





*The Monte Carlo
Beach Hotel's Le
Deck restaurant*



MIDI FEASTS

Seaside gastronomy today along the Côte d'Azur is far more than fresh fish and sauce vierge. JENNIFER SHARP unveils the irresistible mix of glamour and serious cooking with which the Riviera shrugs off its rivals

HÔTEL DU CAP-EDEN-ROC

Few places live up to iconic status as effortlessly as this hotel, originally a grand Napoleonic mansion surrounded by ravishing rose gardens, pines, palms and specimen trees. A majestic walk stretches down to the sea and Pavilion Eden-Roc, which holds a gourmet restaurant, piano bar and informal Grill overlooking a spectacular infinity swimming pool, diving boards into the sea and private jetty. It takes your breath away.

Despite its impressive history, there is a gaiety and carefree style to the hotel. Staff are warm and relaxed, unfazed by celebrity. For Arnaud Poëtte, chef des cuisines since 1992, nothing is too much trouble and he has cheerfully introduced a sushi bar for the summer months to complement his Provençal cooking. The Restaurant Eden-Roc is a bright, spacious room that seems to float in space with airy white trellis and basketwork chairs, lavish flowers, mirrors, delicate chandeliers and huge windows overlooking the water. Tables on the terrace outside and the staff inside are clad in dazzling white linen.

The gourmet menu ranges across the Mediterranean with freshly caught fish and shellfish, sunbaked local fruit and vegetables, the finest French meat and poultry, Italian pasta and rice. The cooking is subtle and original, refreshing well-known dishes such as salade Niçoise, soupe au pistou and wild sea bass perfumed with basil and served with a mousse of fresh fennel. Steak Diane is flambéed at the table with a dramatic flourish and there's a trolley for fine cheeses and another for desserts by award-winning pastry chef Lilian Bonnefoi, who brings a playful sophistication to the menu. The 34-page wine list has the greatest French and Italian labels, 20 fine Champagne marques, 11 different mineral waters, plus a modest nod to the rest of the wine-producing world.

Step outside the gourmet restaurant, past whimsical frescos and photographs of Hollywood stars, and down into the Grill with a relaxed menu of fresh fish, oysters, beef carpaccio, salads and sandwiches, and simple dishes like steak tartare, prawns a la plancha or white salt cod aioli served in broth. With a breathtaking view and cosseting service, it's pure heaven. www.hotel-du-cap-eden-roc.com

MONTE CARLO BEACH

Though it's strictly in France not Monaco, the Monte Carlo Beach hotel and club is part of the Societé de Bains de Mer which includes major landmarks of the principality such as the Hotel de Paris, the Hermitage, the Casino, Les Thermes Marins and Le Sporting. To celebrate its 80th anniversary last year, Monte Carlo Beach was refurbished by designer India Mahdavi and reopened in May 2009 with sumptuous interiors and a bold colour palette inspired by Matisse. The hotel is tiny, just 40 rooms, but the extensive sea front, water sports, restaurants and bars attract a fashionable crowd throughout the summer. In the grounds stands the handsome Villa La Vigie, occupied for 14 years by Karl Lagerfeld and now available to rent; bungalows throughout the property have been family summer homes for generations.

Monte Carlo Beach has something for everyone. There's a large, informal restaurant, Le Deck, alongside the Olympic swimming pool; the trendy Sea Lounge for tapas, sushi and parties; while in July and August, on a promontory jutting out into the sea, the open-air restaurant La Vigie attracts a starry crowd who arrive by boat.

At the heart of the hotel is the restaurant Elsa, named after the legendary Elsa Maxwell (1883–1963), the American writer and socialite who enhanced the reputation of Monaco and organised the inauguration of Monte Carlo Beach. Her lavish parties mixed millionaires with aristocrats and artists, and she famously introduced Maria Callas to Aristotle Onassis.

The decor of the restaurant is crisply modern with blue and white lattice walls. Bold furniture echoes the nautical circles of capstans and portholes, while the doors open onto a ravishing semi-circular terrace overlooking the sea with white furniture and parasols. Elsa is an unashamedly gourmet restaurant with a wide-ranging menu of adventurous and classic dishes. There's fresh crab and chilli served in a sea urchin shell, frogs' legs breaded with polenta served with watercress cream, baked sea bass with red pepper sauce, and fillet of beef in a truffle consommé. There's also turbot cooked in 'grandmother's

casserole', oysters, caviar, foie gras with figs, and fillets of sole Belle Otero, inspired by the famous courtesan. This is a restaurant for real food lovers but dieters won't need too much self-restraint.

www.montecarloresort.com

GRAND-HOTEL DU CAP-FERRAT

In summer 2009, to celebrate its 100th anniversary, this splendid hotel was completely renovated and extended by designer Pierre-Yves Rochon and is now a masterpiece of airy grace and Riviera elegance. Visitors are instantly drawn to the Club Dauphin, situated below the hotel on the seashore and reached only by private funicular. It is impossibly glamorous with an infinity pool blending into the blue Mediterranean, poolside loungers and cabanas for sun lovers, and an alfresco restaurant for lunching and networking.

There's also the new lobby restaurant, La Veranda for all-day dining from a menu of contemporary dishes such as Ibérico ham, risotto, spaghetti with clams, octopus salad with green beans and potatoes, and even burgers. But whatever the distractions, serious gourmets make sure they have a dinner reservation at Le Cap, the Michelin-starred restaurant close to the hotel where highly acclaimed chef Didier Aniès creates menus of great skill and imagination. You can eat inside or outside on the terrace under the pine trees. It's a magical place, with cooking to match.

First the decor. The dining room of Le Cap is semi-circular and the ceiling fans out like a huge scallop shell. The rear wall is decorated with a large mural with frisky and athletic swimmers cutting a swathe through shoals of fish while stylised stars and seabirds fill the sky. Though painted by Michèle Letang, the inspiration is clearly Jean Cocteau, a regular visitor to the Grand-Hotel. The simple lines and subdued colours are deceiving: there is so much verve and energy in the picture. The room is lined with biscuit velvet banquettes complemented by pale blue upholstered armchairs. Art deco ironwork doors lead to the terrace and the room is dotted with skinny Giacometti-style bronzes. Tables carry pretty pots of flowers and mythical figures decorate the china: Poseidon, god of the sea; Aeolus, the winds; Venus, love; and Helios, the sun.

The cooking is of real delicacy and finesse. As an *amuse bouche*, there are luscious cepts with tomato, olive, pak choi for brilliant green colour and Parmesan flakes. Foie gras is served with rhubarb, black radish and a divine sauce; sweetbreads with wild asparagus (like samphire), truffles and a delicate purée of red apples. Mouth-watering desserts are courtesy of renowned pastry chef Luc Debove, who delights in surprise and theatre. A lemon soufflé is turned upside down to

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From Mirazur you can enjoy views over Menton and the Mediterranean

reveal a base of red fruits and then a jug of vodka and lemon juice is poured over the top and set on fire by a nimble waiter. This is service at its most ballistic.

There's more amazement from the wine list with the best Champagnes, including Bollinger, Deutz, Krug, Pol Roger and Cristal. There are very fine white and red Burgundies and the greatest hits of Bordeaux (Haut Brion, Cheval Blanc, Petrus and Lafite-Rothschild) but also agreeable Provençal wines that won't break the bank. You can choose from a staggering collection of Chateau d'Yquem dating back to 1893 and equally fascinating, but not for sale, is a private collection of 62 different vintages of Yquem proudly housed in the private dining room. Well, you can always dream. www.grand-hotel-cap-ferrat.com

MIRAZUR

Menton is right at the end of the Côte d'Azur, nestling into the coastline just as France merges into Italy. It's a grand old town with an enviable microclimate and recently it has become home to an exceptional restaurant. The owner is Argentine-born chef Mauro Colagreco, who came to France to learn under inspired chefs like the late Bernard Loiseau, Alain Ducasse and Alain Passard, owner of the three-Michelin-starred Arpège in Paris. In 2006, he opened Mirazur in Menton.

Still in his early 30s, Colagreco's innovative style of cooking earned him applause immediately. Shortly after opening, influential

critic François Simon gave him a rave review, and the Gault Millau guide dubbed him 'revelation of the year'. In 2009, the same guide named him Chef of the Year, the first non-French chef ever to have been so honoured. Mirazur is now a gourmet destination and as it's closed in the winter months, Colagreco can guest at restaurants in California, Buenos Aires and Japan to spread the word.

The restaurant occupies a large 1950s building over three levels with panoramic views over the Mediterranean and across to the historic centre of Menton. There's a wonderful organic garden, which supplies many of the herbs, fruit and flowers for the menu.

While his style is adventurous, Colagreco is not tempted by the geeky science of the molecular gastronomy of El Bulli or the Fat Duck. He concentrates on freshness, simplicity, a fine balance of colour and the true flavour of food. He might serve sweet red prawns with ribbons of asparagus, borage and wild garlic flowers, a ragout of baby broad beans with nasturtium flowers, or swordfish enhanced with an emulsion of citrus and olive oil. There may be thinly sliced ceps with quinoa, yarrow, wild rocket and white caviar (snail eggs mixed with a little olive oil), or pigeon with a polenta flavoured with coffee and coconut.

Whether it's a simple lunch, an adventurous *dégustation* menu or the daily changing *carte blanche* menu, when the chef is at his best, Mirazur is worth going that little bit further east along the Riviera to find, while Menton itself is a charming town. www.mirazur.fr ■■