

TRAVEL & OUTDOORS

How Castroville Is Keeping Its Strong French (and German) Connection Alive

Local families with Alsatian roots have bought up the historic buildings in this quaint town, which is now home to a new barbecue joint and bakery, a restored theater, and charming hotels.

By Clayton Maxwell

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Castroville.

Photograph by Wynn Myers



Spirits are high in the class I'm crashing on an April night at a community center in Castroville, a small town 25 miles west of San Antonio. About fifty of us, including the mayor, sit in folding chairs while the language teacher, a man from Alsace, a region in northeast France that passed back and forth between that country and Germany over the centuries, leads us in a song praising a *schnitzelbank*. That's the Alsatian word for "workbench," a fitting muse for this crowd of industrious Texas Alsatians, most of whom trace their lineage back to Castroville's founding, in 1844.

We practice two more songs: "S'Elsass Unser Landel!" ("Alsace Our Land!") and "Texas, Our Texas." The class's organizer, Mark Haby, tells us, "Remember, we will sing these as the Alsatians get off the bus." In less than two weeks, more than fifty visitors from France will arrive in Castroville, which has a population of about three thousand, to attend the annual Alsatian Festival of Texas, a daylong party of song, dance, and crisp Alsatian wines.

For residents of a town known to resist the intrusions of *fremde*, or "outsiders," these Castrovillians are a fun and friendly crew. A few stay late, telling me about traveling to the motherland. "Walk into a bar in Alsace and say you are from Castroville and you might get all of your drinks for free," Haby says.



Joshua Kempf, on a downtown sidewalk.

Photograph by Wynn Myers



The Steinbach Haus Visitors Center.
Photograph by Wynn Myers

Buzzed on the bonhomie, I walk to my room at the cozy **Landmark Inn** on the banks of the Medina River. Built in 1849 as a home, it became a hotel four years later. On this spring night, Castroville's streets feel closer to Europe than to San Antonio. The **French Gothic cathedral**, finished in 1870, casts a glow, and the petite pioneer homes with steep-pitched roofs look as if they were plucked from the Vosges mountains.

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I pause at a tiny shoebox of a former church, tucked into the grounds of what was a convent but is now **Moye Retreat Center**, which hosts spiritual excursions. With a creaky wooden door latched by a single hook, this was the first permanent structure built when empresario Henri Castro, a French native of Portuguese descent, settled this town, accompanied by shiploads of Alsatians seeking a fresh start. The descendants of the same people who laid this rock were singing songs with me a few blocks away. And while residents here seem firmly anchored in the past, they are not stuck in it. Locals are instead relying on a shared history to face the future.

This isn't my first time in Castroville. More than a year earlier, on a January evening in 2023, Joshua Kempf, an eighth-generation Texan of Alsatian

descent, showed me around these same streets. He took me to an empty stone building with a slipshod balcony and the faded words “Dan’s Bar” painted on the door. Once a thriving meat market and bar, it sat vacant for years. Soon, Kempf explained, it would house a barbecue joint called Blu Lacy Smokehouse, and next door would be a French bakery, both run by the owners of San Antonio’s popular 2M Smokehouse. When we walked across the street and stood under the marquee of the Rainbow Theater, dark for fifty years, he told me it would reopen in a few months and that its debut films would include a documentary about Castroville’s remaining Alsatian speakers.



The Rainbow Theater.

Photograph by Wynn Myers

Kempf, who’s 38 and lives with his four children in Castroville, is one of the leaders working to protect its distinct charms as the inexorable sprawl of San Antonio marches westward along U.S. 90. He helped start a community investment fund, called the Elsass, to revitalize downtown. The group formed after the town lost a favorite haunt, the midcentury Riviera Hotel. Because it boasted the area’s only public pool, almost everybody learned to

swim there. Now the site is home to a Bill Miller Bar-B-Q, the pool a sea of concrete.

In 2021 Kempf and the other founders of the Elsass held a meeting at the shuttered Dan's Bar. "We showed before-and-after slides of the Riviera," he recalls, "and we asked, 'If you want more of this—if you want another historic building to become a CVS on our square someday—we do nothing. Because that's what we're facing: outsiders with lots of money coming in and deciding for us what our town becomes. Or we could all collectively decide what we want for Castroville and do something about it.'"

With 35 families investing at first, the Elsass raised several million dollars in 48 hours. It now owns ten properties and a grassy, poppy-lined corner park in the middle of downtown, which is quickly becoming host to a hopping scene on weekends.



Blu Lacy Smokehouse.

Photograph by Wynn Myers



Chef Grecia Ramos at Baked, in Castroville.

Photograph by Wynn Myers

Blu Lacy and its next-door bakery, Baked, opened in late October. Day-trippers from San Antonio have been flocking to the barbecue joint, which offers a more traditional smoked-meat menu than the Tex-Mex-inspired 2M. And Baked, overseen by **pastry chef Grecia Ramos**, wife of 2M co-owner Esaul Ramos, has rapidly grown into a local favorite. On a Saturday morning, the line to get French pastries and coffee starts on the sidewalk. After waiting, I go all in on a fat jalapeño cheddar kolache, a butter croissant, and a pain au chocolat shimmering in edible gold baking dust.

In the back, Ramos labors over trays of baked goods with her staff, all Castroville residents she has trained. They average about five hundred croissants on weekend days. When she darts out to say hello, she brings me her latest creation: the Supreme Croissant. Lemon rosemary curd and whipped cream fill the circular treat. Biting into it is a sexy mess.

From my table I see the now gleaming marquee over the Rainbow, which the Elsass reopened six months after my previous visit. Showing tonight: *Godzilla vs. Kong*. I learn that the Alsatian film that Kempf had told me about sold out the two-hundred-seat theater three nights in a row. Alex Limón, the manager of the new Elsass Wine Bar around the corner, tells me, “I ain’t gonna lie, I cried a little.”



Blu Lacy Smokehouse.

Photograph by Wynn Myers

The town's changes since my last visit astonish me. I join more than thirty locals for a Walkabout Castroville Code Tour, one of the town's many efforts to share ideas as the city works on a comprehensive plan in tandem with the Elsass. An urban planner, Zach Lewis, from San Marcos-based Simplicity Design, says to the group, "In our discussions, we've been dreaming big. . . . Now we're getting into the nitty-gritty of how these dreams are turned into reality." He leads us from the corner park to the two-story Hotel Tarde, which opened in 1852. Frederick Law Olmsted, who designed New York's Central Park, once declared it the best inn in the state. "How delighted and astonished a traveler must have been," he wrote.

While the group debates building codes, I'm reminded of a video I watched at the Castro Colonies Living History Center, in which an actor playing Henri Castro says, "It is my destiny to secure the welfare of these families." Castro's past still feels very present in the town he helped build.



Castro Colonies Living History Center.
Photograph by Wynn Myers



Dough Station.

Photograph by Wynn Myers

The Best of Castroville

Stay

Hillside Inn: This hotel, which features a pool and full-service spa, is ideal for travelers looking for twenty-first-century amenities.

Hotel Tarde: Owners Pennie and Josh Robertson take great care of the historic property, which has five guest rooms.

Landmark Inn: A stay at this five-acre site along the Medina River hints at what a stagecoach voyager from the mid-nineteenth century might have experienced when stopping for the night. The rooms look out onto a tree-shaded lawn dotted with treasures such as the wash-house that charged travelers 25 cents for a bath.

Dine

Blu Lacy Smokehouse: The crispy brisket bark is the stuff of dreams, and the sides, particularly the corn salad, are so tasty that noncarnivores will find something to love here too. Don't miss the croissants at Baked, next door.

The Dough Station: This new pizza joint, in a revamped Exxon gas station on the side of U.S. 90, surpasses all small-town pizza expectations.

Magnolia Filling Station: The cortados and the camaraderie are strong at this community hub of a cafe.

Do

Castro Colonies Living History Center: Pop into this carefully restored Alsatian pioneer home from 1850 for a fun bit of time travel. Relive the pioneer days of Texas through interactive maps, films, and docents.

*This article originally appeared in the July 2024 issue of Texas Monthly with the headline “The French Connection.” **Subscribe today.***

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