



The
LITTLE
German
TOWN
WITH ALL THE
Michelin
STARS

BY DAVID FARLEY
PHOTOGRAPHS BY
CHARISSA FAY





Ladde

Selbstgemachter
Ziegenkäse
aus
Baiersbronn



want to try an experiment on you,”

said herb hunter Christine Bissell, as she bent down along the trail and plucked a green stem. Those eight words weren't what I was hoping to hear when I signed up for this *Kräuterwanderung*, or herb hike, through the hills of Germany's Black Forest. After all, this was a woman who, five minutes earlier, had described an herb she culled for our upcoming picnic as "only slightly poisonous."

I was spending a week in Baiersbronn, a community of 14,000 people lodged in the middle of the Black Forest, a 2,300-square-mile swath of land located in southwest Germany, not far from where the Rhine River etches its way between Germany and France. Harbored within the forest's dark-green spruce-blanketed hills and valleys, emerald patches of bovine-laden meadows, and half-timbered houses is an edible mystery: Three of Baiersbronn's handful of restaurants have been





From left: Michael Peterle and his goats; schnapps at Markus Kalmbach's shop; a cow grazes in the Black Forest countryside; herb forager Christine Bissell's picnic kit. Previous spread, from left: a shop sign for ZIEGENKÄSE (goat cheese); Black Forest venison at Schwarzwaldstube.

anointed by that deity of fine dining, Michelin. The village boasts a collective eight Michelin stars (one two-star and two three-star restaurants) and is today deemed by the Teutonic fooderati a must-stop spot on Germany's fine dining trail. Consider the fact that culinary juggernauts London and Chicago each have just two three-star restaurants. Rome has one three-star spot. Berlin has none—what it does have is a bunch of locavore restaurants that are inspired by this village.

If that were all, it would be enough to convince me to stick my fork into this village. But then there are the local artisanal schnapps distillers, cheesemongers, butchers, and ice cream makers, all of whom utilize, as did their ancestors of centuries past, the bounty of the Black Forest—incorporating wild herbs and plants into their various products just as the chefs infuse them into their award-winning menus. I yearned to discover how a small village, tucked away in a forest that was once seen as so impenetrable and inhospitable that only the strong and brave planted roots, had

become a paradigm of new German cuisine. But I also wanted to find out what was in the proverbial water here.

At the source of an underground spring, Bissell pulled a canteen from her backpack and handed it to me. "Now for that experiment," she said, screwing the top off. I steeled myself, fearing the worst: that the Teutonic gods would be evoked right there and then and subject me to a spell, perhaps transforming me into a frog, or that I'd encounter a beast straight out of Grimms' tales. "A fellow forager told me this was really good," she continued. I paused, looking at the vessel, then took a sip: It tasted like apple juice, with a heady, slightly earthy taste and a hint of honey coming in at the end. "I mixed organic apple juice with meadowsweet that I found right here," she said.

Having neither turned into an amphibian nor started to hallucinate, I began following Bissell's lead and sampling herbs with abandon. We tried wild marjoram, yarrow, spignel, red clover, even the first of the season's bilberries. About 30 minutes after

our apple juice break, we stopped at a bench along the trail, and Bissell began laying out our lunch: baguette slices and a jar of sauce made up of yarrow, ground elder leaves, ground ivy, oregano, nettle, lady's mantle, and bedstraw—herbs she had picked the day before and whipped into a variant of pesto. The herbs themselves conspired to produce a biting, bitter taste, but the olive oil and cashews offset it with a nutty and subtly tangy flavor stratum.

Our hike concluded at an 11th-century monastery where we wandered through a re-creation of the herb garden that medieval monks had once cultivated. Clearly, drawing sustenance from the Black Forest was nothing new. The ancient Romans gave the area its name, *Silva Negra*, or Black Forest, thanks to the density of trees that made it appear to be one foreboding wall of blackness. It scared the Roman legions enough that they avoided it altogether. In fact, the forest itself was hardly populated with humans until the 11th century. But by the 19th century, the logging industry



had deforested the dense growth of spruce, silver fir, and beech trees. The timber industry moved on to other areas of Central Europe, the Black Forest was replanted with spruce trees, and the area's economy shifted to the tourism industry—particularly health and medical tourism, thanks to the wealth of underground hot springs, the ultra-clean air, and the soil's natural proclivity for growing herbs. And that's where the story of Baiersbronn's Michelin stars really begins.

The Traube Tonbach hotel had opened in 1789, housing and feeding temporary workers for the logging industry, but by the 20th century it had shifted to serving tourists and become the only big resort hotel in Baiersbronn. Then in 1977, the Traube Tonbach added a gourmet restaurant, Schwarzwaldstube, and soon after hired the man who is probably the most influential chef in Germany today: Harald Wohlfahrt. Wohlfahrt's 35-seat restaurant has held three Michelin stars for 25 years. And of the nine other three-star Michelin restaurants in Germany, four of them are run by chefs who

were trained by Wohlfahrt in Baiersbronn.

In the cozy dining room of Schwarzwaldstube, its dark, wood-beamed ceiling competing for attention with the view of rolling, conifer-clad hills out its windows, I feasted on cod laced with bone marrow. And then tender saddle of local deer lightly seasoned with ginger and curry in cardamom jus. When I looked up from my plate at one point, standing in front of me was Wohlfahrt, 61 years old, his full shock of dark hair contrasting with his crisp chef's whites.

I asked him when he began using local ingredients, and he stared back at me as if I had queried him about the source of his frozen vegetables. "We've been using local ingredients since we first opened," he told me, "everything from the venison on your plate to in-season berries and herbs." He paused and then added, "I come from the northern part of the Black Forest, and this is the way it has always been."

And yet the facade of his establishment still has FRENCH RESTAURANT scrawled across it. It

serves as a reminder that elevated German cuisine has come a long way. Until the 1980s, most high-end restaurants in Germany were French, Schwarzwaldstube included. In *Beyond Bratwurst: A History of Food in Germany*, German food writer Ursula Heinzlmann says chefs were reluctant to focus on German cuisine because of post-World War II guilt.



Germany



When local recipes that are "old-fashioned" see the light, now restaurants futur... Fores...
But food... it too... Tonb... that y... and th...
We pool... Tonb... add... Schw... star a... the Ba... Barei... in 198... the ye... Barei... day, th... Sox of... client...
We other... at Sch... 1993, h... that a...
Sack... forest... wild h... has so... from t... lamb... roaste... infused...
On Sackm... Chef S... of Baie... the env... here," E... an herb... replant... water p... on-site...
« A sele... Metzge... a fourth

When German chefs in the 1980s began using local ingredients and looking to their mothers' recipes for inspiration, Heinzelmann writes that they were accused of "excessive nationalism" and "culinary fascism." I could start to see the Black Forest for the proverbial trees now. Even as he ran an acclaimed "French" restaurant, Wohlfahrt was quietly teaching future culinary stars the ways of his Black Forest upbringing.

But it takes more than one chef to start a food revolution. In the case of Baiersbronn, it took competition. Until 1951, the Traube Tonbach ruled the little resort town. But that year, Hermine Bareiss opened her hotel, and the hospitality arms race was on.

When Bareiss built a swimming pool, a pool materialized the next season at Traube Tonbach. If one added suites or a spa, the other added them, too. And in 1982, four years after Schwarzwaldstube earned its first Michelin star and two years after it earned its second, the Bareiss opened its eponymous restaurant. Bareiss earned its first star in 1984, its second in 1985. Schwarzwaldstube got its third in 1992, the year chef Claus-Peter Lumppp arrived at Bareiss, which earned its third in 2007. To this day, the hotels are the Yankees and the Red Sox of the Black Forest, each with its own loyal clientele.

Wohlfahrt and Lumppp blazed a trail for other chefs to follow. Jörg Sackmann, the chef at Schlossberg restaurant, which opened in 1993, has earned two Michelin stars for menus that are even more locally focused.

Sackmann's son, Nico, traipses around the forest for about two hours each day, picking wild herbs. Nearly every plate that comes out has something that chef Nico foraged that day, from the wild chamomile encrusted on the lamb to the yarrow sprinkled atop the tender roasted Mangalica pork to the thyme that infused the honey drizzled over a tomato foam.

On the evening I dined at Schlossberg, Sackmann and his son came out to say hello. Chef Sackmann told me he thinks the mystery of Baiersbronn's culinary supremacy lies in the environment. "It's all about the air and soil here," he said. "The soil is so great. If we taste an herb we really like that isn't from here, we'll replant it here." He said he loved Peruvian water pepper so much, he planted some in the on-site garden. "Our homegrown water pep-

< A selection of sausages at Metzgerei Koch, the shop of Joachim Koch, a fourth-generation butcher.

WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK IN

Baiersbronn

Bareiss

In 2007, chef Claus-Peter Lumppp earned a third Michelin star for the Bareiss Hotel's eponymous eight-table restaurant, which showcases the produce of local artisans (cured lamb; goat cheese; herb-flecked butter). *Hermine-Bareiss-Weg 1*

Metzgerei Koch

Butcher Joachim Koch makes dozens of sausages as well as Black Forest ham, which he smokes with pine needles, seasons with juniper, and ages for three months in his shop. *Murgtalstraße 160*

Michael Peterle

Cheese maker Michael Peterle's goats feed off the Black Forest's wild herbs, which gives his creations a unique flavor. *Schonegrunderstrasse 80*

Schwarzwaldbrennerei

Third-generation distiller Markus Kalmbach makes schnapps in a variety of flavors inspired by the ingredients of the surrounding forest, such as anise, bilberry, and bloodroot. *Stöckerweg 16*

Rosengarten

Chef Friedrich Klumpp, who owns the restaurant Rosengarten, was one of the first locals to offer herb walks to visitors. He creates an entire menu out of the herbs he gathers—creamed chantrelles, cranberry butter, and even pine needle ice cream. *Bildstöckleweg 35*

Schwarzwaldstube

Chef Harald Wohlfahrt, one of Germany's most influential chefs, heads the kitchen of this intimate, three Michelin-starred restaurant in the Traube Tonbach hotel, which opened in 1789. Look for ingredients sourced within the region, such as deer with ginger and curry in cardamom jus. *Tonbachstraße 237*

Schlossberg

Chef Jörg Sackmann cooks alongside his son, Nico, who forages every day for the wild herbs that show up in their dishes each night. *Murgtalstraße 602*

per has a bolder, more peppery flavor than the original I tried," he said.

Nico jumped in. "Because the industry here was logging, making this a very remote, tough place to live, the people of Baiersbronn had to make do with what they had. Which is why there's an economy of artisanal food makers using the natural ingredients of the forest." He looked at his father, who nodded at me in agreement. Then Nico added, "You should really see for yourself."

He was right. In the following days I met a goat-cheese maker named Michael Peterle who took me into his backyard, behind his cheese shop, to show me where his product comes from: goats eating grass and wild marjoram. "Everything you see here goes into my cheese," he said. I saw a meadow and a herd of goats quietly grazing its greenery. "The flowery herb-filled grass that the goats eat here gives their milk a very distinctive flavor," he explained. Back in his shop, Peterle sliced off

a piece of four-day-aged cheese. The taste was mellow, not overly strong as in most goat cheese, with a subtle spiciness from the herbs eventually poking through. It was excellent.

I also encountered Markus Kalmbach, a third-generation distiller, when I strode past his Schwarzwaldbrennerei (Black Forest Distillery). He was outside sampling his wares with a group of tourists who were taking advantage of his "schnapps spring," a horizontal carved-out log that held several bottles bobbing around in water. You plop a couple of euros in the mailbox-looking container next to the log and enjoy self-service schnapps until you can barely walk home. Kalmbach took me to see his fermenter and let me sample various flavors—anise, bilberry, bloodroot, all of which he gets just up the hill in the forest—until I could barely walk home myself.

I also met fourth-generation butcher Joachim Koch. At Metzgerei Koch, he makes dozens of different types of sausages. But I had



From left: an employee at the Traube Tonbach hotel in a traditional dirndl; Black Forest pork at Schlossberg restaurant. Opposite page: a typical Baiersbronn house.

come for the famed Black Forest ham, which, not surprisingly, is quite different from the vacuum-sealed, packaged sliced ham one finds hanging on the racks in U.S. supermarkets. It was like many of my random meetings in Baiersbronn: a simple query—in this case, how do you make your ham?—and a second later, I was in a back room getting a tour.

Koch took me through the process of how he smokes the ham, dries it, marinates it, smokes it again, lets it dry a bit more. Three months later, you have this unctuous, taste bud-quivering product that melts on the tongue. A subtle smokiness emerged at the back of my palate as I sampled some of the thinly sliced ham. Then Koch left the room and re-entered with a bundle of pine needles in his hand. “One of the keys is this,” he said. “I smoke the ham with pine needles and season it with juniper I fetch from the Black Forest.”

Pine needles, it turns out, season more than just ham. On my final night in Baiersbronn, I stopped into the Rosengarten hotel and restaurant. Owner Friedrich Klumpp is more

than just the chef of the restaurant; he was one of the first locals to organize a *Kräuterwanderung*, or herb walk, starting about 10 years ago.

I had a bowl of pine needle ice cream in front of me when Klumpp took a seat at my table. He had learned that I was interested in herbs. “When I began the walks, the first question people would ask is ‘What is this?’ followed by a second question, ‘Can I eat this?’ So I decided to create a menu totally infused with herbs I gather.”

He looked down at my bowl of ice cream. “You’re literally eating the Black Forest.”

Klumpp didn’t have to tell me that he sourced the pine needles from the forest just outside his restaurant. It was assumed. In fact, no one here uttered phrases like “snout to tail” “farm to table” and “local ingredients,” common dining parlance arising in the last decade.

“This is the way we have always eaten here,” said Klumpp. “We got derailed in the post-World War II period, but we eventually picked up where we left off.”

Klumpp touched on something I’d been

pondering—that the last few years we’ve been intentionally regressing as we’ve been technologically advancing. As the Internet has become an increasingly pervasive, imperative force in our lives and our faces are perpetually stuck to our smartphone screens, it’s not a coincidence that things like knitting, playing vinyl, and eating Paleo have roared back. We’ve crossed a technological Rubicon, and subconsciously we’re grasping for a simpler, more predictable time. We’ve created a culinary atavist dream, a romanticized self-sustainable past in our locavore craze. But in Baiersbronn, people have been living this way all along.

“The people of the Black Forest have always known the edible bounty in these hills,” Klumpp said. “The rest of the world just hadn’t caught up yet.” **A**

Contributing writer David Farley wrote about the Balkans in the March/April 2016 issue of AFAR. Photographer Charissa Fay shot the cover of the January/February 2017 issue.

