

# In the valley of tall, Tyrolean pork gourmets

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ternational culinary map.

Although there are several small speck factories in Alto Adige, almost every farmer also makes speck for family consumption. By a special dispensation that dates from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, about a dozen farmers are permitted to serve meals to the public in October and November, and I was determined to eat at Johannser Hof, Georg Brunner's family farm where he is reputed to make some of the best old-time speck.

Getting there isn't easy. The farm sits on Chiusa hiking trail number 4, also known as Erzweg St-Anna. Roads in these alpine valleys are often rudimentary (the trail leads off the Villandro road), but the walking trail system has been around practically since the famous Ice Man fell into a crevice about 5,200 years ago. (He's preserved in a deep-freeze room at the archeological museum in nearby Bolzano/Bolzen.)

I was not the only one following my nose to Johannser Hof. Brunner gave a tour to a handful of us waiting for a table inside his 800-year-old farmhouse. He raises only a few hogs each year, curing the whole boned leg rather than just the ham. He marinates them for several days in a stone vat in a mixture of rock salt, rosemary, bay leaves, and juniper berries before hanging them in the smoke room just off the kitchen. Walking into the browned room made my mouth (and eyes) water. It smelled like bacon.

From there, Brunner led us to a cave dug deep into the earth. "This room was old when my grandfather used it," he said. "It keeps the perfect temperature and moisture." The hams hang here for a minimum of six months, shrinking slightly and developing flavor. He pointed to the faintly pink fat along a cut edge. "That is a sign of proper curing," he said. "Too much smoke makes it yellow."

The proof was in the tasting. I sat with my fellow culinary pilgrims at a plain wooden table while Brunner's family members brought out freshly baked bread, a block of aged farmhouse cheese (they also keep milk cows), and pitchers of fresh apple cider. Brunner diced the fatty portions of the speck and made paper-thin slices of the meatier sections, each with a thin edge of spicy rind. The texture was more substantial than prosciutto, the flavor somewhere between bacon and ham, but more subtle than either — a complex taste definitely worth celebrating.

Indeed, on the first weekend of October, the low-key farm visits are completely upstaged by the Speckfest in Santa Maddalena, where the center of the village consists of little more than an 18th-century country church and its adjacent sacristy, a schoolhouse, and one farmstead — against the backdrop of the Geisler Range of the Dolomites. A long green valley spills out below, and the festival takes place on the single plot of flat land for miles around.

The two-day event celebrates South Tyrolean farm life, begin-



In the Val di Funes region of Northern Italy, a vista sweeps across the Geisler Range of the Dolomite Mountains. At Speckfest in Santa Maddalena, a ceremonial shroud has fallen to reveal a Hapsburg eagle covered in slabs of speck. In Villandro, Georg Brunner slices some of the speck for which he is renowned.

PHOTOS BY DAVID LYON/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE



ning on Saturday with livestock judging of sheep and cattle (it's hard to herd your pigs over the mountains), and demonstrations of farm skills. Many people show up in traditional Tyrolean garb, wearing lederhosen, dirndls, and farmers' aprons. The big draw, of course, is the food tent, offering beer and wine and all the potato salad, cole slaw, noodles, dumpplings, and fried apples that anyone could eat.

By the time I arrived on Sunday afternoon, people were streaming up the steep hill from the lower parking lot. (Tyroleans stroll up steep hills at a pace we would call jogging.) Five euros (about \$8) seemed a paltry price for full-scale immersion in the mountain culture. The ticket-taker warned me to hold onto my stub.

I waded into the crowd of German-speaking Italian ham fans. An oompah band played for a few minutes, followed by an accordionist. Somewhere on the distant stage a rustic comic told jokes in a mountain dialect so thick that I couldn't understand a word but could predict the punch line by his rhythm. I imagined the stories went along the lines of "a wolf, a sheep, and a shepherd walked into a beer garden..."

Sitting down at one of dozens of long tables, I placed an order with a dirndl-clad maiden and

soon had my own pitcher of beer and platter of fried apples, potato salad, and about a half-pound of sliced speck. The Speck Queen and her court (complete with sashes and tiaras) sat exhausted at their own table, tossing back steins of beer and nibbling cubes of speck. I decided these Tyroleans were my kind of people, even if they were really tall.

But I'd hardly gobbled down my first plate of speck when the announcer exhorted the crowd to circle the small stage as young giants in leather shorts and peaked caps stomped around in time with an accordion tune, took turns walking each other like wheelbarrows, and then assembled a wooden table to toss one of their own high into the air. It was exceedingly... folkloric. The next thing I knew, they had disassembled the table into stilts and clomped off the stage.

Flying, stomping farmers were but a prelude. The crowd rushed to the other side of the festival grounds for the unveiling of a towering statue covered in white sheets emblazoned with the Speck Alto Adige logo. It was guarded by two lines of men in red jackets, Three Musketeers hats, lederhosen, and embroidered cummerbunds. The unveiling couldn't take place until the mayor (or maybe the alderman), and then the out-

going and incoming presidents of the Speck Consortium spoke. Finally the queen tugged at a rope and slowly, slowly, slowly (the accordionist could have played a bump-and-grind) the drapery fell, revealing a silhouette of a Hapsburg eagle outlined against the afternoon sun. It was entirely covered in 2-inch-thick slabs of speck.

I was dumbfounded by the sight of so much ham stapled against the sky. The Val di Funes obviously knew what was coming. They oohed and aahed — and promptly formed a line. One by one they came forward, each celebrant surrendering his ticket stub for a slab of speck. Feeling a little like a child dwarfed among adults, I joined the queue and got my own ration of the rasher.

I was, as my Kentucky grandfather used to say, in hog heaven.

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SOURCE: ESRI GLOBE STAFF

## If you go . . .

**Speckfest 2008**  
Oct. 4-5

### Where to stay and eat

**Hotel Castel Steinbock**  
San Stefano 38, Villandro  
011-39-0472-843-111  
zumsteinbock.com  
Mountaintop village inn overlooking the 10th-century Villandro monastery features open, breezy rooms in modern alpine decor. Chef-owner Hannes Pignater applies his expertise to local food specialties. Rooms during Speckfest are \$160-\$180. Half board (breakfast, and dinner with wine) is available for \$40 per person more.

**Maso Johannser Hof**  
Am Erzweg 25, Villandro  
011-39-0472-847-995  
Open every afternoon in October and November for farmhouse meals and speck sales. Tasting of breads, cheeses, and speck \$16 per person.

**Information**  
**Val di Funes Tourist Office**  
San Pietro 11, Val di Funes  
011-39-0472-840-180  
villnoess.com