

Worth the Alsace detour

29 Sep 2008 by Nick Lander/FT

Restaurant de la Gare in the village of Guewenheim just west of Mulhouse in southern Alsace and 50 kilometres from Basel and the borders of France, Germany and Switzerland will long stay in my memory as one of the very few restaurants that I have ever been locked in to - somewhere neither of the owners could find the key to the front door and where the wine list is so wonderful that, although we were finally let out via a side door, we could have happily stayed for days.

The very different reasons for this unlikely scenario were a jack-knifed cement lorry on the motorway, which delayed our arrival past the bewitching hour of 2pm, at which time every kitchen in France seems to close, and the exceptional hospitality of the Schaegele family.

This restaurant has belonged to Antoine, Jules, André and now Annick Schaegele since it opened as a railway canteen in 1874. Their names, black and white photos of how the restaurant used to look back then and the name of Annick's husband, Michel Seidel, who combines the role of chef and hugely knowledgeable wine buyer, evocatively adorn the cover of the laminated menu.

Food and wine, however good, are not enough on their own to sustain a family-run restaurant for 134 years in a small, out-of-the-way village and, as Annick explained once we were the only customers left on her sun-dappled terrace, "We hope to offer something for everybody round here. There is a simple bistro at the front for one dish and a glass of wine; a more elegant dining room; and one room for meetings and weddings. And with the number of hikers, golfers and cyclists who call in we can never be too formal."

Informality and precision were the two factors which underpinned our meal. Having handed us the menu and wine list, Annick then explained one extra first course, backenoff, a small casserole dish filled with snails and diced foie gras which, she implied, I would be foolish to deny myself.

The dish was even better than she intimated, a layer of snails topped with diced foie gras in a pungent sauce enriched with finely sliced carrots, leeks and potatoes. Equally well-executed were a tranche of duck foie gras; pike with choucroute and a Riesling sauce; carp fried two ways, in beer and semolina, with frites and mayonnaise; and a rich, cassata-like ice cream made in the shape of a kugelhopf, the local cake pictured top left.

With this we drank a half of Kientzler, Gaisberg Riesling Alsace 2001 for 26 euros and a half of Roumier 2002 Chambolle-Musigny red burgundy for 35 euros and spent the entire meal wondering which wines we would order on our return. Perhaps Coche Dury's Meursault 2001 for 69 euros or a bottle of non-vintage Egly Ouriet for 50 euros? Or Château Sociando-Mallet 1990 for 125 euros or Château Margaux 1983 for 300 euros? The enormous list is full of bargains.

As we paid our bill of 149 euros for two, Seidel appeared in shorts about to go off and enjoy the 36 hours, from Tuesday afternoon until Thursday morning, his restaurant is closed each week. He spoke with pride of the pleasure the distinctive wines of Alsace give him as a chef, particularly Gewurztraminers and Rieslings, and his hope that the region's winemakers will not lose sight of this as they produce different styles.

They, and winemakers represented in the cellars of the Restaurant de la Gare, are fortunate to have such a champion.

Restaurant de la Gare, 68116, Guewenheim, France +33.3.89.82.51.29. Closed Tuesday night and Wednesday.