

# A GOURMET BIKE TOUR THROUGH GERMANY'S ASPARAGUS ROUTE

By Tara Nolan



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Through Germany's Baden-Württemberg state is the popular Spargel Route, a bicycle path that takes riders through the heart of farm country. Every year, local farmers open their doors in celebration of crops of white asparagus.

I don't think I've ever felt so relieved to see a sign. After cycling through farmers' fields in a downpour, the sun is now shining and I'm grinning to myself as I catch my first glimpse of the little yellow sign marked with an asparagus man and a bike that indicates I'm going the right way. I'm riding the Spargel Route (*spargel* is German for *asparagus*), which winds its way through fields, forests and towns in Germany's Baden-Württemberg state.

This cycling route is part of the larger Baden Asparagus Route – 136 kilometres, from

Schwetzingen to Scherzheim, that celebrate the ubiquitous spring vegetable.

It's hard to go anywhere in Europe in the spring without encountering white asparagus – for those who are used to the green stalks, a special underground growing technique deprives the asparagus plant of light, turning the stalks a white hue. The sandy soil left behind by the Rhine provides prime growing conditions in this region.

White asparagus is also called “the royal vegetable” or “white gold” because it was once eaten only by royalty. In fact, the Queen of England and various other European dignitaries, still receive yearly asparagus deliveries from this region.

Nowadays, anyone can eat white asparagus, of course. With the increasing popularity of agritourism and the field-to-fork mentality, it's not unusual to devote an entire celebration to a vegetable. Whether you visit the Baden Asparagus Route between mid-April, when the season begins, or the end of June, there is bound to be something going on in one of the towns. Schwetzingen alone hosts several events, including a five-kilometre asparagus race.

My trip to Schwetzingen coincides with the third annual Asparagus Hike, an event where local asparagus farms open their gates to the public and bring in catering, live bands and wineries. At the first farm, I'm introduced to a man who assures me that they'll translate what's happening into English so I know what's going on. "Are you our tour guide?" I ask. "No, I'm the mayor," he replies.

I soon discover that this is not so much of a "hike" as it is a casual stroll from one party to the next. I sample asparagus-filled sausage at one barbecue and lament missing out on the asparagus gelato that I heard had been served earlier from an ice cream truck.

In the heart of Schwetzingen lies a spectacular castle where, on another day, I spend a leisurely lunch at Lachers Restaurant with the current Asparagus Queen, Katharina. Katharina is the current face of the corporation of remaining local farms that grow and sell asparagus in the area. In fact, you can buy asparagus grown on her family's farm, Fackel-Kretz-Keller, right in town. The asparagus is delivered daily from the fields to the backyard of the family's 18th century home, where it is washed, peeled and sold to the public.

It's amazing that I don't tire of spargel during my stay - I eat it every day for a week! I savour it in risotto, in a salad with vinaigrette dressing, over smoked salmon and steamed with Hollandaise sauce.

A strong headwind makes me late for my final asparagus meal at Zum Bären in Bruchsal, another key asparagus-growing area. I apologize profusely to my lunch date, Ute, who will later show me the baroque Palace of Bruchsal. For this last dish, both white and green asparagus form a pyramid over seafood smothered in a rich cream sauce. I try to remember to chew: I'm famished after my 35-kilometre ride.

My endpoint for the day is actually not asparagus related. It's a modern organic winery called Klumpp, on the outskirts of Bruchsal. Apparently the conditions that make this region optimal for growing asparagus, also make it fertile ground for grapes. I relax and sip a selection of wines, silently toasting the end of my asparagus-fuelled journey.

## PHOTOS

1. Bronze statue celebrating the Asparagus Baden Route
2. Visiting the city of Schwetzingen by bike
3. The baroque Palace of Bruchsal
4. Green and white asparagus with rocket leaves

