High Spirits

IF THERE IS A FOOD (AND DRINK) PARADISE ON EARTH, IT IS HERE, IT IS HERE, CHANTS NANDINI MEHTA

Vineyard terraces of Lavaux keep a watch on Lake Geneva; and (facing page) a taste of the terroir bottled by St Saphorin.
On the edge of Lake Geneva, in the town of Vevey, a gigantic steel fork rises out of the water, like a shining emblem of the power and pleasure of food. It’s an apt signature landmark for a town that prides itself on its gastronomic history. Vevey was the place where one of those great life-enhancing inventions—the milk chocolate—was first created, in 1875. It is also the birthplace of such universally loved comfort foods as Ovaltine, Maggi and Nescafé, invented by Nestlé, the world’s largest food company which has its headquarters here (the giant fork sculpture in the lake is also courtesy Nestlé). But I am steered away from all things processed and packaged during my food safari in Vevey and its neighbourhood in the Lake Geneva region. Instead, I am offered a non-stop feast of the freshest harvest of fields, forests and lake—so exquisitely presented, they look like still-life masterpieces transferred from canvas to plate.

Spring is in the air in the Swiss Riviera, the impossibly picturesque stretch of coast along the shores of Lake Geneva, dotted with charming historic towns like Vevey, Montreux and Villeneuve. Wild white narcissus, like drifts of snow, grows thickly on hill-sides, filling the air with a heady scent; yellow dandelions are scattered like gold dust on green grass. The town squares are lined with chestnut trees just beginning to unfurl their pink-and-white blossoms; tulips, hyacinths, wisteria and lilac form a pastel colour palette that is a balm for the eyes and soul. The elegant little lakeside towns, which enjoy a mild microclimate thanks to the moderating effects of the lake, have long attracted rich and famous settlers, as well as visitors from all over the world.

Among them was Rabindranath Tagore who came to visit the writer Romain Rolland in Villeneuve in 1926. Upon sighting The Poet with his burning eyes, flowing robes and generally Old Testament-prophet-like mien, the town buzzed with the rumour that God himself had arrived. It’s a story that’s still remembered by locals and related to Indian visitors. The rock musician Freddie Mercury (alias Farrokh Bulsara) was another Indian who frequented these parts, and whose memory is honoured—his bronze statue stands in Montreux’s main town square, overlooking the lake. Another prominent resident honoured with a statue—this one facing the Big Fork—is Charlie Chaplin who lived in Vevey for twenty-five years, until his death in 1977. A group of Gujarati tourists (true to stereotype, they’ve brought a cook along, and they’re munching thepla) cluster round it to have their picture taken. “Make sure both the Tramp and the Fork are in the frame,” says one. “Bechara Chaplin, he was always hungry, that’s why he’s looking at the fork.”

Assuaging hunger seems to be a major preoccupation in Vevey, with its plethora of restaurants and gourmet food shops. And very well they do it, too, as I discover on my first day there, which begins with a lunchtime cruise on Lake Geneva in an elegant Belle Epoque steamer.
bows formally, and then turns away to look at the scenery through her camera lens. The view from the train’s panoramic windows is indeed enchanting: brown-and-white dappled cows gambolling in flower-filled meadows; forests with gurgling brooks; picture-book-pretty wooden chalets. A couple of hours later, I am at the village of Rossinière, sitting on the terrace of just such a chalet, overlooking the foothills of the Alps. This is the Jardins de la Tour restaurant, a magnet for gourmets in the region and winner of fourteen coveted Gault Millau points.

Lunch begins with a delicate carpaccio of l’omble chevalier, a delicious fish from Lake Geneva. It nestles artfully on a bed of baby carrots and turnips, and plants foraged from the countryside—bear’s garlic (the broad leaf and the bud of the plant, both of which have a mild but delicious garlic flavour) and tiny blue alpine flowers. As I chew on those fragrant flowers, I begin to understand why Swiss cows, who spend their days grazing in alpine meadows, look so content and placid. The fish course is followed by filet mignon and rösti—a hearty Swiss speciality of grated potatoes baked with cheese.

It’s just as well that after this meal we’re on our feet for the next couple of hours, watching the making of one of Switzerland’s finest artisanal cheeses—L’Etivaz. It is made by hand over an open fire, in copper vessels; and only between May and October, when the cows are in high Alpine pastures. It’s a rich and nutty hard cheese which finds its way into Europe’s finest food shops, and each farmer’s lunch on duck ballotine served with a salad of algae, and skip the remaining courses. I’m saving my appetite for dinner, which is at the Michelin-starred Le Restaurant, at the very grand Trois Couronnes hotel. This is a meal that dazzles with its less-is-more simplicity. The emphasis is on seasonal foods, heirloom vegetables, and herbs that grow wild in the spring, and there are no rich sauces to mask the natural flavours. Asparagus served with tiny deep-purple potatoes and fresh goat’s cheese, is followed by perfectly grilled daurade flavoured with lemon zest, and a salad of lettuce hearts and dandelion leaves. I end with luscious strawberries served with an intensely flavoured berry sorbet and little shell-shaped madeleines, all of it washed down with the local Chasselas white wine (more about Chasselas later). It’s a long, leisurely meal, stretching over two hours, but prepared with a light touch that doesn’t leave one feeling overstuffed.

I have another memorable gourmet experience at lunch the next day. That morning I boarded the Golden Pass train at Montreux station in the company of a coachload of Chinese tourists, and head into alpine countryside in the Château d’Oex region. My attempts at Hindi-Chini bhai-bhai meet with little success—my small-talk conversation starters are met with a barrage of facts and figures about the great progress that China has made in recent years, delivered by an earnest young woman civil servant. At the end of her spiel, she

Left to right: the palace hotel of Trois Couronnes in Vevey; quinoa tabbouleh; and potato rösti on its tables. Facing page: a wedge of L’Etivaz.
production is identifiable through a system of labeling. We realize how individualized is the making of this cheese from a true story we’re told. An Etivaz cheesemaker lost her wedding ring, frantically searched everywhere for it, but with no luck. More than a year later, a shopkeeper in England cut a slice off a wheel of Etivaz to sell a customer, and came across the ring embedded inside. He informed the Etivaz farmers’ collective, gave the number of the wheel of cheese, and the cheesemaker got her wedding ring back. Each wheel weighs around thirty kilos, and there’s a laborious process of turning and salting each cheese over a period of at least eight months, until it is mature enough to eat. Etivaz dairy farmers have now invested in a robot to do this job—we watch it at work, striding menacingly along the cellars where the cheese is stored, lifting and turning each one in its gigantic steel arms. A happy tasting session follows, and I decide I like the Etivaz best when it is around three years old, eaten in paper-thin slices, and accompanied by white wine.

There’s more white wine to come the next day when we spend the morning at the Lavaux vineyards, a Unesco World Heritage Site covering the hill slopes for thirty kilometres along the shores of Lake Geneva, from Lausanne to Chillon. It took a Gallic gourmand, back in the eleventh century, to spot the vine-growing potential of this area. The Bishop of Lausanne, a native of Burgundy, got his monks to terrace the hillsides, build stone retaining walls along the terraces, and plant the grape vines. Lavaux vine-growers claim their wine gets its distinctive taste and quality from the fact that it receives the warmth of ‘three suns’—the sun in the sky, the sun reflected off the waters of the lake and the sun’s warmth from the stone retaining walls. Switzerland’s superb wines are among the country’s best-kept secrets—they are not well-known internationally because production is small and most of it is consumed by the Swiss themselves.

We drive through Lavaux’s beautiful heritage villages—St Saphorin, Rivaz, Epesses—to arrive at the home of a thirteenth-generation wine-maker, Patrick Fonjallaz, whose ancestor established the family vineyards, Clos de la Republique, in 1552. Patrick sits us down at his dining table, places four wine glasses and four bottles in front of me and begins his wine-tasting lessons. The first Chasselas wine I taste, Epesses Republique, is distinctly fruity; the next one, a St Saphorin, is more earthy—it’s grown in a different kind of soil. Then he pours me a deep yellow Passerille, a dessert or after-dinner wine, made from grapes that have been half-dried in the shade. “The flavours,” he tutors me, “are of quince, apricot, peach, orange.” I dutifully note all this down, but my head is beginning to spin. Finally he decants a Grand Cru 2009 Pinot Noir. I protest that I can’t drink any more. Patrick assures me I can: his wines have very low acidity—Chardonnays, for example, have seventy-five per cent more acidity—and so I can drink a lot without any ill effects. We refill our glasses, I stop taking notes, and conversation and laughter flow as spirits (literally) rise. Perhaps to gauge just how high we are, Patrick poses a riddle: “What walks with four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon, and three legs in the evening?” Stumped for an answer (solution at the end of this article), we totter off for lunch at the nearby Auberge de la Crochettaz, with its expansive view of Lake Geneva.

And here, we meet the ebullient, hospitable Norman Rodriguez, formerly of Siolim, Goa, who has lived and worked in Switzerland for the last thirty-five years. Norman has hit on a winning formula—there’s Indian food (in thalis if you want) for tour group Indians, and Swiss/French fare for locals. With Indian tourists to Switzerland having finally overtaken the Chinese, business is booming, and Norman has hired seven Indian chefs. His Chinese wife helps keep the restaurant running efficiently. My companions Pascale and Nicole tuck happily into daal, naan and masala grilled prawns, while I try his Coquilles St Jacques (scallops), done in classic French style, but with a clever desi twist of hara dhania.
Zurich is just three hours by train from Vevey, but it’s a startling change of scene, from the bucolic, laid-back atmosphere of the Swiss Riviera to the big-city hustle and energy of Switzerland’s wealthiest town. When you walk down Zurich’s main street, the Bahnhofstrasse, you’re literally walking on gold—the big Swiss banks have their gold reserves stored in vaults beneath this street. And you’re looking into the glittering shop windows of the world’s top jewellers, watchmakers, couturiers and, yes, chocolate-makers too. After a quick stop at the Confiserie Sprüngli—their macarons, known as Luxemburgli, are irresistible—we sit down to lunch at the Carlton restaurant, as famous for its wine cellar as its food. The cellar has been painstakingly built up by Markus Segmüller (“I’m a wine academic, not a sommelier”), who is a bit dismissive of the Lavaux wines as he extols the virtues of wines from Zurich and other German-speaking parts of the country. “Try this Stadt Zurich Barrique, which is quite like a Gewürztraminer,” he says, as he pours me a glass of fruity white wine to accompany a melt-in-the-mouth veal mousse with Madeira sauce. “Our Pinot Noir is superior, and so are the Petite Arvine and Fendant, fine white wines from the Valais region,” he maintains. In Markus’s wine cellar, I’m intrigued to see all the 990 bottles are stored standing up—“It’s been scientifically proven that there’s absolutely no need to lie down the bottles,” he says, “as long as your cellar has the right humidity and temperature of 17°C.” A hoary old wine-myth demolished.

“Angels” at Radisson Blu Angels Wine Tower (above); and the atmospheric Odeon Café. Facing page: Confiserie Sprüngli on Zurich’s arterial street Bahnhofstrasse

On my last day in Zurich we take a twenty-minute train ride up to the 869m Üetliberg mountain, for lunch at the Uto Kulm restaurant. The bracing mountain air whets our appetite for the excellent smoked salmon and cheese-filled ravioli. As I look out of the restaurant window, with its spectacular view of Zurich’s cathedral spires, its silvery Limmat river, and its glorious, crystal-clear lake, I feel a pang that in a few hours I will leave all this loveliness behind for the 45°C inferno that is Delhi in late May.
Lake Zurich or - SWITZERLAND

118 years). VFS charges extra. Apply for a 90-day visa costs 4,200 for agra-hotel. (Answer to Patrick Fonjallaz’s riddle: a human

WHERE TO EAT

ZURICH
Zurich Tourism runs a very helpful and friendly office at the main railway station. Stop in to collect brochures, maps or find a hotel that suits your budget.

WHERE TO STAY

I stayed at luxurious, uber-flexible Park Hyatt Zurich, with stylish modern décor and comfortable rooms. It boasts a bamboo grove in the middle of its foyer, museum-quality modern art on its walls, and is centrally located, a short walk from the Bahnhofstrasse (from CHF 550, park.hyatt.ch). The 5-star Wider Hotel is also an architectural masterpiece: nine historic houses in the heart of town have been ingeniously converted into a harmonious whole. If your pockets aren’t deep enough to stay here, at least have a drink in its beautiful library or bar (from CHF 650, widderhot.ch).

WHAT TO SEE & DO

Lake of Europe’s oldest vegetarian restaurant, Hiltl, in Zurich—dates back to the 19th century and serves hearty local specialties at reasonable prices. Try the Zurich Gschneiderei—walnut cream and wine sauce (gschneiderei.ch). Visit Odson Café/Bar, an atmospheric place on the banks of the Limmat. Among its famous former regulars: Lenin, Mussolini, Einstein (abtlch.ch). Clouds is a fashionable bistro/bar in Zurich West, on the 30th floor of a tower, with spectacular views of downtown Zurich (cloud.ch). At Radisson Blu Angels Wine Tower Bar, check in for your flight a couple of hours early, and watch the spectacular ‘new angels’ float around and perform acrobatics inside a glass tower as they fetch your drinks. There’s a show every hour, with LED lights (radissonbluhanzl.ch). Unter Ulm, at the top of Mount Gellifrey, is a great place for lunch, with its panoramic views of Zurich, the surrounding countryside and the distant Alps. Work off your lunch with a walk in surrounding forests (oklaho.ch). At Fischthube, have your evening aperitif overlooking Zurich’s lake (fischthube.ch).

WHAT TO DO

Take a cruise on Lake Zurich, on a boat run by the Lake Zurich Navigation Company. Lunch and dinner cruises are also on offer (zuerich.com or mg.ch). Drop in at the lovely Chinese Garden on the lakeside (a gift to Zurich from its twin city Kunming). Right next to it is the last house built by Le Corbusier, a minimalist structure with steel, anamorphic glass panels and a ‘-floating’ roof. It’s now a museum dedicated to his work (centredhous.ch). Visit the Zürichberg, a house with an exquisite stained glass windows by Marc Chagall on biblical themes. Feast your eyes on the truly outstanding collection of Indian miniature paintings at the Rietberg Museum, set amidst expansive gardens. They are also home to Nandini Mehta’s Gandhara and Chola sculptures (rietberg.ch).

Lunch at Europe’s oldest vegetarian restaurant, Hiltl, in Zurich