

FORK IN THE ROAD



Centuries-old stone walls enclose terraced vineyards near Sierre in the Valais, a region in southwest Switzerland encompassing the Alps and the verdant valley of the Rhone River.

Switzerland's Valais

Beyond skiing, this region of contrasts is famed for its food, cheese and wine

STORY AND PHOTOS BY
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"Cholera — like the disease?" I wrinkle my nose as I look down on my plate with its slice of golden brown pie. Summoning his Swiss reserve, my server doesn't roll his eyes. I can almost read his mind: Must be an American.

Patiently he explains that the filled pastry called a cholera originated here in the Alps when mountain folks used whatever they had on hand: cheese, vegetables, fruit, potatoes, bacon. I take a bite. It's delicious. I want the recipe.

The savory pie with the unsavory name ranks among the more modest dishes of the Valais, a large canton stretching across southwest Switzerland, encompassing the snowy Alps and the verdant valley of the Rhone River.

Its most famous resort, Zermatt, sits at the end of the train line in the valley below the Matterhorn. More than 100 restaurants, two with Michelin stars and 20 in the Gault Millau guide, cater to the village's international visitors, year-round skiers and sightseers.

Zermatt's Kitchen Around, a combination progressive dinner and chef's table, is offered both winter and summer. At the first restaurant you're served a starter, the last a dessert, and in all cases diners are brought into the kitchen to see the chef and his assistants whipping up your meal. Local wine, coffee and an after-dinner drink are part of the deal, along with a ride in one of car-free Zermatt's electric taxis.

Last summer's Kitchen Around kicked off at the Hotel Mirabeau, where chef de cuisine Alain Kuster got busy in the kitchen adding smoke to a lump of cow's cheese and apricot he'd placed under a glass dome. It became part of a starter accompanied by air-dried beef, elderberry chutney and the traditional Roggenbrot (rye bread).

At the boutique Hotel Alex, second chef David Hellmer plated up John Dory fish with gingered sweet potatoes and avocado. "Did you get enough to eat?" he asked, but before we could answer, a slice of tender beef with bearnaise sauce was laid before us.

While we dined, Hellmer told us he grew up in the



Hotel Mirabeau chef Alain Kuster presents a starter of smoked cheese served with air-dried beef and chutney.



U.S. and traveled to Europe with friends 20 years ago. He never went back. He did his chef apprenticeship, met his wife and settled down in Zermatt. What's the appeal? "The mountains," he quickly answers. Who can argue with skiing and hiking around the Matterhorn?

The evening ended at the Hotel Valliserhof where chef Sylvain Stefanazzi Ogi whipped up a chocolate mousse with pear and Ovomaltine served with Poire William liqueur.

Among other dining experiences that draw crowds in Zermatt is the Parkhotel Beau Site's bar-becue evening. Offered

twice a week in winter, once a week in summer, it features an amazing array of fish, seafood and meats, including game meats such as wild boar.

Another don't-miss is a lunch of Alpine specialties with a view of the Matterhorn on the terrace of the Kulmhotel, which sits at an altitude of 10,170 feet. Board the cogwheel Gornergrat railway for the 30-minute ride from Zermatt.

Beyond food, the Valais is Switzerland's largest wine-producing region, with 40 percent of the country's output. Most vineyards are small enterprises occupying just a few acres along the sloping banks of the Rhone,



A slice of cholera, a filled pastry that originated in the Alps, is served with salad at Bettmerhorn Mountain Restaurant.



Rounds of raclette cheese are lined up on a table, ready to be melted over a grill in the restaurant at Chateau de Villa.

with views of the Alps rising in the distance. Stone walls dating back centuries surround the oldest terraces.

Two grapes account for most of the production. The red pinot noir flourishes in the valley's chalky soils, and the white fendant adapts to the Valais' many microclimates.

More than 100 wine cellars lie between the cities of Sierre and Salgesch. The Cave Caloz winery grows 17 varieties of grapes on about 10 acres, said Sandrine Caloz, its 24-year-old winemaker.

Her grandfather began making wine as a hobby, opening the cellar in 1970. Her father took over after completing wine school. Sandrine studied enology in Geneva for four years, then worked in wineries in Australia before coming home to the Valais. She offers tastings in a rustic nook right in the cellar.

"Swiss wines are getting to be more well-known," she said. The variety of soils and altitudes of the vineyards "bring a lot of com-

plexity to the wine."

Visitors get a close look at the vineyards on the Wine Path, a 3.7-mile walkway between Sierre and Salgesch with a wine museum at each end. Some 80 signs mark the free, self-guided route through the vineyards and tell the story of the vines, the region and its people.

At any time of the year, wine can be sampled in Sierre's 16th-century Chateau de Villa, a combination wine bar, store and restaurant known for one of the Valais' most famous dishes: raclette. Its Degustation de Raclette features five varieties of the semi-hard cow's cheese, the rounds sliced in half and the cut sides melted over electric grills, then served on plates and scraped with boiled potatoes.

In the past, Valais farmers took the cheese with them as they moved cows from lowland pastures up into the mountains. They melted it over their evening campfires, scraping it onto bread. The word raclette comes from the French

If you go

- Kitchen Around: Zermatt, tinyurl.com/zermattkitchen
- Parkhotel Beau Site: Zermatt, parkhotel-beausite.ch
- Kulmhotel: Gornergrat, gornergrat-kulm.ch
- Cave Caloz: cavecaloz.ch
- Chateau de Villa: Sierre, tinyurl.com/chateaudevilla
- Bettmerhorn Mountain Restaurant: cable car from Bettmeralp, tinyurl.com/bettmerhorn

Visitor information: Valais Promotion, valais.ch/en/home; Zermatt Tourism, zermatt.ch/en; Sierre Anniviers, sierre-anniviers.ch; Aletsch Arena, aletscharena.ch

word, *racler*, meaning to scrape.

Today restaurants serve raclette with potatoes, pearl onions, pickles and perhaps a bit of air-dried meat.

Raclette cheese and potatoes make up the key ingredients in cholera too. The hearty dish takes its name from a 19th-century cholera epidemic that swept across Europe. The mountain people in the Valais confined themselves to their homes to avoid contagion and were forced to improvise meals from whatever they could scrounge from their larder. They added leeks, onions, apples, pears and a bacon called petit lard, wrapped it all in pastry and baked it.

The dish remained popular after the epidemic passed, and the cholera name stuck, though some now call it Goms pie for the Goms Valley in the upper Valais. Bakeries sell it cold by the slice, and restaurants serve it hot as an appetizer or lunch entree.

Cholera comes with a side of green salad at the Bettmerhorn Mountain Restaurant. Reached by aerial cable car from Bettmeralp, which is accessible only by gondola from the railway station in Bettmeralp, the meal is well worth the ride up the Alps. So is the restaurant's view of the Aletsch glacier, largest in the Alps.

In summer, hikers follow marked paths along the ice. In winter, skiers hit the runs, stopping to warm up with a slice of cholera washed down with a crisp fendant or Valais beer.