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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Following a trail of schnapps through Germany's storied Black Forest

By **Liza Weisstuch**

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Oberkirch is a small village of about 20,000 people in Renchtal, a region on the western edge of Germany's Black Forest. Like many other villages nearby, people visit here for world-class restaurants, centuries-old town centers and hiking. Oberkirch's hiking is a little different, though. Here is where you'll find the Oberkircher Brennersteig. Walk this nearly nine-mile loop through a lush green landscape and you will pass eight distilleries, intimate family-run operations producing small batches of schnapps from seasonal fruits — Mirabelle plums, cherries, raspberries, strawberries, pears.

Many distilleries are located in modest buildings, the kind of timber homes often associated with Germany. You can tell which ones are distilleries, though, because there are bottles of schnapps outside along the path. Some distilleries keep bottles of their products in little wooden boxes known as “birdhouses.” Some have them in “schnapps fountains.” When I first learned about this, my imagination ran wild with visions of limestone angels spewing forth the local spirit — a Dionysian altar where Willy Wonka and the Brothers Grimm might go on a bender. It's actually a bit more discreet than that but nonetheless amazing. The “fountains” resemble stone tubs filled with chilly water that cools bottles of schnapps. There's typically a tray of clean small glasses and a tray for used ones. Drop a few euros in a box, pour yourself a helping, enjoy, and off you go.

The Familie Halter distillery, however, presents a more involved experience. On a perfect Thursday afternoon in August, I met Johannes Halter, a fifth-generation distiller with boyish good looks and a New York City T-shirt. He learned the art from his father, who lives in a house beside the distillery. His parents live downstairs, and Johannes and his family reside above. The fruits (if you will) of Johannes's labor sit in wooden boxes that open at the top. Each is nailed to a wooden post, and they're lined up in evenly spaced succession along the pathway, situated in front of the bush or vine of its respective fruit: peach, cherry, raspberry. Johannes poured me a taste of his Zibartenwild, a plum variety. It was rich with a round fruit flavor that arrived like an aria and vanished quickly, leaving no trace of the rough alcoholic burn often associated with the grain-alcohol-and-fruit-flavoring concoctions that are labeled "schnapps" in the United States.

About a kilometer walk south, along rows of coniferous trees, is Waldhotel Grüner Baum, a sweeping hotel with blond-wood furniture and floor-to-ceiling windows everywhere. At the end of a wide driveway is a cottage-like building where Johannes Müller-Herold runs Distillery Grüner Baum, a tiny operation trafficking in big ideas. The small wooden box affixed to the building like a mailbox assured me I was in the right place. I lifted the lid and, sure enough, schnapps. And brochures.

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The distillery has been in Johannes's family for 10 generations. A soft-spoken adventure-seeker in the Hemingway mold, he returned to Oberkirch 11 years ago after living in Hamburg, Switzerland and New Zealand with his family. They traveled Asia. He rode his motorbike across the Sahara. He cooked in classy restaurants. His wife teaches tribal belly dancing. Little surprise, then, that although he produces traditional schnapps like his father did, he's more keen to concoct "mouth-rocking" flavors, territory he veers off in with his liqueurs. Sitting in his sunny shop, he poured a taste of his elderberry-chocolate-chili liqueur, a luscious sip of intense cacao with a fruity tang. It delivered a delayed kick. My eyes widened; he nodded approvingly.

Grüner Baum is across the path from Die Alm, a delightful restaurant where a friend and I dined that night on a menu that pairs local schnapps with global takes on Bavarian fare. Combinations such as apple schnapps and fish worked in ways that had me contemplating the shortfalls of Chardonnay.

Schnapps, or fruit brandy, has long been deeply woven into this region, located in the state of Baden-Württemberg. The climate that's made parts of the Black Forest well known for its wines also provides exquisite growing conditions for cherries, plums, apples and more. When the fruit is mashed, fermented and distilled (or "burned," in local parlance) at peak ripeness, a distiller can capture its fresh essence — an opulent flavor without sweetness. There are 14,000 distillery licenses throughout the Black Forest, 796 of them in Oberkirch. Most are bare-bones setups in people's homes. A German law grants a production license to any property that grows fruit. There are also bigger commercial producers. One of the bigger ones, Franz Fies, was established in 1948 and is run by Heinz-Peter Fies, son of the founders. In 2017 he opened a huge, sleek production facility with a modern visitors center. He can make up to 1.5 million liters of mash annually.

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The following morning, a 10-mile drive took me along the western slope of the Black Forest to Sasbachwalden, a dense collection of heritage-protected half-timbered houses with flower boxes hanging from windowsills. There's a local tradition here called "restaurant jumping": One reservation gets you a multicourse meal, each course at a different restaurant, an indecisive person's fantasy. An area packed with vineyards, it's home to a winegrowers' cooperative, Alde Gott, where you can purchase local producers' wines at the vast shop. At Alde Gott, they also make schnapps — electrifying kirschwasser (sour cherry) and plum.

At Spinnerhof, a restaurant and inn, it became clear that "they also make schnapps" could be the local motto. On a hill outside the town center, the rustic establishment is the kind of place where Facebook and headline-making protests do not cross your mind. Built as a barn in 1640, it was transformed into a restaurant in 1976 by Rudolf Spinner, who has ruddy cheeks, an easy smile and weathered hands thanks to his many hobbies, mainly building things, such as a small chapel behind the restaurant, a tribute to his grandmother. His still is in the back of the restaurant in a dark, stone-walled room that feels like a nook in a medieval castle. Spinnerhof, which offers a long menu of classic regional fare, is one of the few locations where you find a distillery in a public restaurant space. At the bar, Rudolf pointed out his handiwork: the blond-wood bar, the stone archway that forms the restaurant's front door, the supremely fragrant raspberry, peach and even hazelnut schnapps laid out before us. "There has to be 150 things that I want to do, never enough time," he said, pouring me another shot and bidding me farewell.

One place where schnapps is not an afterthought is in a long yellow building with a pitched roof and burgundy shutters about 15 minutes from Eichstetten, where a bus from Sasbachwalden delivered me in 90 minutes. Baumgartner is in Kaiserstuhl, a famed Rhine Valley wine region bordered by France and Switzerland. Its soil is volcanic, ideal for growing grapes, and its bucolic valleys are dotted with hikers on nicer days.

Fridolin Baumgartner grew up here. His father, a carpenter, owned vineyards and a few fruit orchards, so, in keeping with the German law, he had a license to distill, although he ran a winery. He died when Fridolin and his younger brother Ulrich were teenagers. Ulrich went to medical school and today works as a surgeon. Fridolin runs the distillery he built on the property. He married his wife, Anneliese, 43 years ago, and they started making schnapps. Today their prizewinning small-batch marvels are sold in prestigious bars and restaurants throughout Germany.

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Fridolin is a jovial bear of a man with a resonant baritone. It's easy to imagine him singing a stirring rendition of "Riders on the Storm." On the day I visited, he had just received a delivery of ripe plums that appeared the size of cherries in his paw-like hands. The crates sat in the compact still room. He and Anneliese, who does the blending and bottling, would sort through the bounty that afternoon and get rid of any subpar fruits. Only the juiciest are selected to make that mash to be fermented and burned. But first, to the tasting room. I parked myself at the counter with Uli, who helped with interpretation. Each sample — raspberry, plum, sour cherry, Williams pear, quince, hazelnut — offered a full harvest season condensed into a moment.

Florian Faude grew up in the Kaiserstuhl and had met Fridolin several times. A casual friendship turned into an accidental mentorship. Florian, who had worked in wine, started Faude Feine Braende in an old wine warehouse and released his first fruit brandy in 2006. If Fridolin's schnapps are like a classic rock song — energetic, harmonized and familiar — Florian's are punk, the same instruments played by a radical thinker. Earthy beetroot and cucumber schnapps are among the more eccentric selections. Mandarin and blood orange are others. He walked me through them when I visited the next day.

"When you smell this, tell me what it makes you think about, what it makes you remember," he said, slowly breathing in the garden raspberry schnapps in his glass. "The jam your grandmother made? The first raspberry ice cream you've ever eaten?"

Yes.

I was introduced to Florian by Hank Strummer, a globe-trotting DJ from the region whom I met in New York. He has a penchant for tropical shirts and a reputation for knowing everyone, an unofficial mayor of the Black Forest. Through him, it became clear to me that the creativity inspired by the region's majesty extends far beyond eccentric schnapps and the clever takes on classic Bavarian cuisine that chefs here are famous for. Hank founded One Trick Pony Ultras, an informal consortium of self-proclaimed "barflies." Modeled on groups of hardcore soccer fans, these friends are committed to supporting and furthering the local bar scene and their own creative pursuits, reminding me of a hip latter-day incarnation of the early-20th-century literary salons of Paris. And on a Tuesday night, he gathered many of them for dinner at Romantik Hotel Spielweg, a study in classic Bavarian design about an hour northeast of Basel, Switzerland. There was Markus Ruf, a photographer, and Rudi Raschke, a former Playboy contributor and now editor in chief of Netzwerk, a regional business and political magazine. There were inventors and a vintage-store owner. And there was master of ceremonies Viktoria Fuchs, Spielweg's head chef and sixth-generation member of the family that owns the charming old-world-style place. As dishes such as porcini egg pan, made with mushrooms she and her cheesemaker boyfriend foraged that morning, were served, she catalogued ingredients with fanfare.

As postprandial drinks of obstbrande, an apple/pear schnapps particular to the region, were poured, chitchat about music, politics and the Fuchs family's hunting and foraging adventures formed the soundtrack.

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An appointment to meet Philipp Schladerer, the sixth-generation distillery owner, took us about 15 minutes west to Staufen early the next morning. According to legend, Faust made his deal with the devil here. Now it's better known for giant cracks in old buildings caused by drilling for a geothermic energy project gone awry. It's also known for Schladerer Schwarzwälder Hausbrennerei, a tourist-friendly distillery that's footsteps from the center of town.

As visitors wandered into the museum-like distillery, Philipp pointed out photos of his ancestors and vintage bottles. He walked us through the cavernous still room, showed off the enormous earthenware containers used for aging schnapps and gave us a taste of his prized Roter Williams-Birnenbrand, a pear variety that delivered the flavor equivalent of a glint of light reflected off a diamond.

From there, we headed north about an hour to Offenburg, stopping along the way to visit Stefan Strumbel, a painter and sculptor whose colorful and disorientingly playful work pulls the rug out from under familiar Black Forest imagery. (See: distorted cuckoo clocks, neon crosses.) His creations are shown in galleries throughout the world. He met us later for a drink at Schoellmanns, a hip restaurant with a popular bar. The shelves are lined with more than 100 bottles of fruit brandies. Owner Willi Schoellmann knows most of the producers, and sometimes they visit. Joseph, an octogenarian schnapps-maker, had just been by that morning to drop off some kirschwasser.

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Stefan's work — a neon sign that reads “This is for all the lonely people” and paintings — is on the wall, and Florian's beetroot brandy is in the Negroni. It was like a curtain call of the personalities I met along the way. I strolled across a wide balcony: To the west was the Vosges, a mountain range in France. To the east were the hills and vineyards of the Black Forest, a landscape fossilized in time.

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If you go

Where to stay

Romantik Hotel Spielweg

Spielweg 61, Münsteral

011-49-7636-7090

spielweg.com/en

Old-world charm defines this cozy, family-run hotel, which features countryside-style guest rooms, suites and apartments across several buildings. The family's sixth-generation proprietors, sisters Kristin and Viktoria Fuchs, oversee management and the kitchen, respectively. The restaurant specializes in elevated versions of regional classics, often made with ingredients foraged daily. Rooms from about \$132.

Spinnerhof

Schlossberg 8, Sasbachwalden

011-49-07841-3609

spinnerhof.de/en

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In 1976, owner Rudolf Spinner retrofitted this sprawling, cozy restaurant and hotel into a circa-1640 barn. The menu features many traditional dishes, such as goulash (about \$21.50), pork schnitzel (about \$15) and käsespätzle (noodles and mountain cheese, about \$11.75). Don't leave without a slice of towering Black Forest cake (about \$8) and a drink of the schnapps that Spinner makes on his still in the back. Rooms from about \$49 to about \$67 during peak season and from about \$47 to about \$65 during offseason.

Hausbrennerei Baumgartner

Badbergstrasse 9, Vogtsburg-Oberbergen

011-49-07662-6646

hausbrennerei-baumgartner.de

Fridolin and Anneliese Baumgartner, the couple that own and run this small distillery, also own and operate cozy apartments and newly built guesthouses right next door. In the tasting room, you can sample a tremendous variety of their handcrafted schnapps. Apartments from about \$56 per day.

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Where to eat
Familie Halter

Alm 57, Oberkirch

011-49-07802-3429

halter-edelbraende.de

Located along the Oberkircher Brennersteig, or “schnapps trail,” this small farm distillery is run by the fifth-generation member of the family that owns it. The fruit brandies and liqueurs are set up in small wooden “birdhouses” on the path outside the distillery. You can visit the tasting room as well. There’s also an option to schedule a guided group tour of the birdhouses. Payment is on the honor system.

Schladerer Schwarzwälder Hausbrennerei

Schladererstrasse 1, Staufen im Breisgau

011-49-7633-8320

schladerer.de

There’s a museum-like quality to this family-run distillery, which was started in 1844 and today is run by the sixth generation of the founding family. Black Forest kirschwasser and Williams pear are some of its best-known schnapps. The distillery recently added a dry gin to its repertoire. Tours come with a small tasting and a 10 percent discount in the shop. Tours about \$13.50 and must be scheduled in advance. Email tour@schladerer.de to coordinate. Walk-ins offered Wednesdays in the summertime only.

Faude Feine Bräende

Schlossmattenstrasse 25, Bötzingen

011-49-7663-6075255

faude-feine-braende.com

Florian Faude, owner and distiller at this forward-thinking operation, makes a variety of fruit brandies and liqueurs from traditional (mandarin, raspberry) to cutting-edge (beetroot, cucumber). Tours with customized tastings start at about \$30 and must be scheduled in advance.

Schoellmanns Bar & Kitchen

Hauptstrasse 88, Offenburg

011-49-7819-194999

schoellmanns.de

The kitchen at this hip, modern restaurant and bar, which is adorned with international artwork, prepares breakfast, lunch and dinner. Regionally inspired bistro cuisine, like käsespätzle (about \$16.70), sandwiches (from about \$10) and elevated bar bites (from about \$10.50) make up the menu. The bar is known for its craft cocktails (from about \$9) and also stocks a huge assortment of schnapps produced throughout the region, as well as wine. A sprawling terrace provides unbeatable views.

Fies Brennerei

Kastelbergstrasse 2, Oberkirch

011-49-7802-4445

fiesbrennerei.de

A range of internationally distributed schnapps, as well as gin, is produced at this distillery, run by the second-generation member of the founding family. A sleek, large visitors center was completed in 2017. Only tastings are available for booking, but tours will be open in 2020. Flight of four about \$11, six about \$13 and eight about \$17.

Information

blackforest-tourism.com

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