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FRANKFURT



“It doesn’t matter whether you’re a banker or an artist — you feel welcome”

Wolfgang Gottlieb, founder of Lotte studio, Frankfurt



Frankfurt’s reputation as a financial capital often precedes it, but if you know where to look it’s a place full of avant-garde surprises, says *Rachel Howard*



Photography by David Newby

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Housed in the narrowest building in Frankfurt, the Michelin-starred Seven Swans has space for just 24 diners. Entering via a tiny kitchen, where three flushed chefs are hunched over bowls of buds and berries, you have to squeeze past head chef Ricky Saward, a burly man with a ginger beard and a broad grin, to access the dining rooms downstairs. Saward serves some of the dishes on the six-course set menu himself. As he sets down an intensely earthy dish of Jerusalem artichokes, nightshade and wonderberries, he explains that all the ingredients (apart from the dairy products) come from the restaurant's organic farm. It's not just farm to fork, he says, it's root to leaf. They churn their own butter, ferment their own vinegar, make their own verjuice.

Seven Swans ticks just about every global food trend: locavore, sustainable... it's an immersive experience, with none of the stuffiness that typically comes with fine dining. Here, you can eat with your hands, chat to the chefs and nod along to mellow indie rock.

It's certainly not what you'd expect in a city synonymous with meat products and bling-loving bankers. But Frankfurt – a city that rebuilt itself after being badly bombed in World War II as a financial powerhouse, symbolised by the shiny skyscrapers that have become the city's trademark – is full of avant-garde surprises. You just have to know where to look.

“Frankfurt looks like a big city because of the skyline, but it's actually more like a village. Everybody knows each other,” says Saward. It's true. Frankfurt may be the money capital of Germany, with an already staggering array of high-rise towers that is only set to grow as the city looks to replace London as Europe's financial capital post-Brexit, but it's not all Ferraris and Ferragamo. It's the most multicultural city in Germany, with



long-standing Italian, Japanese and Turkish contingents. And with a population hovering around 750,000, Frankfurt is also surprisingly small: you can walk everywhere. It's when you start wandering around the backstreets that you realise how diverse and creative the city really is.

A good place to start (or stay) is the Libertine Lindenberg, just across the river from Seven Swans and also owned by the maverick property developer Steen Rothenberger. Bands often bed down at this laid-back hotel, where several rooms are assigned for long stays, while recording new material. Once a month, they might also perform an intimate set at Lotte, the recording studio hidden in the basement, next to the gym, do-it-yourself laundry room and free bike shed.

On the Friday night when I check in, a baby and a Labrador are pottering around the lobby-living room, while a pink-haired guest pours herself a rhubarb cordial from the honesty bar. In the communal kitchen, Mandy, a vegan chef, is icing a batch of cakes. Down in the basement, it's several degrees hotter and the crowd is pumped up. Rikas, a boy band from Stuttgart that sounds like The Beach Boys, is headlining tonight. The musicians are so close to their panting young fans that there's barely room to flick their floppy fringes.

“We get bands from Brighton, Belgrade or Berlin that would normally play for a crowd of 400–500, not 50 or 60 people. The idea is to support the artists, but also to give something special to our community,” explains Wolfgang Gottlieb, the genial founder of Lotte studio. Dressed down >



Clockwise from above Designer-architects Farah Ebrahimi and Philipp Mainzer; the breakfast menu at the Libertine Lindenberg hotel; the Holy Cross Brewing Society, a cafe in downtown Frankfurt; eating at Seven Swans, a vegetarian Michelin-star restaurant on the banks of the River Main; its head chef Ricky Saward



Above Wolfgang Gottlieb, founder of the Lotte recording studio in Alt Sachsenhausen
Opposite, clockwise from left The Städel Museum shows 700 years of art under a single roof. The basement is dedicated to contemporary art; Matthias Vogt, jazz musician and DJ at Espresso Espresso; more modernity at the Städel

in jeans and a navy utility jacket, Gottlieb has none of the affected cool of an impresario. “Frankfurt is the most liberal and open city in Germany,” he says. “It doesn’t matter whether you’re a banker or an artist, you feel welcome here.”

The Libertine is in Alt Sachsenhausen, a pocket of cobbled streets and timber-frame houses that have mostly been converted into pubs that serve *Ebbelwoi*, strong, cloudy apple wine that’s more palatable with a spritz of fizzy water. One of the oldest, Atschel, has all the hallmarks of a traditional German joint: wood-panelled walls, communal benches and tables, and brusque service by stout waiters in white coats. Vegetarians will shudder at the giant slabs of meat being consumed. Alt Sachsenhausen is rowdy on Friday and Saturday nights, a tradition that dates back to the 1940s, when American GIs stationed in Frankfurt would hit the area’s dive bars. They had a big influence on the music scene: by the 1950s, Frankfurt had become the jazz capital of Germany.

“The problem with jazz musicians is that they never have any money. When the Berlin Wall came down, many of my musician friends moved to Berlin to live in squats,” says Matthias Vogt,

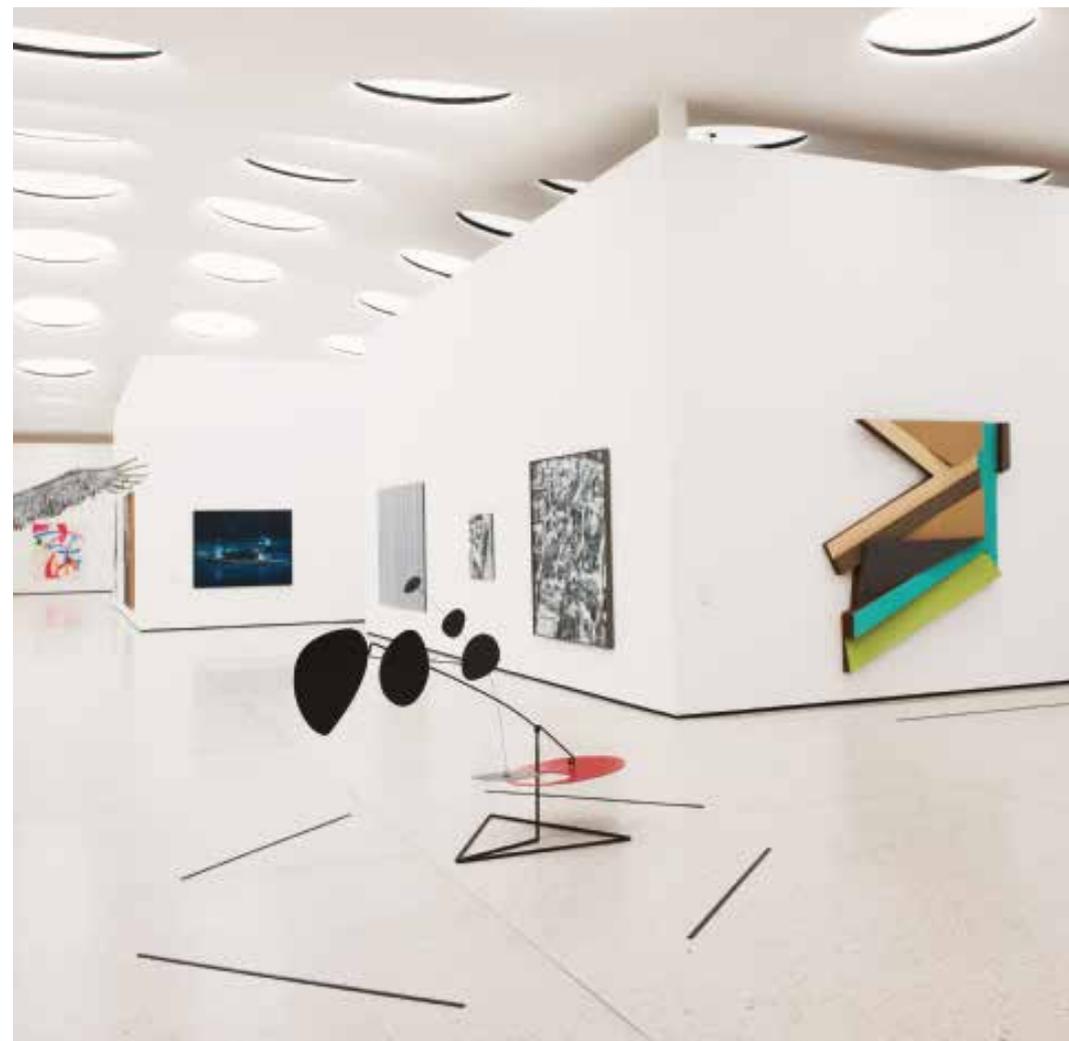
“The idea is to support the artists but also to give something special to our community”

a local jazz pianist who moonlights as a techno DJ. Vogt moved to Frankfurt as a young man. It wasn’t for the money. He came for Sven Väth, the DJ who founded the legendary Omen club in the late 80s. It was here that the techno scene exploded and the “sound of Frankfurt” became a global phenomenon.

Most of the major record labels have since moved to Berlin, but Vogt believes that there’s more room for experimentation in Frankfurt – and a better quality of life. The ever-changing cityscape is also fuelling a new creative dynamic. In the Ostend (East End), Vogt’s home turf, the opening of the European Central Bank in 2015 brought a wave of gentrification. Around the twisted twin towers, vacant plots were transformed into riverside skate parks and sports fields. Kunstverein Familie Montez, an arts venue, opened in the arches under the Honsell Bridge. Like many cities in the throes of expansion, there is pressure on affordable housing. “Of course, it’s not all positive, but the area is much nicer than before,” says Vogt. “I’m looking forward to seeing the future of Frankfurt as a vibrant and versatile city.”

“For people like us, the changes happening in Frankfurt are good; they bring new opportunities,” says restaurateur David Ardinast, as we scoop up a souped-up version of Frankfurt’s signature *Grüne Soße* (green sauce) with warm pitta bread at their latest opening. “The problem is to keep the character of the city. Sooner or later big chains will take over small businesses if the rents are too high.”

A new addition to the unconventional 25hours Hotel, Bar Shuka is the sixth restaurant owned by David and his brother James Ardinast in the Bahnhofsviertel, the seedy-but-trendy area around Frankfurt’s central train station. There, you might stumble on a pizza parlour with a yellow >



Four of the best German Christmas markets

The one for urbanites Christmas Market at the Kö-Bogen, Düsseldorf

This west German city on the banks of the Rhine is the country’s fashion capital and has long attracted Berliners on arty weekend getaways. At the Christmas Market at the Kö-Bogen in Jan-Wellem-Platz, traditional and on-trend collide with stands selling roasted chestnuts and hot berry wine side by side with shops in wooden huts where you can buy everything from artisan knitwear to shimmering baubles.

The one for history buffs The Esslingen Medieval Market, Esslingen am Neckar

Experience festivities days-of-yore style at Esslingen, a few hours’ drive north-west of Munich. At over 200 booths merchants costumed in medieval garb proffer their wares; felt-makers, basket-weavers and glass-blowers demonstrate their craft; while jugglers, jesters and fire-eaters gambol through the streets. Plus there are pop-up taverns serving honey mead and feasts of venison stew.

The one for families Hanau Christmas Market, Hesse

Just 25km east of Frankfurt is quaint Hanau, once the home of the Brothers Grimm. The whole town gets into the spirit, with 80 decorated huts where sweet gingerbread-like *Lebkuchen* treats and *Bratäpfel* (baked apples) are served alongside brightly lit funfair rides. Best of all is the facade of the old town hall, which is transformed into a gigantic fairy tale-themed Advent calendar.

The one for festive fanatics Cathedral X-Mas Market, Cologne

Cologne, an easy hour’s journey from Düsseldorf, goes hard when it comes to Christmas markets. Its most impressive example takes place in the shadow of the city’s famous twin-spired Gothic Cathedral. Snack on piping-hot *Reibekuchen* (potato pancakes) and waffles dusted with icing sugar, while carol singing, puppet shows and all manner of performances happen all around. It’s also home to the Rhineland’s largest Christmas tree.



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Pac-Man oven (Pizzeria Montana), a supper club behind an unmarked door (Club Michel), or a sexy speakeasy in a cellar (The Kinly).

“When we opened our first restaurant here 15 years ago, people said, ‘Don’t do anything trendy or progressive in Frankfurt because it’s just bankers,’” says James Ardinast. “We thought the opposite: bankers are usually young, well-travelled, have money to spend, and are much more open-minded than the average local.”

Their gamble paid off. As we share a dazzling spread of Middle-Eastern fare, the restaurant fills up with a lively crowd of art collectors, curators and designers, who have just been to the opening night at MMK, the wedge-shaped modern art museum with a cutting-edge agenda. The MMK is just one of dozens of brilliantly curated museums in Frankfurt, seven of them strung along the left bank of the Main. Dipping in and out of sculpture gardens, modernist interiors and galleries of old masters is the best way to spend a Sunday in Frankfurt, when the city winds down to a virtual standstill.

The Städel – three floors and seven centuries of art, from Botticelli to Beuys – is the stand-out. Even if you only have a layover in Frankfurt, it’s worth the 20-minute taxi ride into town.

“The conveniences of Frankfurt are something to consider. It’s three hours’ drive to Antwerp, three hours by train to Paris, a 50-minute flight to London,” says Farah Ebrahimi, the artistic director of e15, a global furniture brand based in the eastern outskirts of Frankfurt. Radically simple and egalitarian, their designs are modern classics. Among the solid wood stools and marble and steel tables in their warehouse-showroom are reissues of iconic pieces by Ferdinand Kramer, a leading proponent of the New Frankfurt modernist movement in the 1920s, whose progressive yet pragmatic strand of modernism sums up the city’s understated cool.

When Ebrahimi moved from New York to Frankfurt with her husband and business partner Philipp Mainzer 17 years ago, the city felt oppressively parochial. But the scale, lack of pretension and sense of belonging to a community grew on her. “There’s no love-hate relationship with Frankfurt like you get with bigger, brasher cities like Berlin or New York,” says Ebrahimi. “Frankfurt doesn’t impose anything on you. You can have any style, scene or lifestyle you want and nobody is going to judge you. It’s a refreshingly neutral palette – a blank canvas.” ■

Above left and right
 Designer Farah Ebrahimi of e15 with partner Philipp Mainzer; delicious sharing plates at Bar Shuka