



Good taste

Above: Colmar's picturesque streets
 Right: A dish of *choucroute garnie*
 Below: A typical *winstub*

CHOUCROUTE GARNIE

Alsace encompasses the Bas-Rhin and Haut-Rhin departments in the Grand Est region and is nestled between the Rhine river to the east and the Vosges mountains to the west.



sampled at the many *winstubs* in Strasbourg, the region's cosmopolitan capital and seat of the European Parliament.

Literally meaning 'wine room', these cosy bars are decked out in nostalgic décor and characterised by their

In this picturesque corner of northeastern France, the dawn of the colder months begins around the middle of October when a tapestry of colour washes over the vineyards and the chill in the air has everyone craving rustic platters of aromatic *choucroute* simmered in white wine and abundantly crowned with large chunks of pork, sausages and potatoes.

Though sauerkraut already appeared at Alsatian tables as of the 15th century, it wasn't until the 19th century that the fermented cabbage was served with other ingredients and became the *choucroute garnie* (garnished sauerkraut) we know today. The dish is similar to the German *schlachtplatte*, and not surprisingly so, since Alsace has alternated between German and French rule several times since the 17th century.

This resulted in an attractive blend of cultures evident in everything from Alsace's distinct architecture to its culinary traditions. *Choucroute*, usually enjoyed as a special family meal and accompanied with a crisp, zingy riesling or regional beer, can be

laid-back, convivial atmosphere where you can warm up to other winter classics such as *baeckeoffe* stew or bacony *flammekueches* with carafes of local wine.

Alsace has a semi-continental climate with cold, dry winters. In fact, Colmar, located in the southern Haut-Rhin department, benefits from a sunny microclimate with little rainfall.

Strolling through its storybook streets lined with colourful, half-timbered houses and pretty canals will certainly make winter blues a thing of the past!

The city happens to be the viticultural capital of Alsace and is a great place to start exploring the more than 100 wine villages and many *caves* spread out over its 170km *Route des Vins*.

Colmar is just a stone's throw away from Germany and Switzerland, and should a morning of skiing with the family be on your mind, the Vosges Massif's affordable resorts offer pistes

suitable for all levels. The largest in the region is La Bresse-Hohneck, with 42 pistes spread out over 220 hectares. ▶

Next month
 More on life in Alsace and why it's not just for winter



Winter calls for hearty French food in sublime surroundings. **Paola Westbeek** sets out to discover some of the nation's favourite dishes and where best to enjoy them



Whether you live for the adrenaline of gliding down glistening slopes at some of the most impressive winter sports destinations or prefer the gentle climate of the sun-soaked Mediterranean coast, there is plenty to love about winter in France.

Fewer crowds during this time of year also mean a more authentic experience and ample 'space' for house hunters to really get a taste for living in the country.

But that's not all. With its cheese-smothered casseroles and rich stews, France's rustic winter cuisine is one of the season's most enticing highlights.



PHOTOS © PIXABAY DEZALB - PIXABAY/DWZ CREUTZ





Beautiful Lake Annecy



A rich tartiflette



Enjoy lunch with a view of Mont Blanc in Savoie

Heading south, past Bourgogne-Franche-Comté, we arrive in Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes to indulge in a taste of the mighty *tartiflette*, the queen of voluptuous French winter dishes. Made with potatoes, onions, generous amounts of bacon, cream and white wine (not to mention an entire round of Reblochon cheese), *tartiflette* was invented in the 1980s to promote the soft mountain cheese from Haute-Savoie.

It is based on a traditional potato dish known as *pêla* and made with a potato called *tartiflâ* (hence the dish's name). *Tartiflette* continues to be a firm favourite at ski destinations.

“La R'mize in Les Gets serves a great *tartiflette*,” says Caro Blackwell. “Chalet La Pricaz on La Col de la Forclaz above Talloires on Lake Annecy, not only serves a good *tartiflette*, but you can eat it while enjoying the most breathtaking views of Lake Annecy,” she adds.

TARTIFLETTE



AUVERGNE RHÔNE-ALPES

Caro, originally from England and a digital/social media marketing professional who also writes the blog Taste of Savoie (tasteofsavoie.com), lives in Cernex, a tiny farming village located approximately 30km north of Annecy.

She and her husband moved to Haute-Savoie 11 years ago. “My husband’s work in Geneva originally brought us here,” she explains. According to Caro, expats are

drawn to Haute-Savoie’s numerous ski resorts and its close proximity to Geneva, where many find employment.

When asked if the locals are welcoming, she replies: “Yes, I would say they’re friendly, but the Savoyard people are naturally reserved and quite closed initially. However, when you get to know them and they trust you, they are welcoming.”

Caro encourages anyone considering a move to go for it: “This region has so much to offer. The weather has very clear seasons with good, warm summers and cold, snowy but sunny winters. The mountains have to be experienced, whether on skis, snowshoes or just viewed from the terrace of a mountain restaurant.

“Many of the ski resorts offer access to the mountains for non-skiers. We are very lucky to own a small apartment in the gorgeous ski resort town of Les Gets, and this is where I spend a lot of my time in both summer and winter.”

PHOTOS © PIXABAY/DEZALB; SAVOIE MONT BLANC/BLASSON; RAH

PHOTO © PIXABAY/CINEUV



Arles in winter



Following our taste buds south, our food tour continues in Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur with *daube de boeuf à la provençale*, a rustic stew of tender beef marinated in red wine infused with onions, carrots, aromatic herbs and orange rind.

The dish, which also includes black olives, gets its name from the pan it was originally prepared in: the *daubière*, a deep, round or oval piece of earthenware used for braising meats.

Daubes are prepared all over France. In fact, in Elizabeth David’s *French Provincial Cooking*, (Grub Street, 2007) an authority on *cuisine du terroir*, we read: “There must be scores of different recipes for *daubes* in Provence alone, as well as all those which have been borrowed from other regions, for a *daube* of beef is essentially a country housewife’s dish.”

DAUBE DE BOEUF



PROVENCE-ALPES CÔTE D’AZUR

In the *daube avignonnaise*, for example, beef is replaced with lamb and red wine is replaced with white.

Daube de boeuf is a favourite Sunday lunch in winter and a delectable way to warm up after an active day on the slopes of the Alpes du Sud. Stretching out over the Alpes-Maritimes, Hautes-

Alpes and Alpes-de-Haute-Provence departments, this alpine paradise is home to 68 ski resorts, among them Isola, located at an elevation of 2,000m and overlooking the Mediterranean Sea.

If you’re considering permanently settling in Provence or spending the winter there, bear in mind that although the region is the warmest and sunniest in France, mistral winds are quite common during the season and can be unforgivingly harsh, causing temperatures to quickly plummet. That certainly didn’t stop Vincent van Gogh from escaping to Arles in February 1888, however!

Though he often complained about the ‘infuriating nuisance of the constant mistral’ in letters to his brother Theo, he also wrote, ‘what a compensation, when there’s a day with no wind.’

‘What intensity of colours, what pure air, what serene vibrancy?’

La daube de boeuf provençale

This is an easy recipe, but it has all the rich savour of these slowly cooked wine-flavoured stews. The pot to cook it in may be earthenware, cast iron or a copper or aluminium oven pot of about two pints capacity, wide rather than deep.

INGREDIENTS

- 2lb of top rump of beef
- 6oz of unsmoked streaky bacon or salt pork
- 3oz of fresh pork rinds
- 2 onions
- 2 carrots
- 2 tomatoes
- 2 cloves of garlic
- 2 tbsp of olive oil

- 1 glass (4fl oz) of red wine
- 1 bouquet of thyme, bay leaf, parsley and a little strip of orange peel
- Seasoning

1 Have the meat cut into squares about the size of half a postcard and about third of an inch thick. Buy the bacon or salt pork in the piece and cut it into small cubes.

are there to give body as well as savour to the stew, into little squares. Skin and slice the tomatoes.

3 In the bottom of the pot put the olive oil, then the bacon, then the vegetables and half the pork rinds. Arrange the meat carefully on top, the slices overlapping each other. Bury the garlic cloves, flattened with a knife, and the bouquet, in the centre. Cover with the rest of the pork rinds. With the pan uncovered, start the cooking on a moderate heat on top of the stove.

4 After about 10 minutes, put the wine into another saucepan, bring it to a fast boil; set light to it; rotate the pan so that the flames spread. When they have died down pour the wine, bubbling over the meat. Cover the pot with greaseproof paper or foil, and a well-fitting lid. Transfer to a very slow oven, gas mark one, 290°F and leave for two and a half hours.

5 To serve, arrange the meat with the bacon and the little pieces of rind on a hot dish; pour off

some of the fat from the sauce, extract the bouquet and pour the sauce around the meat. If you can, keep the dish hot over a spirit lamp after it is brought to the table. At the serving stage, a persillade of finely chopped garlic and parsley, with perhaps an anchovy and a few capers, can be sprinkled over the top. Or stoned black olives can be added to the stew half an hour before the end of the cooking time.

Recipe from French Provincial Cooking by Elizabeth David (Grub Street, £14.99)

CASSOULET



ur winter food tour ends in Occitanie where *cassoulet* - a

creamy bean and meat stew blanketed by an irresistibly crisp, golden crust - is the epitome of comfort food.

First mentioned in a *Le Viandier*, a recipe collection dating to the 14th century, the origins of the emblematic dish have been the source of much debate.

Three places have claimed it as their own: the beautifully preserved, fortified city of Carcassonne, one of Occitanie's eight UNESCO World Heritage Sites; Toulouse, the 'Pink City' on the banks of the Garonne river and the fourth largest city in France and Castelnaudary, located halfway between the two.

Castelnaudary, however, was acknowledged as the capital of *cassoulet* by Parisian chef and culinary writer Prosper Montagné in his book, *Le Festin Occitan* (1929). He not only propelled the dish to worldwide fame, but also struck a truce between the three cities when he declared that: "*Cassoulet* is the God of Occitan cuisine. One God in three persons: God the father is the *cassoulet* of Castelnaudary, God the son is that of Carcassonne, and the Holy Spirit that of Toulouse."

Occitanie counts 13 diverse departments and is the second largest region in France. It is home to the Languedoc vineyards which produce intensely fruity and jammy wines that are perfect with *cassoulet*.

Handsome cities such as Montpellier and Narbonne, both just 10km away from the Mediterranean coast, intermingle with quiet villages full of charm and tradition.

If you're looking for a peaceful place to settle in Occitanie, you might want to consider Gers, situated to the west of the region. Dutch food writer and photographer Véronique Pouw (ohmydish.com) and her husband Marco (a big fan of *cassoulet*) have been living



OCCITANIE



A traditional *cassoulet*


in the small village of Préchac-sur-Adour since November 2018.

"Gers is so much calmer than other departments and there is a lot less tourism," says Véronique. "We chose this region specifically because of the great weather, landscapes and views, tranquility, good food and wine, relaxed atmosphere, nature, friendly people and way of life."

Gers is one of the country's sunniest departments with winters that are relatively mild.

Véronique says: "The most extreme temperature we've had was -4°C, but most of the time it's still possible to enjoy a cup of coffee in the sun."

Just a little under two hours south, you can also go skiing in Grand Tourmalet, one of the 33 ski resorts in the Pyrénées.

If your dream is to buy property close to the country's Alpine destinations, or simply spend the season in France to test the waters before a permanent move, it's obvious that winters in these regions are anything but grey and boring - they're decidedly tempting. 



Above: The Cité de Carcassonne in the snow
Below: A winter market in Carcassonne



PHOTOS © N'WONGP; TOURISME CARCASSONNE

More online

[completefrance.com/
language-culture/food-and-drink](http://completefrance.com/language-culture/food-and-drink)

Find out more about French specialities on our website

COMPLETE
FRANCE