



A towering presence: Le Jules Verne makes the most of its elevated position

The Family Jules



ALAIN DUCASSE SCALES THE EIFFEL TOWER AND ALL SYSTEMS ARE GO, WRITES **AMY SERAFIN**

HOVERING ON THE second floor of the Eiffel Tower, 125m up, Le Jules Verne is the best-located restaurant in Paris – maybe even the world. But 25 years after its creation, it was due for an overhaul. French superstar chef Alain Ducasse was the obvious man for the job, and he's turned this into one of the hottest trips in town.

Even for a gastronomic entrepreneur of Ducasse's experience and reputation, the challenge was imposing because, physically, this place is more like a spaceship than a restaurant. The tower sways ever so slightly with the wind and weather, so the weight inside is counted to the ounce. When the old interior was carried out, each piece was put on the scale before being replaced. The surface area, too, is measured to the centimetre. In the kitchen, the staff of 25 have only 45sqm in which to cook. "We feel the lack of space," says the head chef, Pascal Féraud. "We have to think about every move we make." For safety reasons there's no possibility of using a gas flame, so the kitchen cooks

PHOTOGRAPHY **ERIC LAIGNEL**



with electric heat and steam. Basic food preparation such as scaling fish and cutting vegetables takes place in a specially created kitchen annex at the base of the tower.

Le Jules Verne closed last August, then reopened on December 22 after a sprint-against-the-clock, 120-day renovation. "Going up the Eiffel Tower is like leaving on a voyage," said the interior architect, Patrick Jouin (who also did Ducasse's eponymous three-star table in the Plaza Athénée) before setting out to create a 21st-century vessel worthy of the adventure.

Nearly 7 million tourists visit this iconic landmark every year. They're the ones lining up to cram into the big elevators, while restaurant clients make their way in a private lift. Up top, the dining room is divided into three spaces, with the kitchen in the middle, hidden from sight by a glass honeycomb wall. Walls of exterior windows provide different views: the gold dome of Les Invalides, Jean Nouvel's Quai Branly museum, the *peniches* gliding by on the Seine, or the massive buildings of Trocadéro directly across the river.

Though Jouin has done his best to provide a view from every table, it can't be denied that some prospects are better than others. Fortunately, his décor is a fine consolation for diners seated away from the windows. The place is both contemporary and cosy, with indirect lighting and tones of chocolate and beige. Armchairs in leather and carbon fibre perch on futuristic haunches. Through small diamond-shaped side windows, the huge red or yellow pulleys that operate the tower's elevators turn like industrial Ferris wheels. On the tables, porcelain plates are flipped upside down to show their extravagantly moulded bases, reflecting the metal latticework of the building. Branches of light on the low ceiling echo the avenues of the city outside. The ambience adapts to the changing light conditions and views

Above: Head chef Pascal Féraud. Right: The restaurant's moulded plates are unique





The unusual architecture presents some interesting design challenges

throughout the day and night.

Ducasse has turned Le Jules Verne into a showcase for French savoir faire, from the interior design to the porcelain, silverware and crystal, while the servers, sharply dressed by Lanvin, manage that particularly Gallic trick of easy-going formality. The patriotic wine list contains 430 references, both prestigious houses and independent producers. The menu uses home-grown products for a light, contemporary take on the nation's gastronomic traditions.

Only 34 years old, Chef Féraud is already a veteran of tables such as the Louis XV in Monte Carlo, L'Orangerie in Los Angeles and Spoon at Sanderson in London. He originally suggested 250 dishes to Ducasse, and they whittled those down to a list of 50. Among dishes that have already risen to the status of house classics is the Coquilles Saint-Jacques à la Plancha, perfectly seared scallops on a light cauliflower cream with brown butter. There's the Volaille de Bresse, France's most famously tender chicken prepared three ways for a variety of textures and served with a dark, intense crayfish *jus*. And though the Filet de Saint-Pierre (John Dory) looks perfectly banal on the plate, it amazes the palate, with a taste like 20,000 leagues under the sea, after being steamed in Japanese algae. It's served with salted butter and little cockles, clams and *bulots*.

The unconventional cheese platter is a chequerboard displaying four varieties from the country's best suppliers,

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each served with its own accompaniment. Thus a creamy goat cheese is paired with a kicky chocolate-olive tapenade, and an aged Comté with a *vin jaune* jelly.

You'll regret it if you miss L'Ecrou au Chocolat, a light but dense dessert where the flavour of dark chocolate praline is accented by a hint of *fleur de sel* and hazelnut ice cream. The same goes for the hot and bittersweet Soufflé de Pamplemousse Rose (pink grapefruit soufflé). The whole thing ends with a Proustian touch, a package of madeleines as you bid your adieux.

And while a meal runs to about €500 for two, the €5 prix-fixe lunch menu (€10 with wine) might be the best deal in town. In any case, lunch reservations are easier to snag, especially if you're hoping for a table by the window. Though Le Jules Verne is open 365 days a year, clients must book up to two months in advance. It's worth it for an experience that's out of this world. ■