominated by pretzels (*bretzels* as they are known along the Rhine) and gift boxes of cookies.

"Strasbourg is definitely a meeting point between French and German influences," he explained before going inside to procure our first tasting. "We like to say that in Alsace, we work like Germans and we live like the French. If you have a look at the map, the city centre is on an island in a vertical pond. When you look in the France direction, you can see the Vosges Mountains on a clear day and see the Black Forest on the German side of the Rhine. From your ship, it's possible you saw vineyards, which also shape our food and geographic landscape."»



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PHOTOS THIS SPREAD FROM LEFT
Strasbourg historic
quarter; Assembling
tarte Alsacienne; Mireille
Oster candy sampling.

Cook
it

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SERVES 4-6

Tarte Flambée de Alsace

A RECIPE from Le Gruber Brasserie Alsacienne in Strasbourg.

Dough

All-Purpose Flour

2 cups

Canola or Olive Oil

3 Tbs

Salt

1 tsp

Water

$\frac{2}{3}$ cup,
at room
temperature

- 1 MIX** the flour, oil and salt in a large bowl.
- 2 USING** a fork or dough whisk, slowly stir in half of the water. Continue adding drops of water until the mixture forms a shaggy dough.
- 3 TIP** the dough along with any loose flour from the bowl onto a clean, floured work surface, and knead until the dough loses its stickiness and becomes smooth and elastic (about 1 minute).
- 4** Cover the dough loosely with plastic wrap or a clean kitchen towel while preparing the toppings.

Topping

Yellow Onion

1 medium, quartered
and thinly sliced

Bacon

4 oz, sliced

Crème Fraîche or Sour Cream

 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup

Salt

 $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp

Black Pepper

 $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp

Nutmeg

 $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp

Optional Toppings

White Button Mushrooms

4 oz, thinly sliced

Grated Emmental Cheese

 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup

- 1 ARRANGE** a rack in the middle of the oven and heat to 500°F. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper.
- 2 PLACE** the crème fraîche, salt, pepper and a tiny sprinkle of nutmeg in a small bowl and stir to combine. Taste and season with additional salt, pepper and nutmeg if needed.
- 3 ROLL** the dough out on a floured work surface into an oval measuring 10" wide by 16" long.
- 4 SPREAD** the sour cream mixture evenly over the dough and then sprinkle with the onions followed by the bacon, then the cheese. If you are using mushrooms instead of or with the bacon, sprinkle them on before the cheese.
- 5 BAKE** until the tart is well-browned, the bacon fat begins to sizzle, and the dough's edges become golden and crisp, about 2 minutes.
- 6 REMOVE** from the oven, place on a cutting board, slice into squares and serve immediately.



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«Gerard emerged a few moments later with a basket of *mannele* (Little Men), a variation of Advent staple *Kougelhöpf* bread baked in a round shape. The seasonal brioche-style buns resembling larger, fluffier gingerbread men are associated with St Nicholas Day (December 6th), but popular enough to be sold throughout December, thanks to the sweet dough and chocolate chips that make them excellent companions for coffee or tea.

The macarons sampled on the general "Flavors of Alsace" tour were replaced with *bredele traditionnels* (little cakes) at Maison Alsacienne de Biscuiterie, which had numerous chalets in the Christmas Market as well as shops operating year-round in Strasbourg and nearby Colmar. The festively dressed women manning the booth assembled trays with a mix of varieties from different sections of the well-organized concession. If there was a certain flavour that had you craving more, you could purchase a bag or two. Most of us obliged.

Gerard led us onto another street and launched into conversation about various Alsatian cheeses and Muenster, a favourite on both sides of the Rhine. We were picking up the scent of these different cheeses melting and caramelizing on flatbread surfaces as we passed chalets with particularly long lines specializing in *tartes flambées*. Instead of lining up for one, Gerard motioned us into Le Gruber,

a generations-old restaurant decorated with French bric-a-brac. The focal point near our reserved table was a baking station where we could see our order come together. Gerard mentioned that the local way to enjoy the experience is to order several tartes to share. Gerard chose two traditional Alsatian tartes with onions, bacon and Muenster; a mushroom, onion and Swiss cheese tarte; and a dessert tarte with apples flambéed with calvados and a touch of sour cream, as well as a crisp green salad, and a draught Fischer beer or chilled wine.

Before an hour-long break to explore the chalets nearest the Cathedral, we washed the hearty meal down with *gluhwein* and a sampling of a fruit stollen that was flaky, airy, and had a soft hint of butter. "It's like a fruitcake, but far better," Gerard promised. It was.

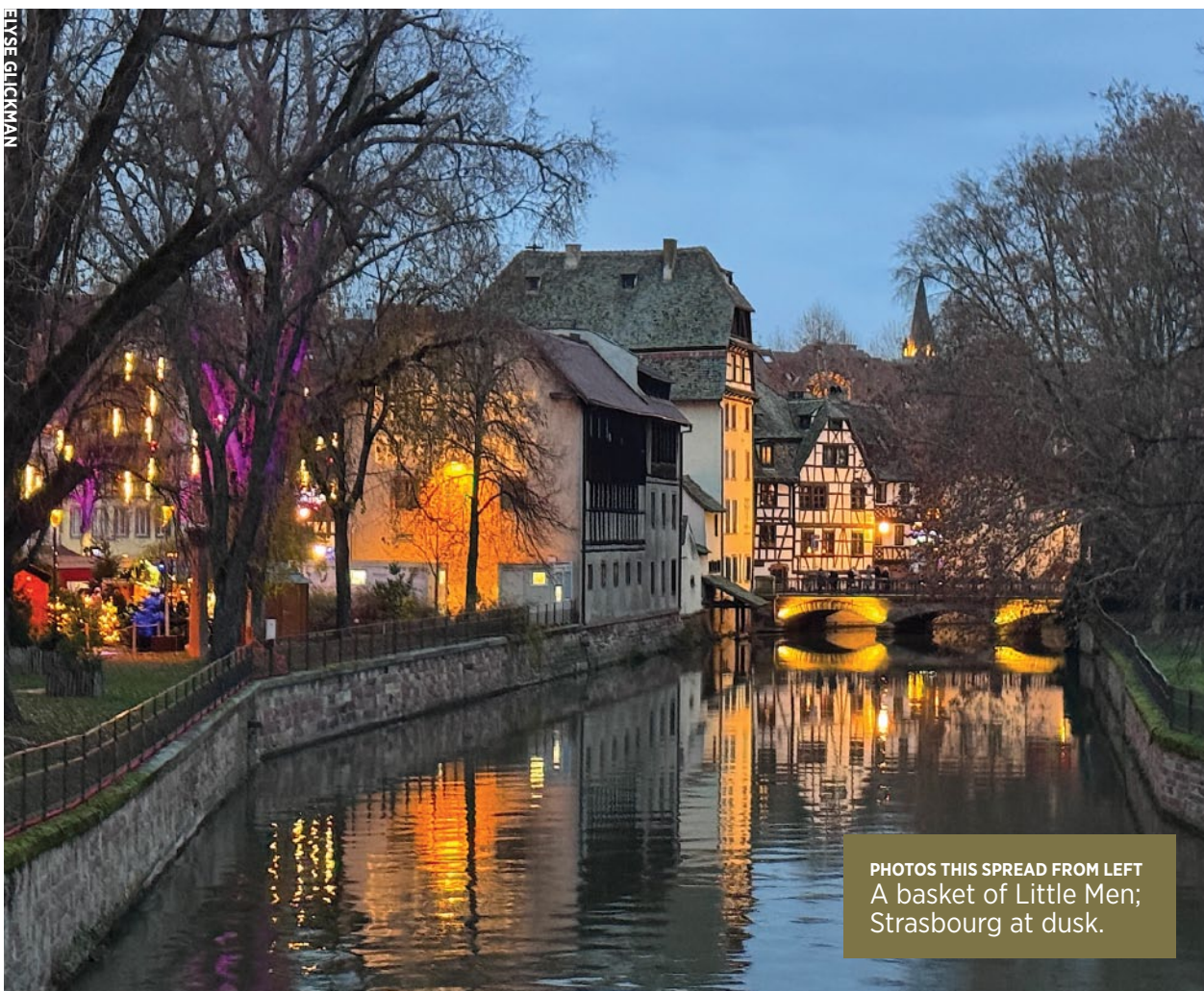
Following our shopping fix, we turned into a street lined with specialty food shops designed with Parisian flair. We barely fit inside La Maison Mireille Oster, with precariously stacked packages of its many gingerbread

specialties. Gingerbread men were dressed and ready to go, but obscured by different varieties of bagged cookies, sturdy gingerbread bricks meant to be paired with coffee, candies, and spice packets that could be used for home baking or savoury cooking. Hidden among bags near the cash register were recipe cards for fish, poultry and vegetables.

The salesperson explained how gingerbread (and Mireille Oster's in particular) brought together spices from around the world. She had us sniff seven different jars and quizzed us on which spice was which before handing out egg-shaped chocolate-covered candies with plum, cherry, chestnut and melon flavours as well as rectangular blocks with flavours such as fig and pecan, almond and praline.

With a strict appointment time at our final stop, wine bar Un Cantalou à Strasbourg, we made haste to Donatien-O la Boutique/Maitre d'éclair where we received a second helping of artisanal desserts. After»

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PHOTOS THIS SPREAD FROM LEFT
A basket of Little Men;
Strasbourg at dusk.



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«finishing culinary school in Strasbourg, Donatien Fehr travelled the world to build his reputation as a pastry chef at Ladurée in Paris, the Ritz in London, on luxury cruises around Australia, and in Japan. When the pandemic hit, he returned to his native Alsace and later opened a shop in Strasbourg offering an impressive range of sweet and savoury eclairs. As word spread about the intriguing flavours and presentation, a Paris location opened its doors. After sampling red velvet (made for Christmas), lemon-yuzu, and salted caramel eclairs, we picked one eclair to go to enjoy back on the Viking Eistla.

We arrived at Un Cantalou à Strasbourg just in time for happy hour. With small boards topped with terrine and two types of Alsatian cheese at the ready, we were introduced to wines from Alsatian producer Famille Hebing. The tasting started with Crémant d'Alsace, a refined sparkling wine made from chardonnay, pinot gris, pinot blanc and auxerrois. The grapes in this wine were grown from the French influence, the sommelier explained, while other wines from the house were made from German varietals such as Riesling, Gewurztraminer and Sylvaner.

Although the entire Alsace growing region is a tenth the size of Bordeaux, Famille Hebing wines benefit from the multi-faceted terroir along the Rhine made up of granite, schist, limestone and

clay, making the wines complex yet approachable and easy to pair. As Strasbourg is located more or less at the same latitude as Vancouver, Canada (which also has a well-known wine growing region nearby), climate also shapes the final results — wines that easily sell themselves.

The wine bar took the seven-hour journey full circle. Back on board the Viking Eistla a steaming cup of freshly prepared Rudesheim coffee paired particularly well with my leftover La Maison Mireille Oster cookies and a Donatien-O hazelnut eclair. **T&T**



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PHOTOS THIS SPREAD CLOCKWISE
FROM TOP LEFT Le Gruber
entrance; Christmas
in Strasbourg; Maison
Mireille Oster; Bredele
Traditionnelles cookies.



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SERVES 1

Rüdesheim Coffee

RÜDESHEIM, A UNESCO World Heritage Site on the Rhine, is beloved for its historic buildings, terraced vineyards, and fine wines. This heart-warming winter cocktail, which captures the town in gastronomic form, has become a year-round favourite.

Sugar Cubes 3

Asbach Uralt¹
3 Tbs

Brewed Coffee
6–8 oz

Sweetened Whipped Cream to taste

Shaved Dark Chocolate to taste

1 PLACE the sugar cubes in a coffee mug.

2 POUR brandy over the cube and light with a long match.

3 STIR until all the sugar is melted and allow to burn for 1 minute.

4 POUR hot coffee into the cup and finish with the whipped cream and chocolate shavings.

¹ A dry, aged brandy such as Cognac, Armagnac or Brandy de Jerez, can be substituted.



Food & City Tours Strasbourg
www.strasbourgfoodtours.com

ELYSE GLICKMAN is a freelance writer and regular contributor to TASTE & TRAVEL based in Los Angeles.