

H a u t e c u i s i n e

How Val Thorens, Europe's
highest ski resort, became one
of the world's least likely
gourmet destinations

Words / Astrid Olsson → Photos / River Thompson







Above✓
The kitchen at the
two-Michelin-starred
Restaurant Jean Sulpice
Below✓
The food at L'Épicurien,
another Val Thorens
restaurant with a star



It's hard to get time with Jean Sulpice, one of the most famous men in Val Thorens. At 7am on a misty morning in the French ski resort, we hitch a ride on a snowmobile with a gruff middle-aged driver and head uphill. Through the fog, we see a shadowy figure on cross-country skis heading upwards, fast. After racing us for a while, we reach the top of Pécelet, at 3,100m, almost a kilometre higher than the main resort. Sulpice is barely out of breath as he peels off his ski skins and says he has five minutes. After a few snaps, without warning, he checks his watch, waves, and is off again. "I need to get to work," he says over his shoulder, disappearing into the mist for the ski downhill to his kitchen.

Sulpice is a busy, and you sense exacting, man. He does this trip almost every morning, calling it his "personal form of meditation", though he fastidiously times himself and regularly updates his skis. Then he goes back to Restaurant Jean Sulpice, his two-Michelin-starred restaurant, and gets to work.

It's remarkable enough that Sulpice was the youngest ever French cook to win a Michelin star (at 26), and then the youngest to win two (at 31). It's perhaps more remarkable still that he's done it all in Europe's highest ski resort, at 2,300m, where eggs take twice as long to boil, bread dries quickly, wine matures at extra speed and packaged food is wont to explode due to the high air pressure.

Then there's the fact that when he opened up in 2002, aged just 22, Val Thorens was a relatively unsophisticated "ski factory", where diners broadly had little expectation beyond a tartiflette and a plate of frites after a day on the slopes.

"Of course, people said it was a crazy idea," he tells us when we meet him for a lavish five-course lunch (*see profile, below*). "There were a lot of people who wanted to put sticks in my wheels when I started off here." »



Jean Sulpice—Restaurant Jean Sulpice

Jean Sulpice has become a figurehead in Val Thorens, with his fresh face appearing every few minutes on the big screens at the bottom of the slopes – and eating at his eponymous two-Michelin-starred restaurant lives up to the billing. His three-, five- or eight-course set menus will likely include a few of his speciality dishes, many of which play with Savoyard cooking: quail's eggs, cucumber jelly, smoked fera and oxalis; salted Savoyard rissole with a cream of vacherin cheese; and, perhaps his most iconic dish, a meringue apple filled with honey and licorice. It's worth going, too, just for the spectacular Savoie cheese trolley. 🍷 jeansulpice.com





Val Thorens back then was nothing like Courchevel, two valleys across, which is known for its “palace” hotels (the French equivalent of a sixth star), Prada and Fendi stores, and the fact that it’s always been home to Michelin-starred restaurants.

“Apart from the challenges of cooking here, there just wasn’t the clientele back then,” recalls Sulpice. “Val Thorens wasn’t a Courchevel or a Val d’Isère – it was all quite utilitarian, with no five-star hotels, and no classy restaurants. But the skiing has always been fantastic, and I just believed that if I combined my passions for food and the mountains, people would come.”

Fast-forward to 2015, and the picture looks very different. There are great restaurants across town, from the Michelin-starred

L’Épicurien, in the swanky Montana apartments; to the Koh-I Nor, in a stunning new modernist five-star hotel; or the rough-hewn, family-owned Chez Pépé Nicolas, a hidden gem that only clued-up locals know how to reach. Still going strong is the wonderful La Belle en Cuisse butchers, where the charming owner Pierre Bosseboeuf has been selling two-year-cured Beaufort cheese, wonderfully oily dried duck and

cured local saucisson for 35 years.

But when Sulpice opened his doors, it was tricky. “It was hard to convince people to come for dinner at first,” remembers Sulpice, now a very youthful 37. “I had to completely rethink how I sourced and presented the food, and it was a challenge to convince people to come and have real fine dining in the mountains.” »

“There just wasn’t the clientele when we opened – it was all quite utilitarian”



Eva Barolo—Caron Freeride Café

Swede Eva Baralo, along with her French husband JP, used to run the Caron Freeride Café, the highest café in the Three Valleys (which includes Courchevel, Méribel and Les Menuires) – but the pair have now moved on to a similar one in Les Deux Alpes. The view from the terrace at the 3,200m Cime de Caron is sensational, and the classic ski food here is good too, from home-made lasagne to tartiflette or pizza with Tarentaise smoked sausage. The Baralos spent three winters at Caron, after he quit a job in sports events and she left The North Face. “It wasn’t always easy,” Eva says. “You’re completely dependent on the weather, and you have to bring absolutely everything up on the first gondola at 9.45am – not just all the food you’ll use for the day, but a giant tank of water. Still, when it’s blue skies and you’re sitting on top of the whole ski area, there’s nowhere better.”

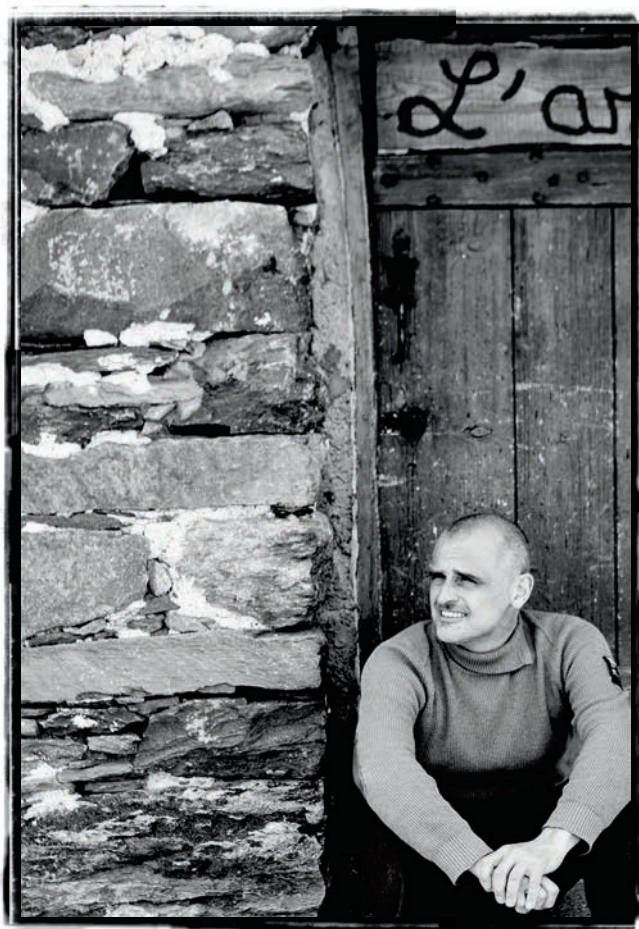
Clockwise from
top left
Jean Sulpice's knives;
a dish at L'Épicurien;
details at Chez P  p  
Nicolas and L'  picurien





Jérémie Gillon—L'Épicurien

Gillon (above) follows the Jean Sulpice food credo of “90 per cent Haute Savoie” food, and has been rewarded for his inventive take on local dishes with a Michelin star. “You have to be going down the valley at 5am to get the best ingredients here,” says the head chef at L'Épicurien in the Montana Apartments. “You have to find the woman with the free range pigs, the fisherman with the best white trout or the guy who forages herbs in the mountains. The first thing is respect for the product – then, I try to have fun.” Gillon's career has seen him work across France with the likes of two-starred Nicolas Lebec, and in the summer he is an executive chef at Singapore's ME@OUE. His favourite place, though? “Here, in the mountains.” 🍷 restaurantmontana.fr



Thierry Suchet—Chez Pépé Nicolas

Situated just off the brand new Chasse red run, the elegantly rustic Chez Pépé Nicolas might just be our favourite Val Thorens restaurant. It's been in the Suchet family since 1957, when (Pépé) Nicolas Jay took over a remote mountain hut to take his goats and cows to pasture. In 1986, Nicolas's grandsons Eric, Bruno and Thierry Suchet took over the farm, gradually adding a small bar and eatery, which has grown steadily since, even if it's traditionally been tricky to ski to. It's worth it for great fondues and charcuterie platters, often surrounded by Suchet family members and the goats who produced the cheese. “We keep the menu small but local, even the wine” says Thierry. “We want guests to feel the simple, good life.” 🍷 chezpepenicolas.com

“It was a challenge
to convince people
to have real fine
dining in the
mountains”



This page
Jean Sulpice's
famous apple
meringue dessert,
with mountain
honey and licorice



Sulpice was born to a family of restaurant owners in Aix-les-Bains, a thermal bath town on the shores of Lake Bourget in the Savoy region, less than two hours from the Three Valleys and Val Thorens. After training down the road in Le Bourget-du-Lac, he went to work with Marc Veyrat, the legendary Savoyard chef and bon vivant who brought molecular gastronomy to bear on mountain plants and herbs: first at the three-Michelin-starred Maison de Marc Veyrat on Lake Annecy, and then La Ferme de mon Père in Megève, also with three stars. Sulpice shared a passion for skiing with Veyrat, and after coming to do a season in Val Thorens, was hooked. In 2002, when he discovered that L'Oxalys was being built as the resort's first luxury residence, he secured the rights to run the restaurant, with his wife Magali as sommelier and front-of-house.

"I just love being in the mountains, and this is as high up as it gets," he says. "Opening a gastronomic restaurant here didn't make

obvious business sense, but in a way I liked that challenge. I couldn't find the herbs I knew or a lot of the products I'd used around Lake Annecy, but I wanted to stay true to my roots; to cook from the Savoyard terroir, and still to make it work for skiers. At least 90 per cent of my food is still using local ingredients."

Wanting to "do fine dining, but not be stuffy", he introduced a simple skier's platter for lunch, with verrines on a rustic wooden platter. Slowly, skiers got used to eating a Chinese okra velouté or a Crozet risotto for lunch; and started coming for dinner. "It took a while to convince people, just as it took a while for me to figure out how it how this works," says Sulpice. »

"I'd inherited Michelin guides going back to 1908, so winning a star was big"

Eric Samson—Koh-I Nor

While most the chefs at Val Thorens are keen skiers, Samson doesn't go near skis – he's happier in the kitchen at Koh-I Nor, the beautiful resort perched on the hill overlooking the town. He's also not particularly fussed by tartiflette and frites: "I like decoration; I like using truffle and foie gras; I like flavours," he says. Those who eat at Koh-I Nor's restaurant, where Samson brings Asian flavours to bear on French classics – think avocado ravioli with gambas and wasabi ice cream, or grilled perch with Thai-style lentils – are in good hands. Samson has won Michelin stars at two different restaurants – the Château de Courcelles in northern France, and at L'Imaginaire in the Dordogne – as well as working with three-Michelin-starred chef Olivier Roellinger. 📍 hotel-kohinor.com

Before you eat

Val Thorens, Europe's highest ski resort, is also one of its most fun-packed



The zipwire

La Tyrolienne zip line starts at 3,230m, and takes you on an epic 1,300m glide across the Vallée de Lory, 250m above the glacier. "It's like being an eagle," they say. 📧 la-tyrolienne.com



The toboggan

Europe's longest toboggan run is 6km of fun, starting at 3,000m up. *N* did it in near-zero visibility, and it was still hilarious (tip: be gentle on the brakes).

📧 valthorens.com



The ice driving

Europe's highest ice-driving track is named after Alain Prost and offers a 760m track for serious sliding. There's also an ice karting track.

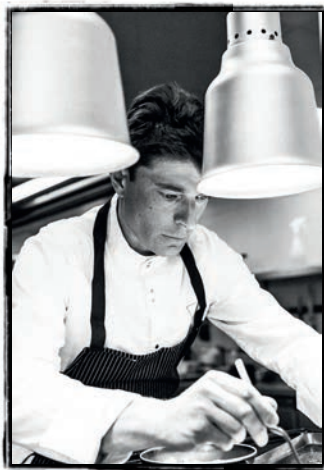
📧 icedrivingacademy.com



The rest

You can ride a Segway, do snowboard jumps onto a giant airbag, go paragliding, paramotoring, or dive under ice in the nearby Lac du Lou.

📧 valthorens.com



Top ✓
A Jean Sulpice sauce
Above ✓
The man himself in his famous kitchen

Over time, he figured out suppliers: like local farmer Cécile Berlioz, who delivers Hurlières Domain saffron; or Eric Jacquier, who catches Lake Geneva féra fish. Also the right flour to use, and thicker crusts, so that his bread wouldn't dry out.

In 2006, Michelin awarded the restaurant its first star. "It meant so much because my great uncle had won a Michelin star, and I'd inherited all the Michelin guides going back to 1908. To become part of that was unbelievable and it felt like the decision to open the restaurant had been vindicated." As well as becoming France's youngest Michelin-starred chef at 26, he had created the world's highest Michelin-starred restaurant. In 2010, he won a second star.

Around that time, the town was starting to change. Eight years ago, Jeremy Gillon was brought in to helm the kitchen at L'Épicurien in the new Montana apartments, and would win a Michelin star. Val Thorens has boomed as a foodie destination ever since, just as the Three Valleys have – Courchevel now has a total of 12 Michelin stars for eight restaurants, while La Bouitte in nearby Saint-Martin-de-Belleville recently won a third star.

"It's amazing the difference," says Sulpice. "It's nice to think that I've been a part of things changing, in Val Thorens and in the wider area. You know when you come here that it's not just some of the world's best skiing – hopefully you'll find some of the world's best cooking too."



Val Thorens is less than two hours' drive from Grenoble; Norwegian flies to Grenoble from Stockholm and London. Book flights, a hotel and a rental car at norwegian.com