

Gastronomic Pleasures

Central Europe is a food lover's paradise with three-starred Michelin restaurants, sprawling gourmet markets; a haven to hunt for exquisite truffles and the best cheese in the world. **By Joyce Lin**



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First Class Fare in Mannheim, Germany

Germany is home to nine three-starred Michelin restaurants, one of which is Amador (www.restaurant-amador.de) in Langen, Mannheim, which received three Michelin stars in its third year of operation in 2008, a notable feat for any restaurant. Amador is part of the Relais & Châteaux group, which recognises top luxury restaurants and hotels worldwide. It is acknowledged as one of the top 35 restaurants in Germany, and patrons include politicians, businessmen and food connoisseurs.

The star of Amador is eponymous head chef and owner, Juan Amador. German by birth but born to Spanish émigrés, Amador pays homage to his roots with fine Spanish cuisine, sometimes with an Asian touch. Juan Amador was also a member of the exclusive Star Chef programme to design the first-class in-flight menu for Lufthansa in 2006.

As you dine in an ultra chic, modern setting with top-notch service, take your pick of both traditional and modern fare. Starters include tapas, where only the freshest local ingredients such as Mannheimer roast pork with Caesar salad are used, or sometimes more surprising combinations of tapas marrying cauliflower, white chocolate, caviar and argan oil.

A must-try main is Back to the Roots, Amador's signature dish that has earned a thumbs-up from critics worldwide. It features moist and tender Mialat pigeon with coconut and spice-infused purple curry. Pair this with a perfect complement from the extensive 51-page wine menu, which includes one of the most extensive Spanish wine lists in Europe and exclusive rare finds such as the Dominio de Pingus 1995, Ribera del Duero (about US\$2,040) – which is nearly unobtainable elsewhere in the world as most of the shipment was lost at sea. Meals are about US\$293, with a two to three week wait list, so reservations are necessary. Amador is open Tuesdays to Saturdays, 12 to 6pm.

Gourmet Journey in Vienna, Austria

A melting pot of Hungarian, Polish, Croatian and Slovakian culture, Vienna offers a mind-boggling array of cuisine. You will need a few hours just to explore exquisite gourmet food shops such as Julius Meinl am Graben (www.meinlamgraben.at), located in the central Graben district. With over 40 years of history, the store offers more than 16,000 types of delicacies. Choose from a mind-boggling 400 cheese varieties, a wide range of hams and cold cuts, chocolates, fine Caspian caviar and a cellar stocking a wide array of wines, like the fine Château Lynch Bages Grand Cru Classé 1961 (about US\$1,769). Open Mondays to Saturdays, 8am to 7.30pm.

The enormous Naschmarkt food market is paradise for gourmet food lovers. Established in the 1600s as a fruit and vegetable market, it also sells the freshest meat, seafood, bread and cheese today. Look out for delicatessen favourites like Persian caviar, sushi and oysters, as well as a colourful display of international produce from Yugoslavia, Greece, Turkey, Japan and China. A must-try traditional Viennese snack is the Kaiserschmarren, a pancake dish with powdered sugar, or the crepe-like Palatschinke.

Schwarzes Kameel (www.kameel.at) is a popular café by day and dining spot by night, and has been an institution in Vienna since 1618. With a roadside café, delicatessen, restaurant, patisserie and wine cellar, you will be spoilt for choice. Tuck into their famous open sandwiches at the café as you watch the world go by. They use bread from the renowned Kasses bakery and make their own ham, and their dedication to fresh ingredients is underscored by the fact that they use refrigerated vehicles to transport food. Their attentive service garnered them the American Academy of Hospitality Sciences Five Star Diamond Award in 2008. Prices range from US\$100 for a four-

2-5. Amador. Photo courtesy of Amador; 6. Chef Juan Amador. Photo courtesy of Amador



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course meal (about US\$120 with wine) to US\$125 for a five-course meal (about US\$155 with wine).

Located in the heart of Vienna, Palais Coburg (www.palais-coburg.com) is a commanding architectural landmark and a top destination for wine connoisseurs. Frequented by celebrities and the elite, the Silvio Nickol Gourmet Restaurant Palais Coburg restaurant is hush-hush about its clientele. With more than 60,000 bottles of wine stored in its vault, it stocks the greatest number of Mouton Rothschild, Château-Yquem and Pétrus varieties in the world with three dedicated cellars each for French, Château-Yquem and New World wines. One of its rarest finds is the Rudesheimer Apostelwein 1727 (price upon request). For true wine collectors, there is also the Château d'Yquem 1811 (about US\$105,626) and the DRC Romanee Conti 1934 (about US\$34,360). Prices are about US\$318 per person for food. Reservations should be made at least one to two weeks in advance.

Best Cheese in the World in Lausanne, Switzerland

The French-speaking part of Switzerland, Lausanne is a certified gastronomic capital with the best restaurants, cafes, cheese and chocolate factories. Home to IKEA billionaire Ingvar Kamprad, David Bowie, Isabelled Adjani and Geraldine Chaplin, Lausanne is part of the Délice network of food cities renowned for their gastronomic tradition. And no wonder - with more than 300 restaurants offering French, Swiss and international cuisine, this city is known to place great emphasis on a full-fledged dining experience.

Restaurant de l'Hotel de Ville Crissier (www.restaurantcrissier.com) is a three-starred Michelin gem in Lausanne, and part of the Relais & Châteaux group. Helmed by chef Benoît Violier, who took over from Philippe Rochat in 1996, Violier has ensured continuity of their famed classical French cuisine. Patrons at this restaurant are mostly Swiss,



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but sporting greats such as Michel Platini, president of the Union of European Football Associations and Amélie Moresmo, former world tennis champion, have been spotted here.

At least 22 chefs work in the kitchen to serve 50 diners, ensuring that food is served promptly by staff who are renowned for their slick, stellar service. There is a strict dedication demanded of the chefs, requiring them to commit for at least two years when they join the kitchen, so you can be assured of impeccably prepared food. Menus are seasonal to include the finest ingredients from each season, and most diners love the autumn menu for its venison.

Must-tries from the January to March menu include the Premières Asperges Fillettes et Bourgeoises de Pertuis (asparagus with caviar) and the mimosa à l'Osciètre Impérial Côtelettes d'Agneau de Lozère poêlées au serpolet, (mimosa and lamb chops in thyme) served with plancha de jeunes primeurs du moment (grilled seasonal vegetables). Prices average US\$474 per person. There is a two-week wait list and reservations are necessary.



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For a taste of the finest Gruyère cheese, take a day trip to the medieval village of Gruyère, where the La Maison du Gruyère (www.lamaisondugruyere.ch) cheese factory is. Some 54km from Lausanne, you can watch demonstrations on how the famed Gruyère cheese is made. Sweet but slightly salty, and gaining complexity in taste as it ages, it is the only cheese variety to have received the Best Cheese in the World award in London in 1992, 2002, 2005 and 2006. Open daily from 9am to 6pm from October to May, and 9am to 7pm from June to September. The entrance fee includes a degustation menu with three types of Gruyère cheese of varying ages.

Truffle Hunting in Istria

"Whoever says truffle, pronounces a great word, which awakens erotic and gourmand ideas," wrote famous French gastronome Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin in 1825. Centuries later, the seemingly innocuous truffle continues to titillate with its unique flavour. Truffles are said to be an aphrodisiac and commonly used to layer complexity onto cream-based pasta dishes.

Istria is a peninsula in the Adriatic Sea shared by Croatia, Slovenia and Italy, and known for everything truffle-related. White truffles are

most prized and delicious, growing from autumn to late winter. Finding them is a great challenge and truffle fanatics have been known to pay up to US\$2,550 for a kilo of white truffles. Black truffles are the other slightly more affordable variety, somewhat milder in taste and grow in the summer.

Truffle hunting is a definite sport, with specially trained dogs used to find these truffles. The best time to go truffle hunting for the white variety is from early October to the end of December. Luxury bespoke travel planners such as Calvados Club (www.calvadosclub.com) arrange private tours for truffle hunting. The tour includes a visit to the village of Livade, one of the most important centres of truffle hunting, followed by a 30-minute truffle hunting demonstration.

After the hunt, enjoy lunch (cost not included in the tour) at the famous Restaurant Zigante (www.restaurantzigante.com). Its owner, Giancarlo Zigante, holds a record in the Guinness Book of Records for finding the biggest white truffle in the world in 1999, weighing in at 1.3kg. There are menus dedicated each to the black and white truffles. The cost of the private tour including a local guide, private car and driver costs US\$210 per person for a small group of up to six people. **INSPIRE**