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FINAL CALL

Why I fork out for fine-dining

By Brian Johnston | Illustration by Jamie Brown



Recently I dined at La Passagère, the Michelin-starred restaurant at Hotel Belles Rives on the French Riviera, where chef Aurélien Voquaud has been causing a stir with his innovative approach to fish and seafood.

A sense of occasion pervades Michelin dining in France, and this was no exception, with a grand art deco room, glittering chandeliers, and two layers of starched tablecloth, one blue, one white. On my table, three candles flickered on a porcelain candlestick that looked as if it might have been designed by Picasso.

Like the backdrop to an operetta, glorious blue views of the Mediterranean glimmered beyond the arched windows of the Belles Rives, adding to the impression I always have when enjoying haute cuisine in France that I've walked onto a stage set.

I feel like an extra, not quite getting the bigger picture. The know-all waiters have the main parts. They glide around like acolytes in stylish suits, and everything they murmur – “Still or sparkling?”, “Would you like more pepper?” – sounds like a metaphysical question.

Nothing is normal with posh dining in

France. Even though I speak French, I seldom have much idea what I'm eating. Only experts could stay on top of the culinary vocabulary: cartouche, chiffonade, confit, consomme and escabe have already launched you into the alphabet.

Already before my meal at La Passagère

Yes, my meal is €195 (\$320), but what price a cultural experience? People spend more on a Taylor Swift concert or a soccer final.

has begun, I'm challenged by *profou*, not a word I've come across before. The waiter informs me that it's a type of bread from the Vendée, made without yeast.

But ignorance doesn't change the taste buds. This *profou* tastes like the loved child of brioche and croissant, and has a flaky, buttery exterior studded with crispy confit garlic slices.

Don't be put off experiencing haute cuisine just because you're intimidated by

the vocabulary: The French are sometimes just as puzzled because what turns up on the plate is often unexpected.

My set menu at La Passagère has me seguing from an oyster that tastes of pine smoke to mackerel that looks almost Japanese. Spider crab comes in a flowery

foam that tastes like the hills of Provence.

The food is delicious, but French fine-dining is about more than that. It invites you to admire a variety of complex culinary techniques, and food plated like a work of art.

One of my courses is a single shrimp, curled in a half-circle that cups an orange-coloured sauce of such velvety suavity that it could only be created in France.

Chef Voquaud says his cuisine is “devoted to an ideal... a moment of timelessness reflecting joy and emotion”. Trust the French to turn food into philosophy. I've no idea what that means, but after a while the flavours and performance art have me seduced, and utterly in the moment.

Yes, my meal is €195 (\$320), but what price a cultural experience? People spend more on a Taylor Swift concert or a soccer final. You similarly got to see the work of the best during a Michelin-starred evening.

The meal takes longer than a pop concert or sporting event. You dandle through multiple rich courses and matching wines and then realise there are several desserts to come.

At La Passagère there are four dessert courses, each a delicate extravaganza involving dark chocolate and extracts of improbable plants such as geranium and dשא fernell.

That's the thing about fancy French dining. You can't describe what you had. You mightn't even know what ingredients you ate. But what you do know is that you've enjoyed the ultimate food fantasy, and one of travel's great experiences.

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