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Tour du Fromage

Going Gourmand in Val d'Isère.

by LESLIE WOIT



Anthony Bourdain sagely stated, "You have to be a romantic to invest yourself, your money, and your time in cheese." Bring on French romance! Cheese is of such great import in France that even the citizenship test includes questions about *fromage*. Cheese is serious business in Savoie: tangy tartiflette, unguent fondue and rib-sticking raclette are sacred staples of the devoted.

"In Tartiflette We Trust". You'll see the waggish slogan on skis, on t-shirts and all round Val d'Isère, even on the bumper of a red Lambo kitted out with snow chains and a ski rack. Each winter, Val d'Isère's restaurants serve an estimated 300,000 fondues - that's roughly the weight of 10 elephants made of cheese. But in the 11th century village that ranks among the world's most famous ski resorts, respect for

culinary roots is also balanced by a love of innovation.

In a resort where you could eat well, very well, in a different restaurant each day for weeks, another bright new light has opened. The piste-side L'Étincelle - meaning 'spark' - is both handy for skiers and walkers, including during the midst of last January's record 23ft snowfalls. Chef Casanova's specialty is wood-grilled meats; the highest quality cuts are savored on the sun-trap panorama terrace outside, and inside amid the chic alpine-modern atmosphere. To begin, perhaps a wood-baked black truffle pizza for the table and, to finish, a selection of exceptional cheeses from a local farm including creamy Vacherin, fragrant Tomme, and strong l'Avalin...*et pourquoi pas?*

In the spiritual home of Olympian golden boy Jean-Claude Killy, Val's big mountains and buzzing village are undergoing a flux

PHOTOS COURTESY OF VAL D'ISÈRE TOURISME



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of self-improvement. Well into a \$225 million redevelopment plan that includes new hotels, 100 private chalets, and an underground moving walkway to lifts, France's highest hotel opens next winter. Le Refuge de Solaise occupies what was once the oldest lift station in the country, built in 1942 and reimagined in boutique five-star splendour. Launching in advance of the hotel, an expansive restaurant whose sundeck swirls in a 360 degree sweep of Espace Killy will be this season's must.

Down in the village, as in every French village, food is culture and cheese is king. The Killy Family collection of vintage skis and equipment spans a century of *le glisse*, displayed at The Ski Gallery and Fondue Factory. The concept of Dimitri and Mick Killy, nephew and younger brother of Olympian Jean-Claude, this cheesy destination combines industrial chic with a night at the museum.

But before you rush to dinner, spare a moment for *apéro*, which never arrives soon enough in our view. *Aperitif* is a sacred rite in these parts and there is no better place for its merry observation than La Cave sur le Comptoir. Guided by chief *bon vivant* Antoine Veuriot, journey through France with an array of delectable wines and an exhaustive library of cheeses. Each cork pop is as instructional as it is rewarding. His cave is a Bacchanalian bootie of good humor and eclecticism.

After all the cheese, the wine, and the multicourse *gourmandizing*, the circle of French life comes back to one thing. Marie Antoinette wasn't half wrong. It is all about cake. Where is the only Master Baker in Savoie? Patrick Chevallot, anointed by the mighty Société Nationale des Meilleurs Ouvriers de France, actually has two pâtisseries here. From his elegantly flaky *mille-feuille* and his moist, shudderingly fleshy *croissants*, to a doll-sized cheesecake topped with sweet, purple *myrtilles* destined to change your life, the vitrines of La Maison Chevallot are a vision of near indecent allure.

France, *je t'aime*. 🇫🇷

