



Alsace's proximity to the Rhine river makes the region's terroir wine friendly.



Visitors to the Joseph Cattin Estate (left), a family-owned local winery in Voegtlinshoffen, can now taste their impressive collection at a new terrace wine bar; The main hive of Alsace's wine culture is in the city of Colmar (centre), where shops recall a nostalgic era and restaurants (right) offer best of French fine dining; The village of Riquewihr is protected by a wall, outside which stands a medieval statue (inset).

LIFE THROUGH ROSE-TINTED WINE GLASSES

COLMAR AND ITS NEIGHBOURING VILLAGES IN NORTHEASTERN FRANCE CAN LAY CLAIM TO PRETTY GOOD VINO AND PRETTIER LANDSCAPES **TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY GUSTASP AND JEROO IRANI**

We had expected to get tipsy on the wines in northeastern France but not drunk on the picturesque villages along the wine route of Alsace. A short drive from Colmar, which is Alsace's wine hub, we stumbled upon hamlets of such jaw-dropping beauty that they could give the luscious wines produced in the region an inferiority complex.

The 170-kilometre route from Strasbourg in the north to Mulhouse in the south meanders along the foothills of the Vosges and charts a course through a 1,000-year-old wine growing area. There are around 800 cellars or wine growers in the region where

tourists can swirl, sniff and sip, and occasionally arch their eyebrows to look like knowledgeable wine experts, as they sample regional specialties.

What we found just as heady were the villages that we explored one windy afternoon when the vineyards were a luminescent mint green. In the east of Alsace, lay the Rhine river and the Black Forest mountain range of Germany, all conjuring a painterly canvas of colours. To add to the drama, the region is dotted with nearly 500 castles, many of them perched precariously on mountaintops, resembling stage props in a fairy tale. Were they the eyries of fearsome ogres,

we wondered, as we drove past.

Our base was Colmar, a town drenched in colour, with its Venice-like canals over which leaned timber-framed homes preening at their own reflections. We drove to our first stop, the town of Riquewihr, 11 kilometres north of Colmar, whose name had a rich Germanic ring to it like the names of many of the other villages we had encountered—Kaysersberg, Eguisheim and Voegtlinshoffen.

This was not surprising, for in the past, Alsace was tossed like a disputed heirloom between France and Germany, giving the region its present-day Franco-German tinge in cuisine,

wines, architecture and the lilting cadence of the local Alsatian dialect.

From a distance Riquewihr, with its church steeple piercing a blue sky, resembled a picture from a children's pop-up book. Protected by a medieval wall, Riquewihr has close to 1,271 inhabitants and is often billed as one of the most beautiful villages in France.

We walked the cobbled streets where half-timbered homes (dating to the 15-18th centuries) leaned against each other like hard-of-hearing old aunts whispering secrets from a shared past. Riquewihr even has a restaurant helmed by a Michelin-starred chef. In summer, wine boutiques, B&Bs and cafés do brisk business, and pastry shops churn out crisp baguettes for wayfarers while speciality shops sell foie gras, sausages, salamis and cheeses.

The pink, yellow and blue homes were a carnival of colour with elaborate oriel windows, secret leafy inner courtyards, old wells and flower-

bedecked fountains in squares. We chanced on curiosities like the Museum of the Thieves, a 13th-century house that was turned into a prison with a torture chamber; the "skyscraper," which had five timber-framed floors; and the Kiener House which was the home of a famous gourmand named Conrad Ortlieb, who was a liaison between local wine growers and wine merchants, according to some legends.

The Alsations are a friendly people and most of them love to discuss their wines with visitors. Many say the happy vibe that resonates in the villages is because of the stork. The birds have made Alsace their home in the warmer months for centuries (they winter in Africa) and you can see their giant nests balancing on church spires and rooftops. Locals believe that if a stork builds a nest on their rooftop, they bring luck to the owner and

From August, the region erupts with wine fests, parties and processions when locals stroll around in elaborate costumes and mysterious masks

his or her family.

The village of Eguisheim turned out to be another show-stopper. Snuggled in a sunlit valley, the town is surrounded by 800 acres of vineyards. Believed to be the birthplace of Alsace wines, Eguisheim's narrow streets corkscrew around each other while its medieval homes celebrate a past that lurks round the corner even now. Chapelle Saint-Léon, a 19th-century castle that was later turned into a chapel, houses the relics of a pope who was born here.

But these villages are not all about musty museums. Come May, blood red geraniums and other blooms spill out of window boxes while towards the end of August, the region erupts with wine fests, parties and colourful processions



Little Venice, a neighbourhood in Colmar where colourful houses loom over the riverside (top), is a picturesque slice of Italiana in France; Throughout Alsace, locals consider the stork (bottom) as a symbol of luck. The birds make their way to the region every summer.

when locals stroll around in elaborate costumes and mysterious masks.

Tourists can experience the grape harvest in September and October.

It was in Voegtlinshoffen that we finally indulged in a spot of wine tasting at the Joseph Cattin estate, one of the largest privately owned estates in Alsace, dating back to the 17th century. We met the family's 12th generation scion Jacques Cattin Jr., who with his father and wife Anais, oversees the vineyards and the winery. We drank in the mountain scenes of the Vosges and the Black Forest as we stood on the terrace of their new wine bar.

The bar's spacious interior, framed by floor-to-ceiling glass windows, pulled off the outdoorsy effect. From there, we started on a tasting tour and gleaned nuggets of information. For instance, in the past, vintners had to gift a part of their production to

the church as thanksgiving for a good harvest.

Soon we were rolling the Joseph Cattin wines appreciatively in our mouths. We learnt then that Alsace is the heartland of the Riesling grape but has seven main grape varieties (Riesling, Gewürztraminer, Pinot Gris, Pinot Blanc, Sylvaner, Muscat and Pinot Noir) offering wine lovers dry, sweet and sparkling choices with floral and peachy aromas.

We tasted some of the Crémant d'Alsace or sparkling wines and the fresh, fruity dry white Riesling as well as Sylvaner and Pinot Blanc. The last round included tasting the Riesling Grand Cru Hatschbourg which strummed our palates like supple fingers on a piano.

Grappling with the complexities of wine making and trying to pronounce the tongue-twister names soon took

a toll as did the wines that we sipped but forgot to spit. Reluctantly, we said goodbye to Voegtlinshoffen.

Back in Colmar, people were still at it, revelling in the pleasures of Alsace, eating rich food and sipping wine and discussing the merits of both endlessly.

ESSENTIALS

Major airlines including Air France has direct flights to Paris from Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai and Bangalore. Regular trains connect Paris with Colmar. You could also stay in one of the villages along the route at a vineyard hotel, B&B, or a campsite. Sept and Oct are perfect for touring the wine route as festivals are held in many villages to signal the end of the harvest. In December, glittering Christmas markets sprout up along the route.

