

When it comes to the pleasures of food and design, the Wälder people of the Bregenzerwald Valley are known for hewing to tradition without blocking out the modern world. The result? A new kind of pastoral paradise. By Sam Knight

AUSTRIA MODERNE

Photographs by Matt Hranek





Previous page, from left: A dessert of chocolate *Nougatknödel*, a sweet Austrian dumpling, with raspberry sauce at the Biohotel Schwanen in Bizau; the Bregenzerwald region is known for the high-quality dairy products of its grass-fed cows. **This page, from left:** The view toward Beza; the traditional shingled exterior of Gasthof Krone in Hittisau. **Right:** *Gebackenes Ei*—a fried soft-boiled farm egg—with an herb salad and smoky speck at the Biohotel Schwanen, where dishes that celebrate traditional ingredients are presented with a modernist flair.

ON MY third morning in Austria's picturesque Bregenzerwald, I left the Hotel Post, in Beza, before the clouds had lifted from the sides of the valley, and headed for the cable car station at the end of the road. As the cable car ascended into the trees, I turned and watched the Bregenzerwald spread out below me: long fingers of meadow and clusters of old villages tucked into the northern side of the Alps.

Bregenzerwald means Forest of Bregenz. It's named for the town in western Austria of roughly 30,000 people that sits below it, on the shores of Lake Constance (Bodensee in German), 75 miles from Zurich. Here in the mountains, Zurich feels far away. They are forest people, the *Wälder*, and in their harsh dialects, words can change in the space of a hillside. A little girl at one end of the valley is a *Schmelle*; a few miles away, she is a *Moatel*.

The *Wälder* used to be cut off from the outside world by trees, and although the valley has been cleared, there's an insular feeling thrumming through its old-world hamlets and villages. What is deeply unusual about the Bregenzerwald, and has been for hundreds of years, is that its people produce exquisitely innovative food and design. It is the sort of place where you find a storybook house in the woods beside a burbling brook—and down the road a modernist concrete home built into the side of a hill. Although this is essentially farm country, it's also an unlikely hotbed of talent, home to rising-star chefs, internationally renowned architects, and high-end furniture

designers plying their trades. In these woods, you are just as likely to find the future as the past.

How this Alpine valley came to be this way pretty much defies explanation, yet here's an attempt: In the seventeenth century, peasants and woodworkers from the Bregenzerwald began venturing out in summer to find work in northern Italy and Switzerland. In the snowy winter, they returned to study and hone their crafts. They were devout, relentless people, and they became some of the leading church-builders and stucco artisans in Middle Europe. A single village, Au—which even today is no more than a scattered hamlet high in the valley—produced an entire school of Baroque architects, the Au Academy, which was active in the eighteenth century. "They wanted to go forward, always to go forward," said Oskar Kaufmann, an architect from the region who specializes in coolly modern prefab structures, which were featured in a 2008 show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

The Bregenzerwald is still alive with the spirit of these forebears. Families have been here for centuries, dedicating themselves to ideals of self-sufficiency and originality and the task of making beautiful things. "It's not about who has the most money or the biggest car," Kaufmann explained. "The only thing that's important is what you do and how seriously you do it."

Take dairy farming. There are as many cows as there are people in the Bregenzerwald. The herds feed exclusively on grass and herbs, and the milk they produce is some of the finest in Europe. For centuries, the *Wälder* have sold their *Bergkäse*

STAY

Biohotel Schwanen
The contemporary mixes with the historic at this venerable property, and the restaurant serves hearty yet inventive dishes like artichoke soup garnished with strips of venison and, for dessert, dandelion mousse. KIRCHDORF 77, BIZAU; from \$200.

Gasthof Krone
At this family-owned hotel, the Nussbaumers pride themselves on time-honored hospitality and local dishes like venison goulash and trout from nearby Lake Constance. AM PLATZ 185, HITTISAU; from \$185. *Continued on page 86*





Clockwise from top left: The modern annex to the Hotel Post; a table setting at the Biohotel Schwanen; the light-filled contemporary dining room at the Romantik Hotel Das Schiff in Hittisau; an updated version of a classic Austrian dish—wild deer stew with mushrooms and celery root. **Right:** Chef-owner Helene Nussbaumer and sous-chef Michael Garcia Lopez of the Gasthof Krone.

(“mountain cheese”)—aromatic and nutty—to the best shops in Venice and Milan. If these people do something, they do it properly.

And yet as proud as they are of their past, they are equally dedicated to reinvention. On my first night, I drove to the Gasthof Krone, a nineteenth-century hotel in Hittisau (the 22 villages of the Bregenzerwald are like buds on a branch, each a few miles from the last). At the Krone, the pale-wood paneling of the Alte Stube, the old inn’s dining room, glowed; the windows were fringed with fine lace; a crucifix hung in the corner. “This table is as old as the house—176 years,” said Dietmar Nussbaumer, co-owner of the Krone, tapping the wood. I drank a dry Grüner Veltliner from southern Austria and ate roasted trout, caught in the Sonderbach, a nearby Alpine stream, and prepared by Nussbaumer’s wife, Helene. The food here, much like elsewhere in the valley, is mountain food: short on bread and long on freshwater fish, veal, venison, *Kaiserfleisch* (smoked pork), and cheese—often flavored with caraway, nutmeg, and thyme.

In 2007, Dietmar and Helene, whose family has owned the Krone for a century, undertook a major redesign using only local craftspeople. They did not have to compromise. Their architect, based just 15 miles away, was Bernardo Bader, who won the international Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 2013. All the new woodwork was made within a few hundred yards of the hotel. The result is a quiet, beautiful reimagining of an Alpine inn: pristine parquet; shutters that sigh when they close; modernist beds; walls of silver fir cut so fine that they required no oil or sanding.

UNTIL AROUND 2000, tourism in the Bregenzerwald was of the local tour bus variety. Most of the old guesthouses plied their customers with beer and buffets. It took a new generation of hoteliers, architects, and restaurateurs—many of whom had spent time abroad, like their ancestors—to find new ways to articulate the secrets and values of the forest. Susanne Kaufmann (Oskar’s sister and the owner of the Hotel Post) is one of those early adopters who realized that the Wälders’ way of life was as enticing as the mountains and forests which shaped it. In 1998, her brother added a striking wooden extension onto the hotel, which has been in the family since 1850. When the rest of the valley saw the result, they realized that the Kaufmanns were onto something.

Now, to spend time in the Bregenzerwald is to encounter a series of beguiling collisions between old and new, Alpine and international. In the village of Schwarzenberg, you walk among immaculate eighteenth-century *Wälderhäuser*

(“forest houses”) with hand-carved shingles the size of your palm, their porches painted blue and covered in stars. Just down the road, the village of Krumbach is punctuated with avant-garde bus shelters—white triangles, bare oak beams, a glass box with three chairs—designed by, among others, Wang Shu, winner of the 2012 Pritzker Architecture Prize. The Romantik Hotel Das Schiff, in Hittisau, has a new breakfast room that wouldn’t look out of place in Brooklyn’s burgeoning Greenpoint neighborhood. Everywhere, linkages can be found between the region’s taste for modernist design and its appreciation of simplicity: Both share roots in the Bregenzerwald’s respect for rigorous craftsmanship.

The culinary scene is landing in a similar sweet spot. At Irma, the Hotel Post’s restaurant (named for Susanne’s grandmother), the kitchen has jettisoned fussy food for traditional local ingredients, often served family-style. The next day, three villages away in Bizau, I was in the sleek Biohotel Schwanen, sipping prosecco and eating a salad of tender greens as intricate as a jeweled brooch. The hotel, now with a modern facade, has a restaurant

that has been serving lunch for 500 years and has been in the hands of the Moosbrugger family for generations. Emanuel Moosbrugger—33 and the heir apparent—recently returned to the Bregenzerwald after nine years in the United States, where he was a sommelier at Daniel in

New York and general manager of Corey Lee’s Benu in San Francisco. Coming home to work side by side with his mother in the restaurant, he was surprised to find that hers might be the most modern kitchen of all. Foraging mushrooms and harvesting wild herbs—the trend of the moment in haute cuisine—is what the Wälder have always done. The menu draws freely on local ingredients and whatever is in season, purchased directly from farmers in town—the dishes paired with Austrian wines, of course.

Back home in London, I thought of something Emanuel had told me. Since returning from the States, he has observed that it takes most visitors a few days to adjust to the isolated nature of the Bregenzerwald. “If people come here on vacation,” he said, “they really have to talk to each other.” The Wälder sometimes say things like this. They can come across as brusque. They rarely apologize. Over the course of many centuries, they have found a way to live, with great style, in their forested valley in the Alps, and they have done so by refusing to accept compromise in their buildings, their food, and their work. Spending time in the Bregenzerwald connects you to this life, and it makes you realize that perhaps this is how it should be. ♦



Right: *Felchen*, or lake perch—the catch of the day from Lake Constance—is presented tableside before cooking at Irma, the dining room in the Hotel Post. The area’s restaurants have returned to their roots, informing their menus with the local ethos of timeless simplicity rather than flashy international hotel cuisine.

STAY

Hotel Post

Built in the nineteenth century, the property has been in the same family for five generations. During facials and massages at the spa—a Zen-like modern addition designed by Oskar Kaufmann—practitioners use fragrant herbal serums and scrubs made with St. John’s wort, salvia, and chamomile, species that have grown wild in the mountains and valleys here for centuries. Irma, the hotel’s restaurant, serves updated versions of traditional Austrian dishes such as braised lamb shoulder and has a superb list of local wines. BRUGG 35, BEZAU; from \$180.

Romantik Hotel Das Schiff

This small inn across the street from the Krone offers wellness packages and has a shop that sells local jam, honey, and glassware. HEIDEGGEN 311, HITTISAU; from \$155.

MAP BY HAISAM HUSSEIN

