



67 Bas-Rhin is the northern part of Alsace, on the north-eastern border between France and Germany (the southern part of Alsace is the Haut-Rhin department). Strasbourg is the capital of the region. The climate here is almost 'continental' with hot summers and dry, cold winters. There is much to enjoy, with an interesting mix of vineyards, rolling countryside and forests and historical monuments

Natural boundaries in Alsace include the Vosges Mountains to the west and the Rhine River to the east. The massif of the Vosges gradually gives way eastward to the plain of Alsace, while to the south the region of Sundgau in southern Haut-Rhin rises to the Jura Mountains. Alsace is one of the more fertile regions in central Europe. The hills are generally richly wooded, chiefly with fir, beech, and oak. Annual precipitation is relatively low.

The area has a rich, highly intensive agriculture characterized by small farms. This is particularly true of the vineyards that dominate the foothills of the Vosges. Riesling, Gewürztraminer, Sylvaner, Auxerrois, and Pinot Blanc are among the notable white wines produced. Parts of the alluvial plain west of Strasbourg are devoted to cereals, but industrial crops such as sugar beets, hops, and tobacco are also grown. The region is also known for its asparagus and foie gras.

Alsatian cuisine does not shy away from calories or carbohydrates; it dishes up rich, robust, rib-sticking recipes in generous portions, with no regard for anyone's waistline. While many of the recipes are influenced by Germanic culinary traditions, the flair with which they are cooked is uniquely French. Alsatian food is synonymous with conviviality.

Traditional dishes are marked by the use of pork in various forms, including baeckeoffe, tarte flambée, choucroute, fleischnacka and carpe frite (fried carp).

Alsace is the main beer-producing region of France, thanks to the brasseries (breweries of Kronenbourg, Fischer, Heineken, Météor, Kasteel Cru and Kanterbräu). Hops are grown in Kochersberg and in northern Alsace. Schnapps is also traditionally made in Alsace.

Choucroute Garnie à l'Alsacienne,

Treating each cut of meat just right, whether lean and tender, tough and fatty, smoked, salty, or in sausage form ensures that everything comes out perfect.

A low oven gives the tough cuts plenty of time to tenderize while reducing moisture loss for maximum juiciness.

Adding the kraut partway through cooking prevents it from over-softening during the long braise.

An optional pre-salting step for the fresh pork cuts helps them retain juices later, and seasons them deeply. Making it requires knowing a thing or two about all the cuts of meat involved and how best to handle them. This recipe will ensure that your lean cuts don't dry out and that your tough ones become meltingly tender.

Preparation Time; 60 mins, Cooking Time; 3 hrs 15 mins, Serves 8 to 10

Ingredients

450g boneless pork loin

450g boneless pork shoulder
Kosher salt
90ml lard, goose fat, duck fat, or vegetable oil
2 medium yellow onions, thinly sliced (about 350g total)
480ml dry white wine, such as Riesling or Sylvaner
240ml homemade chicken stock or low-sodium chicken broth
1 cheesecloth sachet containing 2 crushed medium cloves garlic, 10 juniper berries, 2 cloves, 1/2 teaspoon caraway seeds, and 2 bay leaves
450g slab bacon
1 ham hock (about 340g)
225g piece salt pork from the belly or side (not fatback; optional)
2.25kg good-quality store-bought or homemade sauerkraut, drained
680g mixed French and/or German-style sausages, such as frankfurters, bratwurst, weisswurst, boudin blanc, boudin noir, or knackwurst
2 smoked pork chops (about 560g total)
5 small potatoes, peeled, halved, and simmered in salted water until tender
2 tablespoons kirsch (cherry brandy; optional)

Method

Generously season pork loin and shoulder all over with salt.

You can either proceed with the rest of the recipe right away, or, if you have time, place both cuts on a wire rack set over a rimmed baking sheet and refrigerate, uncovered, for up to 2 days. (Pre-salting the fresh cuts of pork will season them deeply and help them retain juiciness later.)

Preheat oven to 120C (fan 100C), 250°F.

In a large casserole, heat 60ml goose fat (or duck fat, lard, or oil) over medium-low heat until shimmering.

Add onions and cook, stirring often, until softened but not browned, about 10 minutes.

Add wine, stock, and cheesecloth sachet to onions.

Nestle pork shoulder, slab bacon, and ham hock in onions and braising liquids and bring to a simmer over medium-high heat.

Cut a parchment paper lid sized to fit casserole and set directly on top of meats and liquid.

Transfer to oven and cook for 1 1/2 hours.

Meanwhile, Cook Pork Loin

Place pork loin in a small ovenproof skillet or on a rimmed baking sheet and cook on a separate rack in oven until an instant-read thermometer inserted in centre registers 50C, 120°F, about 1 hour.

Set aside.

Meanwhile, Prepare Salt Pork (if using)

Fill a large saucepan with water, add salt pork, and bring to a gentle simmer.

Continue to cook at a very gentle simmer for 1 hour, then transfer salt pork to casserole for remainder of cooking time.

Meanwhile, Prepare Sauerkraut

In a colander, lightly rinse sauerkraut under cold running water, then taste; depending on how much of its sour flavour you want to preserve, you can stop here or continue to rinse until desired flavour is reached. (This will depend on the age and flavour of the sauerkraut and your personal preference.) Using your hands, squeeze sauerkraut dry of excess water.

After meats in casserole have cooked for 1 1/2 hours, add sauerkraut to casserole, mixing it into braising liquids and meats.

Raise oven temperature to 150°C (fan 130C), 300F re-cover with parchment paper lid, and cook until meats are very tender, about 1 hour longer.

To Finish the Dish

Fill a large saucepan with water and bring to a bare simmer over medium-high heat.

Add sausages, lower heat to maintain a bare simmer, and cook until heated through, about 10 minutes.

Keep warm.

In a frying pan, heat remaining 30ml of fat or oil over high heat until shimmering.

Add reserved pork loin and sear, turning often, until well browned all over, about 3 minutes per side. Slice into medallions.

Remove parchment paper lid from casserole and add pork loin medallions, smoked pork chops, and potatoes. Return to oven and cook until chops and loin are just heated through, 10 to 20 minutes.

Remove all meats from casserole and set aside on a clean rimmed baking sheet.

Discard cheesecloth sachet.

Season sauerkraut with salt and stir in kirsch, if using.

Using a slotted spoon, heap sauerkraut onto a large warmed serving platter, allowing any excess juices to drain off and arranging potatoes throughout.

Drain poached sausages.

Arrange meats and sausages all over mound of sauerkraut and serve.

Special Equipment

Large casserole, parchment paper, cheesecloth, instant-read thermometer, rimmed baking sheet, wire rack (if pre-salting fresh meats)

N.B. An Alsatian white wine, like Sylvaner, Riesling, or Pinot Gris, would traditionally be used in this dish. However, the flavour difference that results from using other dry white wines, while noticeable in side-by-side tests, is subtle. You can use any dry white wine here that you prefer, though it's best to find one without too much oaky flavour.