

FOOD & DRINK

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A lot on his plate

The French Riviera is a hotspot for high-end restaurants. **Tristan Rutherford** samples some of the area's finest in a bid to taste nine Michelin stars in three days

It's going to be a difficult day at work. I'm lunching alone at Nice's Michelin one-star restaurant, Flaveur. In front of me is an amuse-bouche fantasy. There's parsnip mouse topped with tobiko (flying fish) eggs. There's melt-on-the-tongue mackerel on a giant seaweed "chip". A luminous yellow cube of haddock on a mousse of citron caviar. And a perfect square of trout gravlax on a perfectly round coriander biscuit. But that's not the difficult part. I have another Michelin-starred degustation in Nice this evening. And another two-star tasting near Italy tomorrow. And another in Monaco the day after that. My Michelin mission is to eat nine stars in three days. I fail in this and manage only six stars but not through lack of trying.

Luckily, I'm on the French Riviera. This coastal strip is one of a few places in the world outside London, Paris, New York and Hong Kong where such a challenge is possible. My fear is eating up to 6,000 calories per day. Back at Flaveur, the restaurant's young head chefs, brothers Gaël and Mickaël Tourteaux, serve me a new invention every 20 minutes. There's a three-layer carpaccio – petal-thin raw chestnuts above field mushrooms on beef brisket, perched on a bone marrow risotto. Then venison with umami-rich plum and black garlic dumplings and a juniper mousse. Elder brother Gaël Tourteaux joins me for dessert: pear, cardamom and nutmeg ice creams, jellies and biscuits, all coloured the same stone grey. Where did he learn to do this? "There's a wealth of Michelin-starred restaurants on the French Riviera," says Tourteaux. "I learnt my skills at Le Chantecler. My younger brother Mickaël practised at the Moulin de Mougins [a nearby two-star where Alain Ducasse learnt his trade]."

Like most chefs from the south of France, Tourteaux is



familiar with the *South China Morning Post*, *The New York Times* and *FT*. The conversation turns to China. "We welcome more and more Chinese diners," explains Tourteaux, while I plug a palate-cleansing tray of test tubes filled with ginger milk and fresh herbs. "They are up to date with fine dining trends. They're also extremely polite, which makes a change from some European nationalities."

Tourteaux is doubly delighted because the previous day a table of mainland diners bought a very expensive bottle of Burgundy. "It's becoming as famous as Bordeaux," he says, smiling, "and I have lots more in my cellar." Five hours later I'm sitting in the office of Jean-Denis Rieubland, head chef of the aforementioned Le Chantecler inside the five-star Hotel Negresco. Lobsters and oysters are being shelled around us. Rieubland explains why the French Riviera is such a foodie destination. "For me it's all about the ingredients," he explains. "The sun shines on the South of France to give us 300 sunny days each year. It pours its energy into

our Niçoise olives, globe artichokes and the Bellet vineyards above Nice airport." Does Rieubland use any 21st-century touches as they do at Flaveur? "We are really a classic two-star restaurant," he says. But Rieubland's clientele is slowly changing from older French diners to younger Europeans and Chinese. "President Hu Jintao stayed upstairs in the Negresco's suite royale in 2011, so we had increased interest from Chinese guests after that. Our Chinese guests love to eat."

As do I. In the hushed formality of Le Chantecler's dining room I'm served butter-soft duck on a mash of quince and chestnuts. Then grilled scallops surrounded by a beetroot rainbow. Following a one-star with a two-star is a great opportunity to compare the Michelin rules. Dishes here are delivered under silver cloches by waiters with the dress and demeanour of a 19th-century palais. My second wine pairing of the day is also more extravagant. A 1996 El Pison Rioja that tastes like ruby nectar.

The following day I enjoy a single two-star Michelin lunch followed by an early night. I sip sparkling water on the 40-minute train ride from Nice to Menton on the Italian border as it zips above the beaches of Villefranche, Monaco and Roquebrune.

As Mirazur occupies the 11th spot on the annual list of the World's 50 Best Restaurants, head chef Mauro Colagreco is categorically the best chef in France. Unlike

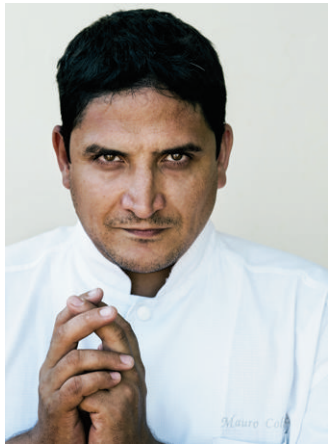


Veal loin with dashi custard, chiongia beetroot, wasabi sorbet, borage and tatsoi greens (above) from Flaveur; Mirazur (left) occupies 11th spot on the list of the World's 50 Best Restaurants.

the fancy fustiness of Le Chantecler, Colagreco's trick is to remove any diversions (think white dining room, black suited waiters, blue sea panorama) so the sole distraction is his food.

It's my only meal of the day, and it's an utter privilege. Raw tuna, caught locally, is paired with bitter almonds and citrusy raspberries. Crustaceans are served with edible flowers on an airy pillow of tapenade-stuffed bread. It's Picasso on a plate. Michelin-starred meals should leave you entranced and incredulous, not sated and stuffed. Mirazur leaves me hungry for more.

Tomorrow I have one final gastro onslaught, this time in Monaco. This tiny nation boasts nine Michelin stars, surely the



Mirazur's Mauro Colagreco.

highest concentration on earth. Alas, Monaco's three-star Louis XV by Alain Ducasse is closed for refurbishment until April. My stomach is "saved" from the five-hour marathon I enjoyed here in 2013 (it included 57 pieces of silverware and a dessert decorated in gold leaf). Restaurant manager Michel Lang talks me through the renovation.

"Louis XV will be more contemporary, young and purified," he says. "Also with a completely rewritten Riviera menu, new outfits and lighter

tableware." Still the same service? "You have to keep the professionalism in a Michelin three-star restaurant, but what's new is our 'office' in the centre of the salon. This piece of furniture will unfold as the meal progresses." Louis XV keeps one eye on the times and another on the overseas dining sector. "I am sure this will seduce and satisfy our guests, particularly Asians."

For a final gourmet hit I try the one-star Yoshi. A collaboration between Takeo Yamazaki, its Japanese head chef, and Joël Robuchon, the restaurateur who holds 25 Michelin stars, more than anyone else in the world. It's effortlessly amazing. I lift the enamel lid off a soup bowl to discover a fish ball that distils more crustacean flavour than an entire lobster. In another dish I peel layer upon layer off a meaty marinated black cod. Dessert is a fruity ikebana: a perfect triangle of blackberries, apricot, papaya, mango and melon.

Over a bowl of green tea, Yamazaki explains that gastronomy on the French Riviera is like the chicken and the egg. "It's a world famous destination with direct flights to New York, Moscow, Dubai and worldwide. And with 29 Michelin-starred restaurants, it attracts wealthy gastronomes. It also attracts chefs like me," smiles Yamazaki. I'm glad it does. life@scmp.com

Flaveur, 25 Rue Gubernatis, Nice, tel: +33 4 93 62 53 95, flaveur.net
Le Chantecler, Hotel Le Negresco, 37 Promenade des Anglais, Nice, tel: +33 4 93 16 64 00, hotel-negresco-nice.com
Mirazur, 30 Avenue Aristide Briand, Menton, tel: +33 4 92 41 86 86, mirazur.fr
Louis XV by Alain Ducasse, Hotel de Paris, Place du Casino, Monaco, tel: +377 98 06 88 64, alain-ducasse.com (reopens in September)
Yoshi, Hotel Metropole Monte-Carlo, 4 Avenue de la Madone, Monaco, tel: +377 93 15 13 13, metropole.com

RESTAURANT REVIEW TENKAI

The area on and around Aberdeen Street seems to be tempura central – within a few blocks there are three places specialising in the Japanese fried dish.

The elegant, refined Ippoh (at 39 Aberdeen Street) was the first (and remains my favourite), Tenshu (at 6-10 Kau U Fong) opened a few months ago, and now there's Tenkai.

Like the others, Tenkai is small – there are only nine seats at the counter, behind which the sole chef works. It offers only one omakase dinner menu (priced at HK\$1,300 plus 10 per cent) and it includes sashimi and other non-fried dishes.

The meal started with chawanmushi: delicate, smooth custard with tiny bits of shrimp and bamboo shoots. The second appetiser, which the waitress described as "Japanese New Year food", included glossy, sweet black soya beans, crunchy herring roe, a nice slice of duck, delicious cod eggs with ginger, too-sweet dried sardines and an ordinary boiled shrimp.

One reason I go for the tempura-only menus at this type of restaurant is that the non-tempura dishes are often disappointing. And so it was with the sashimi course. The shimaaji was very good, but the maguro was sinewy

and the amaebi was lacking in sweetness.

Tempura was served in two flights, and of the first, we liked the shrimp, snow crab, lotus root and asparagus. The boiled octopus had great flavour but was so tough we couldn't bite it – we had to eat it in one huge mouthful and it took a long time to chew it so it was tender enough to swallow.

We had the same complaint about the hamaguri clam in the clear soup – it was very tough.

Of the next set of tempura items, the aoiri squid was delicious: the thick piece had been very finely scored – you couldn't really see it, but you felt it in the mouth. Bamboo shoot topped with freshly shaved dried skipjack tuna was a revelation to anyone who has only tasted the pre-shaved katsuobushi: it was intense, almost like very fine quality jamon Iberico, except tasting of the sea.

Tendon and tencha – the last savoury course – was fantastic: the rice was topped with a delicious sakura ebi fritter.

The meal ended with refreshing yuzu sorbet. Susan Jung

Tenkai, 17 Aberdeen St, Central, tel: 2559 0737. HK\$1,300 without drinks or the service charge



From top: the interior of Tenkai; tempura bamboo shoot with freshly shaved dried skipjack tuna; tendon with miso soup and pickles. Photos: Bruce Yan