


THIS PAGE:

Ulla di Frassy, head chef at the rustic and bustling Châlet Etoile in Cervinia, Italy.

OPPOSITE PAGE:

The view toward Stockhorn, powder paradise.





LUNCH

at 8500 ft.

In Zermatt, Switzerland, the only things that match the epic beauty of the Alps are the majestic mountainside restaurants, where the golden *rösti*, dazzling fruit tarts, and après-ski refreshments are only accessible by trail



ABOVE: A lone skier takes in the view of the majestic Stockhorn before diving into miles of untracked powder; indulging in a well-earned lunch—and a bottle of Barbera—at **Baita Grand Sometta**, in Cervinia, Italy.
OPPOSITE: The Walliser Teller—a sampling of cured meats—from a local butcher shop in Zermatt.

FIRST SKIED IN ZERMATT IN 1979, when I was ten. My parents rented a small apartment at the edge of the village, a healthy hike up a winding path. The dollar was strong, but the budget was tight. Most nights, we ate in—spaghetti, with store-bought sauce. For lunch, we stocked up at the supermarket and picnicked on the deck of an abandoned hut near the foot of a glacier: crackers, *landjäger* sausage, *Hobelkäse* (a local cheese), le Parfait (liver pâté in a squeezable tube), blood oranges, and Toblerone. We acquired a taste for skiing where others had not. We became ravenous for untracked powder and high-mountain solitude.

Over the decades, we've kept going back—three generations now, with my kids, and my brother's. The village has a hold on us. The mountains surrounding it constitute a ski area so vast that we still find ourselves on runs we've never skied or even seen. You can ski over the border into Italy, into another galaxy of valleys and lifts. The enormity of it all makes Vail look like a sledding hill in Central Park. But then there are the meals. Life in these mountains is a skiable feast. We learned, years ago, that skiing in Zermatt really means skiing to lunch. The "morning," whether it be one lazy noonday groomer or a six-hour tour involving helicopters, ropes, and harnesses, typically ends in one of the several dozen rustic restaurants that are strewn about the slopes like islands in a frozen sea. Their abundance is dizzying. You can only take them on one at a time. The vacation is never long enough.

American skiers might need to recalibrate their idea of lunch. This isn't a foil-wrapped burger on a plastic tray, or a bag of Chili Cheese Fritos, with you sitting on your helmet on the floor. It's Alpine perch, Dover sole, vitello tonnato, osso buco, pear-Parmesan fagottini with walnuts, Gorgonzola, and honey. Or it's just *rösti mit*

spiegelei und speck—a golden, sautéed pancake of shredded potatoes, topped with bacon and a fried egg. It's a two-hour indulgence, in a tiny paneled *gaststube* or on a crowded deck, looking out on some of Europe's highest peaks. It's hard to say which is more dazzling, the scenery or the food, or to imagine that you'd find any ski area in the world with a better selection of either, much less both at once.

DAYS START EARLY. The church bells in the middle of town start gonging around 6:00 a.m. Peel back the curtain and there's the Matterhorn, its hooked peak catching the glow of sunrise—a tremendous spectacle, despite its status as a gift-shop cliché. Where you have lunch determines (*continues on page 104*)





YOU CAN SKI OVER THE BORDER INTO ITALY,
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AND LIFTS. THE ENORMITY OF IT ALL MAKES VAIL
LOOK LIKE A SLEDDING HILL IN CENTRAL PARK.

*The glacially fed
Matter Vispa River,
which runs through
the town of Zermatt,
elevation 5,276 feet.*



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT, TOP TO BOTTOM: Lunch at Fluhalp, elevation 8,500 feet, in Zermatt; the sign for Franz and Heidi's Findlerhof, which translates roughly to Stop here and eat, or you're crazy; the fagottini di pere con Gorgonzola, miele, e noci at Châlet Etoile; après-ski shots; Luciano Gerali, chef at Baita Grand Sometta; the puff pastry-topped Steinpilzsuppe (mushroom soup) at Bergrestaurant Blatten; a snow-covered carriage; cremeschnitte from Zum See; a bombolone with wild raspberry grappa at Grand Sometta; the cable car to Klein Matterhorn; rabbit pâté from Les Neiges d'Antan; a regular at Grand Sometta; on the bridge over the Vispa; lunchtime at Fluhalp, sunglasses required; a sign warning skiers to beware of crevasses; the wood-fire grill at Le Gitan.





RÖSTI WITH FRIED EGGS



4 SERVINGS Rösti is a large potato pancake made famous by the Swiss. This version omits the speck, but feel free to add a slice under the cheese. Chilling parboiled potatoes makes the grating step easier.

- 3 russet potatoes (about 1½ lb.)
- Kosher salt
- 6 Tbsp. (¾ stick) unsalted butter, divided
- Freshly ground black pepper
- 4 oz. raclette or Gruyère cheese, sliced
- 4 large eggs
- Chopped flat-leaf parsley

Place potatoes in a large saucepan, add cold water to cover, and season generously with salt. Bring to a boil; reduce heat and simmer until the tip of a paring knife slides easily about ½" into potatoes, 8–10 minutes. Drain potatoes and let cool. Chill until firm, about 2 hours.

Preheat oven to 300°. Peel potatoes. Using the large holes of a box grater, grate potatoes. Melt 4 Tbsp. butter in a 12" ovenproof skillet over medium-low heat. Add potatoes. Season with salt and pepper; press gently to compact. Cook, occasionally shaking pan to loosen, until bottom is golden brown and crisp, 15–20 minutes.

Slide rösti onto a plate. Carefully invert skillet over plate and flip to return rösti to pan, browned side up. Dot 1 Tbsp. butter around edge, allowing it to melt around and under rösti. Season with salt and pepper and cook until second side is golden brown and center is tender, 10–15 minutes longer.

Top rösti with cheese and bake until cheese melts, 5–8 minutes.

Meanwhile, melt remaining 1 Tbsp. butter in a large nonstick skillet over medium-low heat. Crack eggs into skillet and cook until whites are just set, about 4 minutes.

Cut rösti into quarters, top with eggs, and garnish with parsley.

(continued from page 100) where, in the vastness, you will ski. And so the phone calls go around. Lunch at Zum See? Okay: Meet at 8:15 at the base of the gondola to Furi, at the southern end of town.

The trip up takes almost an hour. The last leg, a vertiginous tram ride over an ice fall, takes you to the highest lift station in the Alps. You walk through a tunnel to see mountains stretching halfway to the Mediterranean—these are the snows that water the vineyards of the Piedmont. From here, depending on how you go, it can take an hour or more to ski down to Zum See.

Not far above the town of Zermatt, a detour cuts left, through some larch trees, to a tiny old farming hamlet, where Max and Greti Mennig have operated **Restaurant Zum See** (pronounced Tzoom ZAY) since 1984. You leave your skis by a trough and follow a path of mud, straw, and snow through ancient barns made of sun-stained larch, with slate roofs covered in lichen. The restaurant occupies a three-story wooden house that dates back to the 16th century. Inside there's a snug dining room with low ceilings, tiny windows, and, on a shelved sideboard, an arsenal of glistening fruit tarts and rare Swiss and Italian wines. Outside, the seating sprawls from a stone patio out into a kind of tiered plaza amid the barns. Waitresses dash about, a whirl of toil and charm. Capacity is elastic: Markus, the owners' son, who apprenticed with Daniel Boulud in New York City, may suddenly bring a table out of a shed and position it in some corner of the barnyard, as though preparing a picnic for a rusticated prince.

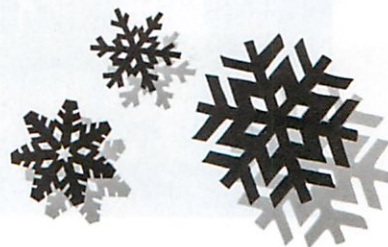
Max's kitchen measures just 129 square feet, out of which, on a busy day, there may materialize 250 meals. He and his kitchen staff of four Portuguese cooks make everything on the premises—pasta, ice cream. Max, a trim and self-possessed German, started out as a butcher, and he still sometimes breaks down large cuts himself. He serves a lot of kidneys, liver, and sweetbreads. He is also a wizard with seafood. Max's Dover sole is a popular delicacy. So is his Provençal fish soup, every portion made *à la minute*. One of the remarkable things about the mountain restaurants of Zermatt is the seafood, which arrives fresh from Zurich every morning. (You learn not to be cowed by the sight of mus-sels in the mountains.) It can feel like a

cop-out to revert to peasant fare like *käseschnitte* or *rösti*, but they are irresistible. *Käseschnitte* consists merely of a thick slice or two of toasted bread soaked in wine, topped with a heavy layer of Fontal or Emmenthal cheese and broiled in a crock pan. It may come with bacon, ham, or a fried egg. Zermatt is no place to lower your LDL.

Max's desserts are famous. People call ahead to reserve a slice of the *creme-schnitte*, a rich wedge of crème sandwiched between baked puff pastry. One afternoon, I watched him make apple strudel. He spread out the dough on a tin table at the center of the kitchen—onto which one cook ladled melted butter and another laid chunks of seasoned apples. With a linen cloth, Max rolled it up like a giant joint. He twisted four strudels in 15 minutes.

The biggest challenge in Zermatt, dinner-wise, is reviving your appetite. Between the extremes of the white-hat haute cuisine at the Mont Cervin Palace and the crepe stall across the street, there's a seemingly endless range of possibilities: old taverns with waitresses in dirndls, molecular gastronomy, sushi. For cheese fondue and raclette (a local cheese that is melted under a flame or a lamp and then scraped off the wheel and plated, with new potatoes and pearl onions), there is **Whymper-Stube**, in the lower level of the Hotel Monte Rosa, where Edward Whymper, an Englishman, plotted the first ascent of the Matterhorn, in 1865. Whether or not you follow his route, your clothes will smell of cheese for a month.

Another local specialty is meat grilled over an open fire in the middle of the dining room. At **Le Gitan**, the meat—rack of lamb, veal, beef filet—comes in shifts, each serving accompanied by a lethal potato gratin that necessitates an after-dinner stroll through the village to look the other overeaters up and down. The streets are narrow, shrouded, carless. Little electric carts and taxis zip soundlessly around, and horse-drawn carriages clomp by, but it's a *spaziergang* town.





FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: The daily menu, scrawled in chalk, at the bone-warming **Bergrestaurant Blatten** in Zermatt; at **Fluhalp**, golden, crispy-edged rösti, topped with eggs and chives, is enough to power you through the rest of your afternoon on the slopes.

IT CAN BE A SPAZIEREN MOUNTAIN, too. Growing up, my brother and I called it *Zer-walk*. Over the years, spiffy new lifts have made it easier to get around, but to find untracked snow, we still often have to hike a bit. We learned to do this as kids off the Gornergrat, a summit facing the Monte Rosa, the highest mountain in Switzerland. The old way of getting there was to take the cog train up from the village, which put us in a position to hike out along a series of ridges to ski the steeper north-facing gullies and then to head over to the gentler Sunnegga-Unter Rothorn area near noon, as the slopes facing the sun softened up. More to the point, this plan allowed us to have lunch in the summer-farming settlement of Findeln, where there are a half-dozen restaurants.

We usually ended up at the one that used to be called Hans and Gerda's and is now (no joke) Franz and Heidi's—or technically, **Findlerhof**, owned by Franz and Heidi Schwery. The place is hardly marked. You come to a cluster of barns and descend a narrow path on foot, with an old rope for a banister. A gnarled

stump points you to a deck thrust out over a gorge like the prow of a ship, bow pointing toward the Matterhorn. From here you can scan some classic descents—or just watch the steep stairs that lead to the Schwerys' kitchen, which Franz and his staff navigate while toting plates of improbable fare: goose-liver terrine with a gooseberry marmalade, tuna tartare, pasta with mussels.

Franz, dressed in an old deerskin vest with buttons cut from antlers, walks up to his restaurant from Zermatt every morning at 6:30 a.m. He has worked as a mountain guide and for many years was the keeper of the Hörnlihütte, the remote refuge where climbers spend the night before continuing up the classic route to the Matterhorn summit. He can seem a little surly, perhaps because he is merely a third-generation Zermatter, and thus, by local standards, something of an outsider. "I'm not one of the families," he says. Or maybe it's because Franz and Heidi are forced to brush past each other on those steep stairs a hundred times a day. Whatever the case, it works. The quiche with onions, bacon,

leeks, cheese, and scallions might seem, after a Glühwein or two, to be a metaphor for a restaurant marriage.

A SUNNY, WINDLESS DAWN: Today we go to Italy. The run down from the Klein Matterhorn to Cervinia is seven miles long. The border isn't patrolled or even marked, but something changes when you ski across it. The sunglasses are different. Some of the Swiss severity gives way.

Along the side of the trail, at about 9,100 feet, I stopped at a tiny cabin called the **Baita Grand Sometta**. Inside there is a cluttered counter, where you can buy candy or orange soda and order such muscular specialties as *sottofiletto ai funghi* (veal rump roast with mushrooms) or a *stinco al forno* (roasted pork leg), which you eat on paper plates at a handful of tables inside. It seemed a bit much for 10:00 a.m. The chef, Luciano Gerali, a dolorous looking gent in a floppy chef hat, came out of the kitchen. He and his daughter Anita bring all their supplies up each morning by snowmobile. They offered me *uova sometta*—Italian, apparently, for "stroke on a plate":



LAMB CHOPS + SPINACH + TURNIP PURÉE



4 SERVINGS The lamb roasts on a bed of thyme to infuse the meat.

- 1½ lb. turnips, peeled, cut into 1" pieces
- Kosher salt
- ½ cup heavy cream
- 3 tsp. olive oil, divided
- 2½ lb. rack of lamb (1 or 2 racks), bones frenched
- Freshly ground black pepper
- 5 sprigs thyme, divided
- 1 cup dry Marsala
- 1 garlic clove, peeled
- 2 bunches flat-leaf spinach, trimmed

Preheat oven to 400°. Cook turnips in a large saucepan of boiling, salted water until tender, 10–15 minutes. Drain. Return to pan; add cream. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer until cream coats turnips, about 4 minutes. Purée turnip mixture in a food processor or with an immersion blender until smooth. Cover and keep warm.

Meanwhile, heat 1 tsp. oil in a large ovenproof skillet over medium-high heat. Season lamb with salt and pepper. Cook fat side down until brown, 5–8 minutes.

Turn lamb over. Tuck 4 thyme sprigs under; place in oven. Roast until an instant-read thermometer inserted into center registers 125° for medium-rare, 15–25 minutes. Let rest on a plate for 10 minutes.

Drain fat from skillet; add Marsala. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat; simmer, stirring and scraping up browned bits from bottom of skillet, until reduced by half, 5–8 minutes.

Meanwhile, heat remaining 2 tsp. oil in a large skillet over medium heat. Add garlic and remaining thyme sprig; stir until beginning to brown, about 1 minute; discard garlic and thyme sprig. Add spinach by the handful, tossing and allowing it to wilt slightly between additions. Season with salt and pepper. Cook until tender, about 4 minutes.

Cut lamb between bones into chops and serve with spinach, turnip purée, and Marsala sauce.



THIS PAGE: Baby lamb chops with spinach and turnip purée at the elegant *Les Neiges d'Antan*, in Cervinia, Italy.
OPPOSITE: A happier-than-he-looks Saint Bernard at the Rothorn, which boasts striking views of the Matterhorn.

two fried eggs, ham, and Fontina cheese. I had an espresso instead. When I got up to go, Anita made me take a *bombolone*, a fried-dough ball filled with chocolate cream. It was still warm. I ate it as I sped down the groomed run, trailing powdered sugar.

Later that morning, we skied into Cervinia, Italy. A van took us to a hotel down the valley called *Les Neiges d'Antan*, which translates to “the snows of yesteryear.” The owner, Ludovico Bich, whose great uncle was the first to ascend the Matterhorn’s east and south walls, led us down to his wine cellar. Tucked away in one corner of it, there was a giant exposed slab of serpentine rock, the color of jade, glazed with a skein of glacial water. The hotel had gone up around it. “That’s the secret of my cellar,” Ludovico said. “It’s what keeps very long my wines.”

Ludovico led us out to a patio out back. He pointed out the smoker, fired by larch cones, which he used to smoke trout. He opened a magnum of Barbaresco and rolled out an antipasti trolley: beef tongue, a homemade ricotta, anchovies with salsa verde, and a dozen other wonders. He served an Aostan peasant soup called *la scuppa à la Valpellinente*—cabbage and stale bread soaked in broth,

smothered with Fontina cheese, and baked—and cut wedges out of a homemade rabbit-liver terrine, wrapped in lardo. Then he brought out a pasta plate, divided in three, featuring tagliatelle with porcini mushrooms, pork-and-beef ravioli, and exquisitely tender gnocchi with bacon, radicchio, soy sauce, and cream. “These are very typical things,” Ludovico said. “No stylish.” It was true, maybe, that each thing, on its own, was primitive, distinct, but all together it was like a passage in an epic about the feast of a mountain king.

When it was over, we drank grappa that had been made by his cousin, then began the long journey back to Zermatt: gondola, gondola, tram, ski. The light was golden, the shadows long, the mountains impossibly grand. My sons and their cousins zipped around us, looking for jumps, oblivious to the view. We stopped. My father pointed with a pole toward a coveted snowfield beneath the Äschhorn, and then, for the benefit of the kids, began to tick off, as he had for us years before, the names of the peaks. You could map, in this immense panorama, a lifetime of runs and meals. ■

Nick Paumgarten is a staff writer for The New Yorker.



ALPINE ADVENTURE 101

WHEN TO GO: December through April. The exceptionally high altitude and heavy glaciation result in a longer winter ski season than in most of Europe.

GETTING THERE: From Geneva, transfer to Switzerland's famously efficient rail service for a three-hour

ride through the Rhône Valley. Finally, at Visp, take an hour-long train to Zermatt.

WHERE TO STAY: If you're going all out, the 19th-century **Hotel Monte Rosa** (from \$390 per night) is European luxury par excellence. The more casual **Hotel Bahnhof**

(from \$75 per night) is a quaint, quirky backpacker-style hotel.

HIRE A GUIDE: The American expats at **Epic Europe** have spent the past decade adventuring and eating in the Alps. They can book everything from ski and bike guides to tours of vineyards and cheese caves.

HIT THE MOUNTAIN: Zermatt has options for both easy skiing and hardcore adventure. Lift tickets run around \$80 per day, ski and boat rentals about \$60 per day. —AMIEL STANEK

For information on all the restaurants and hotels in this story, see Sourcebook, page 118.