



PIT BUEHLER



Out of the box

When in Lucerne, meet the locavores

CHRISTINE McCABE

There's no need to wax lyrical about the scenic charms of Lucerne, Switzerland's most visited city. With a fairytale lakefront old town and snow-capped mountain backdrop, it's postcard perfect from every angle. And while chocolate-box clichés abound in Switzerland and most tourists tend to throw caution, and cholesterol counts, to the wind, subsisting on a diet of fondue, rosti and raclette, Lucerne affords really interesting culinary options with a focus on homegrown, handmade and freshly foraged.

And there could be nowhere more fecund or flower-strewn for a spot of hunter-gathering than Switzerland in spring. Think vegan strudels, dainty teas flavoured with alpine meadow flowers and cheeky herbaceous gins distilled in mountain cowsheds.

If you're in Lucerne on a Saturday or Tuesday set the alarm for 6am, grab a basket and sally forth to explore the city's farmers market (or *wochenmarkt*) where for more than seven centuries producers from nearby farms and from as far away as Paris have met to trade.

During my May visit the crowded marketplace is a dizzying cornucopia of top-notch spring fare — fat white asparagus, even fatter artichokes, strawberries as plump

as a Kardashian bottom, new potatoes, quail eggs, seed-filled breads, tangled egg noodles and massed cut flowers. The pretty stalls wind along both sides of the Reuss River, it's best to cross at the Spreuerbrücke, an ancient covered footbridge where the curious 17th-century Danse Macabre paintings adorning the pediments are a sober reminder of the brevity of life, no matter how many organic ventures and gluten-free loaves you devour.

Existential angst is not something I've encountered before at a farmers market, but help is at hand in the form of cream-topped coffee and a superior kuchen. The Poushe Strudelhaus folk travel from Zurich to sell their wonderful sweet and savoury strudels — try the poppy seed. And while you're in the area, drop into the gorgeous L'art du Thé (at Burgerstrasse 1), a haute salon of the leaf. Its proprietor Barbara Vogel-Hafiger spends part of each year roaming the globe hand-selecting the best and rarest teas. Be sure to pick up a tin of her AlpenChic, a fragrant blend incorporating Swiss alpine flowers and herbs.

Continue your foodie adventure by jumping a ferry across Lake Lucerne to one of the best restaurants in the region at the Park Hotel at Vitznau, a gleaming white palace rising above the lake shore like a vision from *The Great Gatsby*. Gutted and lavishly redecorated by its resident Austrian fund manager owner, Peter Puhrringer, the Park is rapidly establishing a formidable food reputation thanks in large part to its baby-faced chef, Nenad Mlinarevic, who heads the Michelin two-star Restaurant Focus. His menus represent a radical reinterpretation of Swiss cuisine and are resolutely locavore — stints at restaurants such as Copenhagen's Noma have honed Mlinarevic's foraging skills. You won't find any lobster, soy sauce or finger lime at Focus, he says; instead there's lake fish, asparagus in season and local herbs.

Bruno and Rebecca Muff and their Haldi Hof organic farm, above left and above; wine cellar, Park Hotel Vitznau, above right; PRISMA restaurant at Park Hotel Vitznau, above far right

"Using only local or Swiss produce can be limiting, but this just helps to make you more creative," says Mlinarevic, who gathers wild herbs and mushrooms on his morning run and preserves summer berries and fruit for the cooler months.

One of his favourite dishes features veal with 14 wild herbs, including sheep sorrel, yarrow, chickweed and delicate ramson flowers. He makes syrup from dandelions, experiments with floral and herbal infusions, and buys his venison and lamb from a local butcher.

"Swiss cuisine is often heavy, loaded with cheese and potatoes," Mlinarevic tells me. "What we make here couldn't be more different." And, one could add, labour-intensive. Mlinarevic commands six kitchens, 14 chefs and a wine cellar reputed to be worth more than \$35 million in this no-expense-spared, self-styled "health and wealth residence", where references to *lucere* are hardly subtle. The hotel's glass-sided lift well is decorated with oversized coins and there's a large statue of a bear and bull locked in combat on the front lawn.

Focus is open for dinner, but the hotel has a lovely alternative: the Michelin one-star PRISMA. Enjoy dreamy lake views across lawn so green you'll need sunglasses while tucking into a superior duck liver terrine or a simple but sensational local "spring" chicken served with white, green and baby asparagus, and topped with a dressing flecked with bacon aged in hay flowers.

Fifteen minutes from the Park Hotel, former IT whiz Bruno Muff, who sold his company to Google a decade ago, takes a more "down home" but no less fastidious approach to the locavore tradition at the utterly beguiling Haldi Hof, a sort of *The Good Life* meets *The Sound of Music* orchard of 7ha nestled between Mount Rigi and Lake Lucerne, and a go-to organic farm for Mlinarevic

Troubled and tragic history underpins born-again Berlin

THE FAMILY TOURIST

PENNY HUNTER



Among the stelae at the memorial

Our family of four is queuing to enter Berlin's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe when we are approached by one of the staff. She smiles, hands us a brochure, tells us the expected time we'll wait, then gently informs us it is recommended visitors be at least 14 years old.

She has raised an issue we had debated long and hard. Are our children — 10 and 11 — too young? Will the images and texts be too confronting? At what age do you allow children to know that humans are capable of extraordinary cruelty to others and that such cruelty can be wreaked on a scale beyond comprehension?

Reminders of Berlin's troubled history are everywhere. Shiny brass plaques dot the footpaths, marked with the names and fates of those sent to concentration camps. Sombre stone figures stand outside what was once the Jewish Cemetery; the Nazis destroyed the graves and used the land as a holding yard for the persecuted before deporting them. There are reminders of children's suffering and salvation in a bronze statue outside a train station depicting the contrasting fortunes of those rescued via the Kindertransport and those sent to their deaths. Buildings are still riddled with bullet holes from the final, formidable assault by the Russian army on the city in 1945. And then there's the Wall.

We've encountered all these sights while exploring this scarred yet vibrant city and they have prompted long discussions with our children. But now we stand in the queue at the memorial, our resolve shaken. In the end it is our daughter who helps make the decision. She reminds us of the books she has read — *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, *The Book Thief* and *Number the Stars* — and is adamant that the memorial is an essential part of our Berlin itinerary.

We decide to enter. At street level, the memorial has an imposing presence. The site is covered in more than 2700 concrete stelae of varying heights. Their grave-like shape is unmistakable, and walking among them gives a sense of the enormity of the tragedy we will soon learn more about. Inside the information centre, below ground, the atmosphere is quiet and respectful as visitors follow a timeline of the persecution of Europe's Jews after the National Socialists took power in 1933.

The rest of the centre is divided into four exhibition rooms. In the Room of Names, a recording of brief biographies of all known Jewish Holocaust victims is played continuously; to listen to the recording in its entirety would take more than six years.

Another room chronicles the fates of a diverse array of

Jewish families — their lives before, during and after persecution — while in another there are films, photos and audio recordings detailing the more than 200 sites where atrocities took place.

It is in the Room of Dimensions where we spend most time. Messages from Holocaust victims are illuminated in glass panels on the floor. We wander slowly and carefully, not wanting to tread on words of unimaginable despair and sorrow, written by adults and children facing a terrifying future.

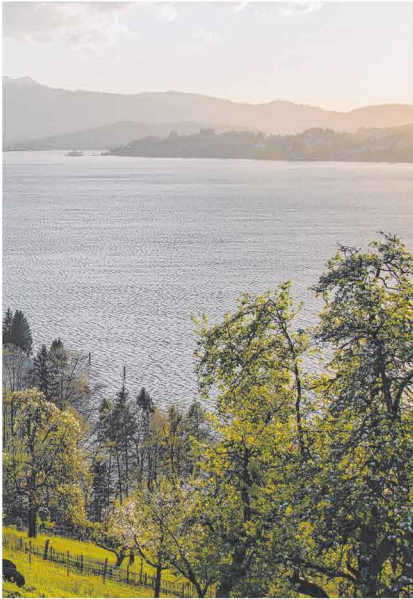
One, dated July 31, 1942, reads: "Dear father! I am saying goodbye to you before I die. We would so love to live, but they won't let us and we will die. I am so scared of this death... Goodbye forever. I kiss you tenderly. Yours, J."

For our kids, these letters — some handwritten and thrown from trains en route to the death camps — bring a personal perspective to a tragedy that until now had seemed abstract and unimaginable.

We leave the centre and find ourselves bathed in the Berlin sunshine casting long shadows between the concrete stelae. The children are subdued but not distressed.

Later, they tell us how incredibly grateful they are for their lucky lives.

• stiftung-denkmal.de/en/home



and other leading chefs. Turning their backs on the fast lane, Bruno and wife Rebecca make organic schnapps, gin, mustards, preserves and 20 types of vinegars in a collection of old farm buildings, lovingly detailed by Rebecca in a style best described as flea market chic. The tasting room is housed in a 200-year-old cowshed where visitors sit at a long, rustic table sipping outstanding gin from vintage glasses while chickens and peacocks wander by the open door and cowbells can be heard tinkling on the distant mountainside.



BEAT BRECHBUHL

The farm shop is irresistible with its dark, fruity aromas; there's a room devoted to handmade soaps and cosmetics, another to mustards and vinegars, and last, but not best of all, the mote-flecked still room, its shelves crammed with gin, "hiking water" and "single tree" schnapps. Bruno studied botany before buying the farm and his gins are infused with locally sourced floral or herbaceous elements. Many of the schnapps, including the strictly regional Rigi kirsch, are aged for up to five years to achieve a softer flavour, and are sold in handsome hiking flasks where the cap doubles as a shot glass, as well as hollow hiking sticks.

The farm lies on the famous 114km Waldstatterweg walking trail and is the perfect spot for trampers to take a break and refuel. "And if you make it to the top of Rigi, you can make a party together with your hiking stick," Bruno says, laughing.

His small team beavers away year-round sourcing herbs, flowers and fruits from neighbouring farms to create more than 300 products; the organic cosmetics line keeps them busy during the winter months.

"Quality is crucial," he says. "This is my passion and everyone here works with heart."

Armed with a bottle or two of alpine gin, continue your fairytale forage by jumping a century-old lake steamer from nearby Weggis back to Lucerne. Order coffee in the chandelier-lit first-class dining room and while

everyone enjoys those chocolate box alpine views you can take a surreptitious sip or two from your hiking stick.

Back in Lucerne the elegant Hotel Montana has opened an exciting kitchen club. The early 20th-century hotel is famous for its authentic art deco and cubist interiors and is connected to the lakefront by the shortest funicular in the world (one minute from top to bottom). The grand dining room and large terrace, claiming incomparable lake and mountain views, are popular drawcards, but the new multi-million-franc kitchen is set to become a destination in its own right. This impressive showpiece is connected to the dining rooms by escalators to speed service and features a fleet of gleaming cooking stations and a flotilla of copper pans circling the kitchen via a snaking conveyer belt.

Guests are welcome to join the kitchen team for aperitifs or book a chef's table, seating up to 20. Purpose built, this area of the kitchen operates like a private dining room with its own piano and dress-circle position overlooking the bustling stoves (cooking classes are also available). Downing a cocktail while watching someone else cook makes a fitting end to a day's foraging in and around Lake Lucerne, where even shopping for fruit and veg is so picturesque you could put it on a chocolate box.

Christine McCabe was a guest of Switzerland Tourism and Lucerne Tourism.



BEAT BRECHBUHL

Checklist

A first-class Swiss Travel Pass covers Switzerland by train, bus, boat and ferry, including the famous Glacier Express and Lake Lucerne's historic steamers, and provides free admission to about 500 museums. More: swisstravelsystem.com. The five-course "surprise menu" at PRISMA costs CHF130 (\$187). More: parkhotel-vitznau.ch. Haldi Hof is open seven days for tastings or lunch in the farm cafe. More: haldihof.ch.
 ● myswitzerland.com
 ● luzen.com
 ● hotel-montana.ch

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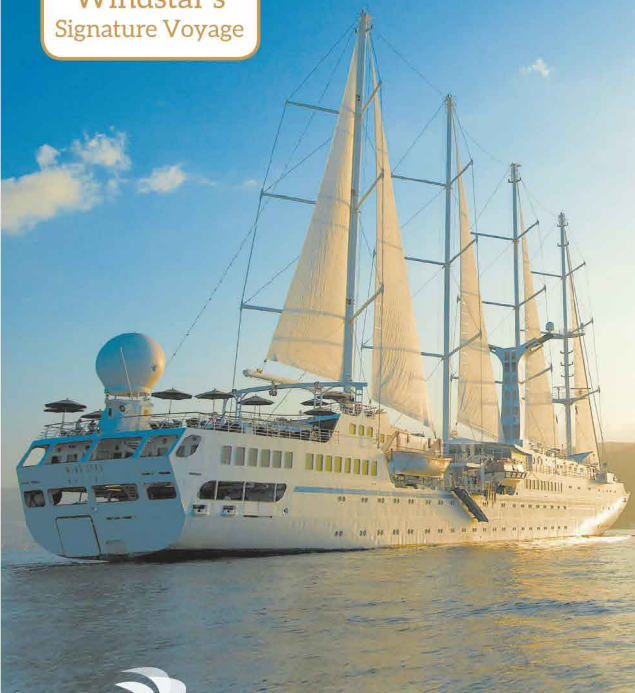
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