

Snow Magazine - Winter 2009

PERFECT PLACES

french paradox

IN SAINTE-FOY TARENTAISE, SMALL CAN BE SPECTACULAR | BY PATRICK THORNE



IF THERE'S ONE THING THE FRENCH KNOW, IT'S AMBIENCE. They have, in fact, cornered the market on the word used to describe this otherwise indescribable quality.*

But the dirty secret of French ski resorts — the enemy of ambience — is overdevelopment. As France's famed winter playgrounds have earned reputations for having some of the world's best skiing, they have become big and crowded and bereft of the very thing that attracted us to begin with. And once ambience is gone, nothing can bring it back.

You can, however, preserve it. Case in point: Sainte-Foy Tarentaise, an unspoiled French village with a little — but surprisingly good — almost-private ski area. Located just off the road that connects one of the world's biggest ski areas, Paradiski, to another, the world-famous Espace Killy (home to Tignes and Val d'Isère), Sainte-Foy's pistes are linked to theirs by an exchangeable lift ticket, but no lifts.

The mountain itself claims a mere four chairlifts, which serve an underutilized ski area of 15 runs and 3,500 feet of vertical. At just half the vertical of its gargantuan neighbors and a tiny fraction of their terrain, Sainte-Foy's slopes are quiet, its powder beautifully untracked.

"Sainte-Foy offers some of the best off-piste in the Alps, without crowds," notes Marianne Brechu, the former French downhill

The chic design and creature comforts of Yellowstone Lodge help make Sainte-Foy one of France's hidden gems.

team member and free-ride champion who organizes private powder-ski touring and heli-skiing through Elite Ski Team.* There are also groomed trails for all ability levels, right up to the steep black piste No. 2, the

ominously named Dark Crystal. If, heaven forbid, the Alps face a weak snowfall, the resort has 100 percent snowmaking coverage. And dodgy French ski lodging — the bane of the smaller resorts — is not a problem here, courtesy of the [Yellowstone Lodge](#).*

The best chalet on the hill — thanks to a resident chef of French quality, an on-call chauffeur, and a talented masseuse — [Yellowstone](#) recently got better with the addition of a helicopter pad (illegal in France, heli-skiing is quite legal just over the border in Italy).

The helipad is just 150 feet from the lodge (turn left at the front door) and two Italian bases — La Thuile and Val Grisenche — are just a five-minute flight away, which opens up a massive range of terrain. From either, the day's last run brings you from the border back to the Sainte-Foy valley, where you can ski down through wilderness to end your day in one of the lovely surrounding villages. In neighboring Le Miroir, for instance, you can enjoy drinks or a meal a world away from the ski crowds at the traditional Chez Marie.*

But you may understandably want to race back to the [Yellowstone](#), to soak in a hot tub as you gaze across the valley to magnificent snowcapped peaks, sipping a hearty French red and enjoying the attention of its staff. And ambience by the bucketful. ●

COURTESY YELLOWSTONE LODGE (3)

more butter before being topped with powdered sugar and brought to the table with some local jam of plum or mountain cranberry. When combined with shaky legs after a long morning of off-piste, *Kaiserschmarrn* quite often results in the cab being called again for a trip back to the hotel in St. Anton. * Though, to be fair, the layout of the restaurant means that almost every room is private. In one case, a room cantilevered from an interior balcony seats exactly two, and the waiter must stand in the doorway.

* Bordeaux are the stars here. After World War II, the chateaux there stopped producing large-format bottles. In 1981, Hospiz owner Adj/Werner persuaded them to reinstitute the practice, filling his cellar and igniting a passion among wine collectors.

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GOING TO EXTREMES (PAGE 52)

* Most icewines are made from riesling, vidal, or cabernet franc, all hearty grapes that can withstand winter's extreme temperatures. In a recent tasting of a dozen Ontario icewines, *SNOW* found six that blew us away.

Inniskillin Riesling 2007; \$75 (300 ml). Intense flavors of bright apricot and tropical pineapple, with excellent balance between sweetness and acidity. This wine is a perfect pairing for a goat-cheese soufflé or salty blue cheese. Impress guests by serving it as a post-brunch "dessert."

Stratus Riesling Icewine 2007; \$40 (187 ml). Aromas of ripe apple and melon followed by a luscious, almost liqueur-like feel. It has a long finish with lingering stone-fruit flavors. Serve as a stellar finish to a dinner party, paired with an apple tart.

Inniskillin Vidal Gold 2006; \$75 (375 ml). Candied-fruit nose and dried apricot flavors. This icewine's palate-cleansing acidity makes it a versatile pairing for savory fare like rich patés or foie gras. At a cocktail party, it would also be stunning with robust canapés or salty nuts.

Château des Charmes Vidal 2006; \$26 (200 ml). Ripe apple and dried fruit aromas, with medium acidity and a long, pleasant finish. This wine is the ideal complement to an intimate evening, savored fireside with a partner.

Inniskillin Cabernet Franc 2007; \$95 (375 ml). Brilliant red color with aromas of raspberries and

cream. This wine is sensual on the palate, with a long, smooth finish. Pair with bittersweet molten chocolate cake; also exquisite sipped solo.

Legends Cabernet Icewine 2008; \$65 (375 ml). Intense red berry aromas and flavors. With its vibrant, tawny-pink color, this wine looks as lovely as it tastes. It has enough acidity to cut through a rich, savory dish like seared foie gras with berry coulis. Also a fine pairing for berry-topped crème brûlée or chocolate desserts.

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PERFECT PEARING (PAGE 56)

Makes 1
As served at Hotel Farinet's Lounge Bar, Verbier, Switzerland

Xanté Hot Apple

6 oz. fresh apple juice
2 oz. Xanté liqueur, at room temperature

Simmer juice on stovetop until steaming. Pour hot apple juice into a large mug, then add Xanté. Stir and serve immediately.

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PEAK ENERGY (PAGE 59)

* Snowwater Heli-Skiing Inc., 866/722-7669; snowwater.com
* So named by the first group to ski it. The author was part of the second.

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FRENCH PARADOX (PAGE 64)

* Its closest English synonym, the Greek-derived "atmosphere," means, roughly, "vapor circle," and this airiness somewhat captures the ineffable quality (the "je ne sais quoi") we associate with ambiance. Atmosphere, of course, diminishes as altitude rises, and thus exposes itself as a poor metaphorical option for this magazine's subject matter.

* As with all things Sainte-Foy, "small and personal" also means limited availability, so book early. Elite Ski Team, 0033 (0) 6 10 90 76 78; eliteskiteam.com.

* [Yellowstone Lodge, Sainte-Foy Tarentaise](http://YellowstoneLodge.Sainte-FoyTarentaise.com), +44 (0)20 8877 8822; yellowstoneskilodge.co.uk. France's Yellowstone Lodge is in no way affiliated with Montana's private Yellowstone Club, and is thus uninvolved in that imbroglio (which is a fine Italian word, yes?). Other lodging is available in the valley, both on the hill and in surrounding towns. For more information, contact the Sainte-Foy Tarentaise Tourist Office, +33 (0)4 79 06 95 19; saintefoy-tarentaise.com.
* Chez Marie, Le Miroir, +33 (0)