



PORT AUTHORITY

Welcome to Hamburg, a vibrant trading post where local produce, tradition, artisan craft and fish buns are savoured in equal measure. Alex Harris disembarks on a culinary tour

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ØMIND HAUG



From left: the stylish interior of Haebel on Paul-Roosen Strasse; chef and owner Fabio Haebel outside the restaurant





From left: relaxing with a book in Public Coffee Roasters; red mullet at Haebel; one of the city's grand facades. Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Lakeside at The Fontenay; Swiss head chef Cornelius Speinle; French haute cuisine at Jacob's; the restaurant's Thomas Martin; Lakeside's foie gras parfait; a boat on the Elbe



'The River Elbe has cut through Europe with as much influence and indelibility as Bowie's music in the Seventies, and at no point has it been put to more important use than at its intersection with Hamburg'

Travel information

Hamburg is Germany's second-largest city and sits astride the River Elbe in the north of the country. Flights from London take around two hours and the time is one hour ahead of GMT. Currency is the euro (EUR). In June, the average high temperature is 20C and the average low is 10C.

GETTING THERE

easyJet offers a number of daily direct flights to Hamburg Airport from London Gatwick. easyjet.com

Eurowings flies to Hamburg direct up to three times per day from London Heathrow. eurowings.com

GETTING AROUND

Hamburg has an extensive public transport system that's easy to navigate, including the U-Bahn underground and elevated railway, buses and harbour ferries around the canals. Pick up a Hamburg Card from the tourist website for unlimited public transport travel and discounts at over 150 attractions. Day passes cost from £9pp. hamburg-travel.com

RESOURCES

Germany Inspires is the German tourist board. Its website is packed with useful information and highlights around the city, as well as news on upcoming cultural events in Hamburg and beyond. germany.travel
Hamburg Tourismus is the city's official website and offers plenty of inspiration to help you get the most out of your trip. hamburg-travel.com

FURTHER READING

The Invention of Curried Sausage by Uwe Timm and Leila Vennewitz (New Directions, £11.99) became a bestseller in Germany when it was published in the late 1990s. Timm, as narrator, tracks down the origins of the popular German street food he enjoyed as a kid in his native Hamburg and describes what daily life was like in the post-war city.

CARBON COUNTING

To offset your carbon emissions when flying to Hamburg, visit climatecare.org and make a donation. Return flights from London produce 0.25 tonnes of CO₂, meaning a cost to offset of £1.85.

Many Brits view Hamburg through a distorted lens: cheap flights, bright lights, parties into the night. In the holding pens of UK departure lounges, often rambunctious groups are on hand to reaffirm this idea. It feels odd, then, to be embarking on a tour more culinary. But Hamburg's reputational hangover is an unfair one. Like misunderstood Amsterdam and beautiful Krakow, it is loved for much more by those who know it. Ask true gastronomes and they'll tell you it's a bustling port city that's racking up the Michelin stars; a produce-rich land, with plenty to offer the plate.

Hamburg is a city built not upon the gaudy Reeperbahn (its main street) but upon the strong foundations of German heritage and trade. It doesn't take much to see why. Its port is huge. The River Elbe has cut through Europe with as much influence and indelibility as Bowie's music in the Seventies, and at no point has it been put to more important use than at its intersection with the city in which I find myself. Hamburg: gateway to the world.

But enough of that for now, because I am, in fact, starting at the Reeperbahn, casting my net toward the port for fish. *Fischbrötchen* (a fish bun) is at the same time a simple sandwich and one of the city's most important dishes. Eating it is traditional and, as I was told by the local next to me on the flight, one of the most Hamburg of things you can do. I promised to make it my first stop.

Kleine Haie Grosse Fische, the little fast food hole-in-the-wall he recommended, lies just off the Reeperbahn. Its larger-than-life proprietor Heiner Harhues looks like something straight out of a children's book with facial lines that bespeak a colourful life. 'Come in, come in.' He beckons through the door and sets to work on his craft. 'It's *the* Hamburg dish,' he tells me. 'Like you have fish and chips, we have fish and bread.' I prepare myself for something greasy. But as I bite through, so too do I swallow my preconceptions. The bread is crunchy, fluffy and excellent (he bakes it here); the herring, salty, flaky and perfect; the garnish utterly fresh.

Fish and chips be damned. It's little wonder Kleine Haie Grosse Fische is known as the best spot for this dish. And it's mostly down to Harhues's respect for ingredients. 'I get the fish fresh from the market over there,' he points. I try to hide my —————>>





Opposite page, clockwise from top left: the multifunctional Sumatrakontor building; expect intimate dining with one single, undulating table at The Table; an artfully plated dish at HACO; The Table's Kevin Fehling; the city's iconic new Elbphilharmonie concert hall. This page, from left: red-brick warehouses line one of the city's many canals; inside Entenwerder 1, a colourful spot to enjoy a coffee



distaste at the thought of fish flogged in such close proximity to the area's sports bars. 'It's the market for all the top chefs. Not just from Hamburg, from all over. Chefs even fly in from the UK.'

From the visceral lows of the Reeperbahn to the dizzying heights of fine dining and Lakeside, a towering restaurant that makes good use of the same fish market used by the four-seater joint I just left. At the helm is Cornelius Speinle – an energetic Swiss chef, recipient of a Michelin star for his restaurant back home – who's surrounded himself with a global team, some local, others from elsewhere, a few plucked from shared time at The Fat Duck.

Heston Blumenthal's influence is immediately apparent when you sample the food. They serve up red cabbage macarons with horseradish cream. A foie gras lollipop. Smoked eel in white chocolate (mind-blowing). Venison and fresh fish. 'With all my background in different three-star restaurants, the most creative work I ever saw was at The Fat Duck,' Speinle says. 'We have German suppliers. But we aren't a German kitchen. We go for strong flavours, but you should feel comfortable, not heavy afterwards. North German cuisine is lighter. Because of the water, people eat a lot of fish. It's when you get into Bavaria that the food gets heavier – pork crackling, pork belly, sausages.'

Hamburg is the most populous and important settlement on the River Elbe's course. The watery highway brought in ingredients such as pepper, cloves, anise, cinnamon and saffron at a time when they were considered rare luxuries. It created a gastronomic backdrop of variation and flavour. It also made the city rather accomplished – a legacy that continues to this day. It's hard to distil down the myriad ingredients that make up the success of a city's cuisine, but Hamburg's are quite obvious. A degree of exoticism – by German standards, at least – characteristic of most major trading hubs, tempered in the city's love for local fish netted from the Elbe and nearby Baltic Sea, all honed on every restaurateur's favourite gilded whetstone: money.

And a lot of money, at that. Hamburg isn't Germany's richest place overall, but it is the wealthiest per capita. While cash doesn't always cook up good cuisine – and arguably some of the world's best restaurants are inexpensive eateries, often in rural backwaters – it certainly gives chefs more to play with. ➔

Where to eat

Prices stated are per person for three courses including wine or beer, unless otherwise stated

Cölln's Tucked behind the grand Rathaus, Germany's oldest oyster bar serves some of Hamburg's best seafood. The Sylter Royals are a must. From £30. *Brodschangen 1-5, 00 49 40 4920 6115, coellns.de*

HACO Björn Juhnke is at the helm of this Scandi-style restaurant where menus showcase less-used produce like dandelion, sea fennel and millet ferment. Lots of vegetarian options on offer. Four-course menu from £79. *Clemens-Schultz Strasse 18, 00 49 40 7420 3939, restaurant-haco.com*

Haebel Chef Fabio Haebel brings a taste of his childhood to this petite dining room with his Nordic-French dishes. Wild boar, sea buckthorn and lake fish feature heavily. 17-course menu from £80, excluding wine. *Paul-Roosen Strasse 31, 00 49 151 7242 3046, haebel.hamburg*

Heldenplatz Where local chefs head after service: a relaxed dining room serving until late. Go for the frogs' legs, rabbit, and apple tart. From £46. *Brandstwierte 46, 00 49 40 3037 2250, heldenplatz-restaurant.de*

Jacob's Hidden in the leafy Nienstedten district, Thomas Martin and his team deliver highly skilled French haute cuisine to guests on a lime tree-lined, shaded terrace overlooking the Elbe. From £62. *Elbchaussee 401, 00 49 40 822 550, jacobs-restaurant.de*

Jellyfish A Michelin-starred establishment in the trendy Sternschanze area. Pescatarian menus by Laurin Kux boast fresh, seasonable and sustainable fish served with finesse. Five-course menu from £99. *Weidenallee 12, 00 49 40 410 5414, jellyfish-restaurant.de*

Kleine Haie Grosse Fische Discover Hamburg's iconic dish, the *fischbrötchen* (fish bun), at this quaint outlet. Try the classic or tackle crab patties all courtesy of owner and shipbuilder, Heiner Harhues. Buns from £4.50. *Querstrasse 4, 00 49 178 355 6370, kleinehaie-grossesfische.de*

Lakeside Ethereal interiors and panoramic views of the Alster await at this one-star restaurant. Chef Cornelius Speinle's food is just as impressive: think sweetbreads with preserved lemon, shiitake and peanut, followed by poached rhubarb with sheep's yoghurt and sorrel. Five-course menu from £199. *Fontenay 10, 00 49 40 605 660 5740, thefontenay.com*

The Table Expect the unexpected at Kevin Fehling's three-Michelin-star dining room, where the theatre of the kitchen is played out in front of diners at a curving cherry-wood bar. Seven-course menu from £165. *Shanghaiallee 15, 00 49 40 2286 7422, thetable-hamburg.de*



From left: the elegant interior of Jacob's at Hotel Louis C Jacob; oysters with fennel and yuzu at Michelin-starred Jellyfish; service with a smile at Clouds – Heaven's Bar & Kitchen, in the city's 'Dancing Towers' skyscrapers. Opposite page, clockwise from top left: a summery cocktail on the 24th floor at Clouds; Cölln's dining room, Germany's oldest oyster bar; waterfront scenes near Tortue; sashimi at the hotel's Asian-inspired Jin Gui restaurant; Clouds bar affords great city views

'When we started, 11 years ago, everyone wanted sushi or Italian. I said "no, we have to change". So we made it stylish, focusing on quality over anything else. And that's at the heart of Germany's food history'

Because top ingredients, of course, cost a lot. The city's affluence is reflected in its architecture, too. Arresting townhouses, Brooklynesque warehouses, grand hotels and, most notably for anyone who passes it, the Elbphilharmonie, Hamburg's new concert hall, which dominates the skyline. Elsewhere, the city's many canals manage to add some natural beauty to otherwise very Germanic buildings. Though it must be said, not many of the high rises are pretty to look at, no matter how rich their inhabitants.

The wealth of Hamburg is one reason its restaurants can survive being quality-driven instead of trend-led. People are prepared to

pay for quality. That's the principle keeping Cölln's – a stunning building and the oldest oyster restaurant in Germany – relevant during the age of pop-ups and fast-moving burger chains. 'There's a lot of history here,' owner Jan Schawe tells me as I watch the incongruously young clientele sit amid the hand-painted tiles from 1900 and chairs once graced by the backsides of German giants such as Otto von Bismarck. 'It's easy to open trendy places in Hamburg. I was afraid another burger place would take this spot when it went up for sale. I couldn't let that happen. So we took it.'

Schawe explains that, here at least, there is some love for German cuisine. 'When we started Mutterland, our local produce shops, 11 years ago, German food was out of fashion; everyone wanted sushi, Italian. I said "no, we have to change". So we made it stylish, focusing on quality over anything else.' And that's at the heart of Germany's recent food history: the produce is great – surprisingly so – but it hasn't been very fashionable. 'It's changed a lot in the last year,' Schawe says as I polish off some of his famous oysters from the North Sea. 'Local is becoming trendy. People are caring about Hamburg's produce again.'

One man to whom provenance is of utmost importance is Fabio Haebel, chef-proprietor of his namesake casual fine-diner Haebel, who I've met upon the recommendation of the chefs at Lakeside. 'There are cherry tomatoes and there are cherry tomatoes,' he says as we make our way across town together to his restaurant on Paul-Roosen Strasse. 'Our tomatoes come from an organic farmer who used to deliver to families, and now does gastronomy as well. That's how we like to work here.' And it's working well. Seven-and-a-half years doing the same thing is impressive for any restaurant, let alone one with as few covers as Haebel.

When the food arrives, it's easy to see why. Fabio wows with his menu: a lobster croquette followed by pumpkin seeds, redcurrant jelly and sourdough bread with a chicken liver butter so savoury and distracting, it almost derails the interview. Lobster again with a knockout bisque. Red mullet – superb in this region – with beurre blanc, two different types of caviar, one from seaweed – vegetarian, super-salty – with broad beans and cockles.

Most chefs worth their Maldon will tell you produce quality is the what matters most. But for Haebel that ethos defines the whole restaurant. 'We could use normal meat, normal veg, normal fish; some guests wouldn't mind that much, but I mind. I'm a sustainable chef.' And, it turns out, a bit of a masochist: 'Every month we have a new menu. We haven't repeated a course for three years. Six new dishes a month means 216 new plates' —————>>

Delis, markets and cafés

Balz & Balz A bite-sized coffee shop in the Hoheluft district that's made for 'kaffee und kuchen'; expect locally roasted coffee and slices of *schmandkuchen*. *Lehmweg 6, 00 49 40 6043 8833, balzundbalz.de*
Hanging Out Café Relaxed, shabby-chic café near the university. Students and professors alike head here for the giant lattes, smoothies and fresh juices. *Bornstrasse 18, 00 49 40 4146 9762*

Hobenköök A restaurant-cum-market hall serving dishes made with the regional, seasonal produce found across its rustic wooden shelves. *Stockmeyerstrasse 43, 00 49 40 2286 5538, hobenkoeek.de*

Isemarkt Make like the locals under Eppendorf's railway viaduct and browse some 200 food stalls at this 70-year-old market where the daily fish comes in fresh from the port. *Isestrasse 1-73, isemarkt.com*

Konditorei Lindtner Rows of confectionery line the panelled rooms here. Take home dainty marzipan squares and handmade truffles or opt for a tart overflowing with glazed summer fruits. *Eppendorfer Landstrasse 88, 00 49 40 480 6000, konditorei-lindtner.de*

Maison Mitchell New Yorker Gabriel Mitchell learned his trade from Pierre Hermé, but at this patisserie he rips up the rule book. Expect French classics made with the likes of avocado, olives and chili. *ABC Forum, ABC Strasse 46, 00 49 40 3694 4026, maisonmitchell.com*

Oschätzchen Delikatessen Some of Europe's top brands grace the towering laden shelves here. Look out for beautifully packaged handmade chocolates amid the myriad varieties of spices and oils. *Hohe Bleichen 26, 00 49 40 3500 4780, oschaetzchen.com*

Rindermarkthalle A food hall housing fishmongers and butchers and the vast Bröt und Stulle bakery (try the *butterkuchen* pastries). *Neuer Kamp 31, 00 49 40 8797 6390, rindermarkthalle-stpauli.de*

Viola's Gewürze & Delikatessen Pick up everything from dried soup bases and unusual rices to vinegars, oils and over 140 types of salt at this popular deli. *Eppendorfer Baum 43, 040 4607 2676, violas.de*





From left: scallops and prawns at HACO; the city at dusk; the terrace at café Entenwerder 1 on the northern Elbe. Opposite page, clockwise from top left: a young creative works in one of the city's coffee shops; *fischbrötchen*, the local delicacy; historic ceramic tiles at Cölln's; a dainty dessert; a local cycles home under a viaduct; Cölln's signature oysters served with a glass of crisp white German wine

“Berlin is faster, Hamburg is slower. In Berlin it’s about being there. In Hamburg, it’s about eating first. It’s about ingredients.” All I can think about is how great life would be if all butter was chicken liver butter’

created without repeat. That’s why people who eat here make another reservation.’ I’m dumbfounded. ‘Berlin is faster. Hamburg is slower. In Berlin it’s often about being there. In Hamburg, it’s about eating first. It’s about ingredients.’ As he talks all I can think about is how great life would be if all butter was chicken liver butter.

But like most affluent cities, Hamburg is modernising apace. It does have its fair share of pop-ups and concepts. Sternschanze,

Hamburg’s hipster area, is replete with burger concepts and trendy bars (Otto’s Burger is actually great). Equally important as food to Hamburg is its drink. And it’s certainly a place you can drink well.

Coffee has a rich heritage here. By the end of the 19th century Hamburg had become the biggest coffee market in the world. Now, Scandi-style speciality coffee shops are becoming hangouts for young creatives, and roasters like Public Coffee Roasters (who grind their beans on a houseboat on the Elbe) are treating beans like wine, simultaneously serving and educating on Java’s complexities.

But the black stuff has nothing on Hamburg’s true liquid gold: beer. It was here that the use of hops in beer was pioneered. Fans would be remiss not to visit the Altona region and Holsten Brewery before heading to Ratsbier, one of the city’s best craft breweries. You’d think selling beer to Germans would be a shoe-in, but the craft revolution got off to a slow start here due to the entrenched ideas of what beer should be: crisp, fresh pilsner. Darker, richer, stronger beers were a hard sell. But they’ve taken root with the city’s youth. It’s a drinking experience that makes for some fantastic sips.

And so, before risking inebriation, I make my way to my final stop. The Table is Hamburg’s top destination restaurant. If you tour Europe in search of Michelin stars, add it to your list and you’ll bag three in one. Kevin Fehling, the prodigious chef behind it, arrives with a suitably enigmatic quietness. ‘It’s important the menu is always developing, we’re always pushing,’ he says. ‘We want to go on and on, to create a positive pressure, pursuing perfection.’ Fehling’s perfectionism, creativity and technique are infamous.

The restaurant itself is what hits you first. It’s spacious, open. ‘That’s the concept,’ says Fehling. ‘I wanted to create living room scenery in here, with curved forms, not normal tables.’ He’s certainly succeeded at that: the room is dominated by a single, snaking table, which creates a sense of intimacy and closeness to the action in the kitchen. ‘The openness reflects my cooking. From my travels, I bring new cuisines and techniques to my kitchen from around the world.’ So it’s not very German? ‘It is German!’ he says. ‘It’s Spanish avant garde. French tradition. Japanese reservation. German precision. I bring everything from around the world to Hamburg. My strive for perfectionism is what makes it German.’

And that’s the heart of it. Like its history, Hamburg’s cuisine is defined not by being either German or international alone, but a hard alloy of both. It’s evident in the creativity of the city’s chefs. ‘Our style is “world-open”,’ says Fehling. ‘Hamburg is the door to the world.’ □

Alex Harris and Øivind Haug travelled to Germany courtesy of Hamburg Tourismus GmbH. hamburg-travel.com

Where to stay

25hours Hotel Hafencity Poised in the heart of the sleek Hafencity area, this new port-inspired hotel offers stylised ‘cabin’ rooms with nautical panelling and maritime design touches. Head down the road to admire the famous warehouses that line the nearby canals or rent a Schindelhauer bike from reception to explore further. Doubles from £119. Ueberseeallee 5, 00 49 40 257 7770, 25hours-hotels.com

The Fontenay Architect Jan Störmer was inspired by the movements of Hamburg’s artificial lakes when designing the curving walls of this hotel. High ceilings and pale parquet floors combine with full-length glass windows to give an airy feel. Even the spa’s sauna boasts skyline views towards Hamburg Television Tower, a 30-minute walk away. Doubles from £302. Fontenay 10, 00 49 40 6056 6050, thefontenay.com

Kempinski Atlantic Set in the heart of the city looking out over Alster Lake, this historic hotel will transport you back to the golden era of Atlantic cruise ship travel (it originally hosted first-class passengers poised to cross the oceans). Expect opulent rooms furnished with Macassar ebony furniture and Italian marble bathrooms. Doubles from £485. An der Alster 72-79, 00 49 40 28880, kempinski.com

Hotel Louis C Jacob This riverside hotel outside the city centre houses one of Germany’s most prestigious private art collections within its 18th-century walls. Art lovers should request the lavish Liebermann Suite, where the famous German painter once stayed. Doubles from £220. Elbchaussee 401-403, 00 49 40 8225 5405, hotel-jacob.de

Sir Nikolai Sandwiched between the bustling old town and historic warehouse district (both within easy walking distance), this 19th-century office building has been transformed into a swish hotel filled with velvet accents, Persian rugs and mid-century furnishings. Doubles from £131. Katharinenstrasse 29, 00 49 40 2999 6666, sirhotels.com

Tortue Two excellent in-house restaurants sit within the moody interiors of modern Tortue, styled in a muted palette of slate and stone. Pick from Asian-inspired dishes or a brasserie serving German-influenced French cuisine, such as bouillabaisse, braised rabbit and veal escalope. Doubles from £160. Stadthausbrücke 10, 00 49 40 334 41400, tortue.de

