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A vine time in foodie France

Jade Wright takes a gourmet tour of Alsace and sips and sups on the best the region has to offer

WHEN I choose a holiday destination, my top priorities aren't the nightlife, nor the beaches it has to offer. I want great food and a fascinating history. And I found both in Alsace.

Well off the main French tourism trail, Alsace boasts more Michelin starred restaurants than anywhere in France outside Paris.

Tucked away on the German and Swiss borders, it's the land of the great white wines – Riesling, Gewurztraminer, Pinot Gris, Muscat d'Alsace, Sylvaner and Pinot Blanc.

And history? Alsace has changed hands between Germany and France with dizzying regularity.

It's been French since 1945, but the German influences are all around, with beautiful fairy tale half-timbered houses adorned with flowers, gabled roofs, and chimneys topped with storks' nests.

It manages to combine the best of both cultures, and it's hard not to fall in love with this sunny land, from its rich historical past to its unique

traditions and magnificent landscapes of vineyards and picturesque villages.

We couldn't decide on a single place to stay, so rented a car for our own mini gastronomic tour.

Starting off in the historic heart of the town of Colmar, we stayed in Hotel Le Colombier, tucked into the heart of the picturesque old district known as Little Venice.

The hotel is housed in a beautiful old building that still retains the charm of the Renaissance heritage.

Colmar is a real treat, full of drinking dens and restaurants which look like they might have been there for centuries – low beams laden with copper pots, dim clinking of glasses and cutlery.

We had dinner at Flory, which is tucked away off the beaten track in the beautiful Rue Mangold. It serves traditional Alsatian cuisine in huge portions with jugs of ale and is well worth a visit.

The old town is filled with crooked houses, half-timbered and painted-on crooked lanes.

We could happily have spent our whole visit there, but the

vineyards were calling, so out we headed into the countryside.

One of the most famous wine producers in the region is Josmeyer, a family run vineyard in the village of Wintzenheim, just west of Colmar.

It has 25 hectares of vineyards scattered across nearby villages, and best of all, you can visit for a tasting.

Most of the villages along the route have small family run hotels or auberges, offering a warm welcome and fine food.

We stopped off for lunch at Kirmann in Epfig. Situated at the heart of the village, overlooking vineyards, it's a beautiful half-timbered building covered with pretty hanging baskets, with a menu that's a celebration of the Alsatian cuisine.

After a hearty lunch, and a fabulous tasting at Josmeyer, we loaded up the car with far too much wine and made our way to Strasbourg, the capital city of Alsace.

Accommodation in the city centre can be hard to come by when the European Parliament is in session, but we found a real gem in Le Dragon, housed





in a 17th century building, a five minute walk both from the cathedral and one of the city's most famous restaurants.

La Cloche à Fromage offers the world's largest cheese platter, with almost 100 different cheeses to choose from. A plate of 15 cheeses matured and selected by a master fromager (cheese maker to you and me) costs around £20

and the all-you-can-eat fondue Savoyarde will warm your insides for around the same price. You can smell the place from the end of the street, and, for cheese fans, it's a real treat.

For our final stop on the gourmet trail, we headed to Mulhouse to try one of the hottest new restaurants in eastern France.

Restaurant le 4 in Rue de la Bonbonniere has only been open for a couple of years, but it's already become a dining destination.

For under £20 you can enjoy three delicious courses, with starters including mille feuille of smoked salmon with horseradish foam, a main course of veal, mashed potatoes and mushroom emulsion with aubergine caviar and gingerbread tiramisu with honey and apple ice cream for pudding.

But that's the wonderful thing about this part of France. For the price of a couple of courses in a chain restaurant over here, you can have a real feast, made with superb ingredients, in a beautiful setting.

By the end of the week, we were almost too full to move.

As we wandered – or should that be waddled – back to Basel airport for our return trip, I was grateful that we wouldn't be charged excess baggage for the extra pounds I'm sure we put on during our stay.

As it was, we returned home with a case full of beautiful wine, and a smile on our faces.

Next time we'll book a fortnight.

JADE WRIGHT travelled to Alsace with the Alsace Tourist Board.

She flew directly from Manchester to Basel in Mulhouse with Swiss. Flights start from £69, one way.

For full details of trips to Alsace, including last minute Valentine's breaks, visit the website at www.tourism-alsace.com.

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DIVINE WINE: One of many Alsatian vineyards, above, and, right, the Colmar area which, like Alsace itself, is packed with drinking dens and restaurants