



The Observer

The gourmet guide to the Trois Vallées

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The Trois Vallées, encompassing the resorts of Méribel, Courchevel, Val Thorens and five more, famously boasts the world's largest ski area, with more than 600km of runs. But its reputation for food lags far behind. Most skiers make do with spaghetti bolognese, croque monsieur and **frites**, all at high-altitude prices. Yet if you know where to look, the region has some fabulous gourmet secrets. In fact some of the finest restaurants in the Alps, from Michelin-starred blowouts to welcoming chalets with drop-dead views, can be found just a snowball's throw from these popular pistes.

Les Aiguilles De Peclet

This ramshackle chalet was built by Val Thorens' first ski school director, Camille Rey. Now, 26 years on, his cheerful daughter Aurélie is at the helm. Downstairs is self-service; upstairs, cosy pine rooms festooned with mistletoe and red cushions are a high spot for Savoyard home cooking. Take the oeufs brouillés, which someone at the

table translates as 'scrambled eggs'. Aurelie tells me they marinate foie gras and mushrooms in cream, then cook the eggs with these - making them as much like scrambled eggs as Catherine Deneuve is like Victoria Beckham. Beautiful salads heave with fresh greens and pouches of warm goat's cheese. The tartiflette is succour on a plate. To finish, the sweet rissoles - a kind of Savoyard donut - are made to Aurélie's grandmother's recipe: little balls of love filled with crème patissière and drizzled with dark chocolate.

Don't miss: oeufs brouillés with morilles and foie gras

The damage: one course from €15

Where to find it: at 2,945m, at the top of the Funitel de Pécelet lift above Val Thorens (00 33 4 7900 0376)

La Table De Mon Grand Pere

Local ingredients, generous portions, old family recipes. Why can't I have a grandfather in Le Praz? Thankfully, Norbert Gacon continues to share the traditions of his. Originally part of his grandfather's house, this cosy inn has operated here since 1938. To this day, it's a local favourite. This winter a new chef, Nadine Vercellino, poached from La Sivolière in Courchevel 1850, has instituted a welcome shift from the gastronomic back to simpler, more straightforward fare. The menu is Savoyard, the tarte au beaufort is pure comfort, and fresh fish and oysters fluctuate according to availability. Everything from the pasta to the pastry is homemade. Expect a familial welcome, and sit back and relax.

Don't miss: tarte tatin with vanilla ice cream

The damage: three-course menu €29

Where to find it: inside the Hotel Les Peupliers in Le Praz (aka Courchevel 1300), directly opposite the ski jump and bottom of the gondola (00 33 4 7908 4147; lespeupliers.com)

La Bouitte

Unpretentious yet so very, very French - there's a combination you don't see every day. La Bouitte's Michelin star twinkles brightly over the tiny hamlet of St Marcel. Once inside the converted 18th century farmhouse, you can't help but feel the reassuringly professional staff want you to truly enjoy the experience. It's about inspirational treatment - of both food and guest. It begins with a bouton de sechuan, a tiny dab of South American flower blossom that sizzles on the tongue and is washed down with essence of tomato. One of two dishes they offer year-round is the pan fried foie gras

with balsamic reduction. After all, who would dare take the eighth wonder of the world off the menu? In a few happy hours we covered the holy trinity of culinary decadence - foie gras, lobster and truffles. One word of caution, the lift back over to Méribel shuts not long after 4pm and it's a pricey taxi ride home. Then again, they do have five bedrooms upstairs - and dinner's already cooking.

Don't miss: escalope de foie gras de canard

The damage: two-course menu €52

Where to find it: in St Marcel, a tiny hamlet just up the valley from St Martin de Belleville. Off-pisters can ski to the door; others should ski down to St Martin, then call the restaurant, which will send a car (00 33 4 7908 9677; la-bouitte.com)

Allodis

When the sun's out, head for the piste-side terrace at Allodis, a three-star hotel and restaurant with the sophistication of a four-star luxe. Far from the madding hordes, here the quiet murmur of French mixes with the clink of stemware and the swoosh of passing skiers. Its suntrap tables offer the best views in the valley: the entire far face of Méribel in one panoramic sweep. A wooden platter of charcuterie and cheese arrives tout de suite. Expect huge crisp salads, beef carpaccio, smoked salmon, and garlicky escargots the size of 50p pieces. The desert table groans with an embarrassment of millefeuille, crème brûlée and fruit tarts. Friendly professional service, including an army of cute French waiters in neatly pressed shirts and cool shades. A true vie-est-belle moment.

Don't miss: the desert buffet

The damage: one course plus desert buffet €33

Where to find it: right on the piste in the Belvédère area above Méribel, close to the Rhodos lift (00 33 4 7900 5600; hotelallodis.com)

Il Vino

'It's all about the wine,' says Il Vino's Nicolas Simon. 'If you're ready to play the game, you choose the wine and we provide the food.' Like its sister operation in Paris, Courchevel's newest high-class boozier is the brainchild of Enrico Bernardo, voted world champion sommelier by the International Association of Sommeliers. Instead of choosing your preferred dishes (boring), you choose your preferred wines (exciting - and just a little weird). The mystery courses arrive, expertly paired to the vintages. There is also a blind tasting menu, allowing much slurping, sniffing and betting. By the end of lunch, the table looks like a posh glass recycling depot. Our party consisted of

two PhDs, a biologist and me - between us we correctly guessed more than half the grapes and just about figured out the menu. Oenophiles will be in their element, especially with the 'Wines of Europe' menu for €1,000. The restaurant is open for lunch by reservation only, though it is possible to book the same day.

Don't miss: Côte Rôtie 'Les Grandes Places' Clusel-Roch 2000

The damage: four-course blind tasting menu including wines €100

Where to find it: in the centre of Courchevel 1850 - ski to the bottom of the Verdons lift, cross the road and it's on your right (00 33 4 7908 2962)

Oxalys

There used to be just one reason to come to Val Thorens, the highest snowsure resort in the Alps, and it was never the architecture. Now there are two. Jean Sulpice, the chef at L'Oxalys and a protégé of legendary Marc Veyrat, has yet to celebrate his 30th birthday, but this energetic Tintin of the kitchen has already put Val T on the gastronomic map - L'Oxalys was awarded a Michelin star in 2006. A good morning's journey from the other valleys, the place is speckled with clever Courchevel and Méribel instructors bringing their clients for lunch. There's a whiff of Santa Fe in the decor, a bit of an urban groove in the room, and not a hint of snobbery.

'All my cuisine is imagination, it's research, it's a lot of work,' says Sulpice. His imagination has come up with frogs' legs in garlic tempura, and scrambled egg and cèpe emulsion spooned from its own shell. The venison is cooked in hay; scallops are awash with salty foam. 'My inspiration was to bring the ocean to the mountains,' he says.

Don't miss: pigeon in a foie gras pastry crust with liquorice sauce

The damage: three-course menu €48

Where to find it: in Val Thorens, on the left beside the Pluviometre piste (00 33 4 7910 4915; loxalys.com)

Le Chabichou

All those 'Thousand things to do before you die' books cluttering up your drawing room? Bin them - and replace with the menu from Le Chabichou. The dishes are decadent, but somehow lunch at this Michelin two-star temple still manages to feel properly sportif. Just holding the wine listing is an aerobic workout, and it's a dizzying challenge choosing between treats such as roast saddle of wild boar or scallop carpaccio with caviar. Desert is an oral revolution: fizzy praline with Valrhona

chocolate crackles on the tongue like Bastille Day fireworks. Few in the room had the willpower to refuse such dark riches - indeed, the only one to do so that day was Gordon Ramsay. And while the room did fall atwitter as he arrived, it also fell into respectful awe when Michel Rochedy, Le Chabichou's owner and executive chef, emerged to press the flesh. I asked him about his personal favourites and he paused to consider. 'Tous,' he smiled. He couldn't be more right.

Don't miss: warm lobster with black truffle, leek vinaigrette and lobster claw lollipop

The damage: three-course lunch menu €48

Where to find it: by the side of the piste in Courchevel 1850, close to the bottom of the Loze lift (00 33 4 7908 0055; chabichou-courchevel.com)

Essentials

Inghams (020 8780 4433; ingham.co.uk) has a week at the three-star Les Ducs de Savoie in Courchevel 1850 from £1,001, at the four-star Le Pied de Voute catered chalet in Méribel from £725, and at the four-star Le Fitzroy in Val Thorens from £1,097, all including flights from Gatwick and transfers. Flights are also available from 14 other UK airports for a small supplement.

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