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Austria

The height of fine dining in the Alps

Forget about the miles of fantastic skiing — the slopes of the Zillertal Valley offer visitors a gastronomic feast, says **Nick Dalton**

I have just drunk a test tube full of tea with an unspecified alcoholic kick, accompanied by a melon chunk wrapped in prosciutto and coated in crispy caramel, a bit like a toff's toffee-apple. Now I'm nibbling turbot with what many would regard an arcane combination — champagne sauce and beetroot, topped with a touch of caviar.

It's as modern as they come, yet I'm surrounded by decorative plates on the wood-panelled walls and embroidered cushions on the rustic chairs. And the waitresses are wearing dirndls, those flouncy, lacy Austrian dresses.

As dinner — and a 14-course one, at that — in a ski hotel, it's an eye-opener. Austria used to be a land where chunks of meat, mostly pork, reigned supreme, and the vegetarian option wasn't really an option.

Not so now in the Zillertal Valley, less than an hour from Innsbruck, which has a plateful of ski areas, including the long-time British favourite, Mayrhofen. It's a world where the organic and the homely meet with a fresh, imaginative twist.

I'm high up in the Hochzillertal area, at Hochfügen, a cluster of ski-in, ski-out hotels, where the Hotel Lamark is owned and run by the chef Alexander Fankhauser. He has a five-night-a-week show on Austrian TV and a 17/20 rating from the Gault Millau restaurant guide, reckoned

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to equal a star from its rival Michelin, which doesn't do Austria. My gastronomic feast takes more than three hours, costs about £100, and perhaps reaches its peak with layered goose liver and brioche, a miniature marvel with the disconcerting look and texture of a chocolate truffle.

The hotel has a Tyrolean public face but the rooms are newly refurbished in what can only be called Teutonic Ralph Lauren,

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all warm fabrics in rich checks. The doors open on to 125 miles (200km) of skiing, a wealth of fast pistes and rollercoaster off-piste, regularly topping 6,500ft (2,000m), higher than much Austrian skiing and with reliable snow. Yet it's only part of the 400-plus miles on the Zillertal Superskipass, which covers ski lifts in the entire valley, plus buses and the valley train, so getting between areas is easy.

High above the hotel is another trend — the gourmet, boutique mountain hut. Kristallhütte, reached only by chairlift, sits on a ridge guarded by a giant metal spider sculpture. On sunny days a string quartet plays on the terrace. Inside, a circular fireplace under a giant copper chimney is the focal point for skiers sipping Zillertal beer (like the rest of the area, prices are keen with a half-litre costing less than £3.50). By night it is a hotel with eight simple rooms, a five-course dinner, and 40-plus schnapps and other firewaters for a nightcap.

At the ski area's 7,700ft high point is the Wedelhütte. Those in the know head past the main restaurant up to the Premium Lounge where, after swapping ski boots for slippers, I find an airy timber space, picture windows, white tablecloths and candles, and a €46 (£40) four-course lunch. My halibut in champagne sauce with (and I'm sure there's a posh name) mushy peas is divine, although there's a regular menu, shared with downstairs, featuring traditional dishes such as wiener schnitzel (about £10).

The 11 suites have an entrance away from the restaurant and in the Noughties the discreet charm attracted Germany's then president, Horst Köhler, as well as Austrian politicians. There's also a wine cellar (more a loft) for tastings — I try Wedelhütte's rich own label Burgenland Trocken 2009, aged in oak barrels on the mountaintop.

In both huts there's a luggage service from the gondola in the village of Kaltenbach, where I ride the VIP gondola, a BMW-designed car with two heated, leather seats, music and a champagne reception — an indulgence at £42 a couple.

Most engaging of all is the Schneekarhütte atop Mayrhofen's own lofty, ski paradise, the Penken. Opened in 1988 by a farmer, Sepp Bair, it has grown organically, building ever outwards. Last season there

were new big-beamed rooms, where leather sofas rub shoulders with an open kitch-

en, and a three-storey pyramid, home to nine sleek, timbered, playfully decorated rooms — the Kristall, glittering in Swarovski crystal; Kurschel (cuddly), all soft and fluffy; and the two-level Kaiser suite reaching up into the apex of the pyramid. I stayed in the suite in the main building's stone tower, a semicircular modernistic dream with a flock of sheepskin rugs and

glass walls giving 180-degree views. The suite costs €388 a night for two, but includes breakfast and a five-course dinner.

Bair, with long hair and a bearded rock star look, is hot on animal welfare and all the meat (and most other produce too) is organic. I ate a trio of bacon (one of them a crisp rasher atop a glass of schnapps), a rich dish like a British faggot and a perfect osso bucco, although a meatless option of a risotto with herbs was exceptional.

Off the slopes there are other culinary delights such as Mountain & Soul — the sister hotel to the Kristallhütte, between Mayrhofen and the other main ski area, Zillertal Arena, where a DJ plays lounge music in the Soulkitchen restaurant — and Landgasthof Linde, a 500-year-old inn in the village of Stumm, another Gault Millau winner for its updated take on Tyrolean staples.

But the drive for good food isn't restricted to the small, boutique places. The Sporthotel Strass is the liveliest spot in fun-loving Mayrhofen. There are more than 500 guests to feed but the hotel has a farm that provides dairy products, pork and beef while all the other meat is fresh and local.

In the Strass's large, elegant spa I sit in the herbal sauna where water trickles through copper pipes on to four different herbs, leaving a scent like new-mown hay. It smells good enough to eat.

mayrhofen.at) which offer accommodation on their websites. British Airways (0844 4930787, ba.com) flies five times a week to Innsbruck from mid-December to early April, from about £120 return. Inghams (ingham.co.uk) offers a week, half-board, at the Strass from £689pp, including flights and transfers



Need to know

Nick Dalton was a guest of the [Austrian National Tourist Office \(austria.info\)](http://austrian-national-tourist-office.austria.info) and the Zillertal and Mayrhofen tourist boards (zillertal.at and



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LARS ENDEL / ALAMY



Mountain huts in the Zillertal Valley

