



SOMETHING'S COOKING IN THE VALLEYS

Savvy ski companies in France's Three Valleys are attracting food lovers with ski holidays that focus as much on the food as the snow. Food editor Rebecca Woollard, who first cooked professionally as a ski-chalet girl, sloped off for a taste of the high life

COLD COMFORTS, CLOCKWISE FROM THIS PICTURE
Working up an appetite on the slopes;
Alpine Escape's Dulcis Casu; La Bouitte's
posh nosh; looking sheepish at La Trantsa;
Portetta Hotel snacks; Fire and Ice bar

hungry traveller.



“My cooking career started out in a ski chalet in Courchevel, so I have many memories of the French Alps.

However, since most of them feature hangovers, kitchen disasters, crying into undercooked turkey crowns and downing far too many toffee vodkas, it's understandable that I'd never considered the famed Three Valleys ski area a foodie haven. If you have the money, you can dine well (the resort is famously the haunt of Russian oligarchs and their lady friends), but what if you want to go for a holiday that won't cost you an arm and a Moncler-clad leg?

That distinctly British concept, the catered chalet holiday, held no appeal for me after I'd hung up my chalet-girl apron. I'd loudly affirm to anyone who'd listen that I preferred the freedom to choose my own meals (and mealtimes). I didn't want a hungover youth hanging around with some droopy canapés; I knew what went on behind the scenes and I had no desire to pay good money for it.

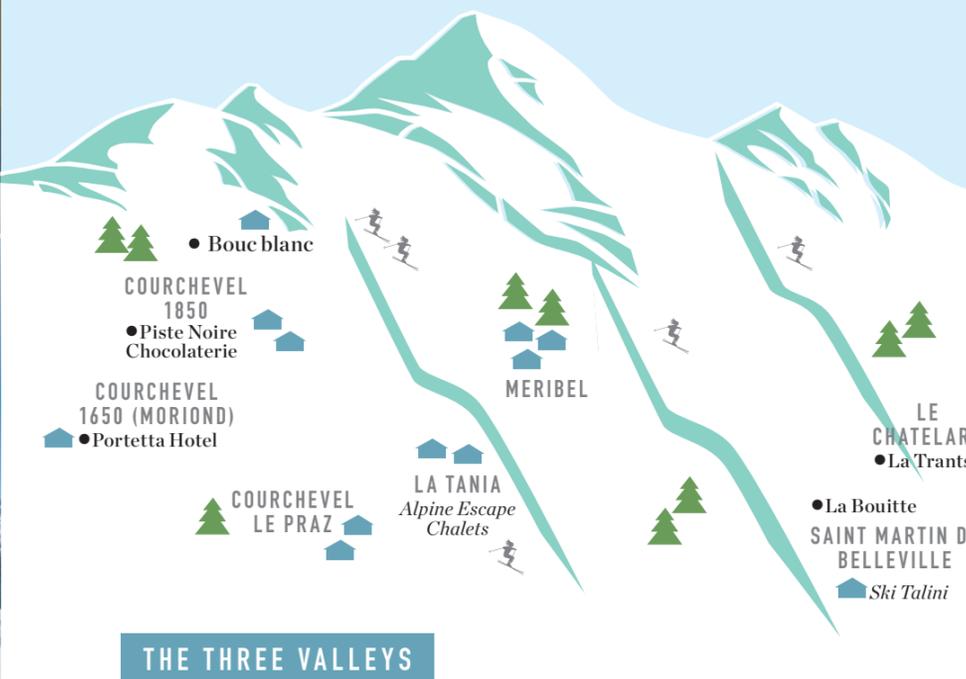
But I'll tell you a secret: on my last visit I discovered that there are travel companies in the region who are doing the chalet holiday extremely well – no cheap pâté, no boxed wine and, as far as I could tell, very few hangovers (for the chalet staff at least). On top of that, it seems that if you know where to look, the Three Valleys really is something of a foodie paradise, whatever your budget.

DINING IN

We stayed with two companies on our trip, Alpine Escape (alpine-escape.co.uk) in La Tania and Ski Talini (skitalini.co.uk) in St Martin de Belleville. Neither resort is very famous, which is why the tour companies chose them. What you get is fantastic skiing with a lower price tag than, say, Courchevel 1850 or Méribel, and a friendlier feel. →

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hungry traveller.



GOING OFF-PISTE

One of the best parts of the trip was visiting **La Trantsa**, a sheep farm where Serge Jay (above) makes fresh and aged sheep's milk cheeses. Book a snow-shoe walk to his farm (raquettenature.com) for a cheese tasting and 'trantsa' – a traditional meal of rye bread and warm sérac curd cheese (like ricotta) with honey, pepper and crushed coriander seeds. It's extremely good.

Serge has also begun making spiced mutton sausages from the male sheep – so nothing is wasted. His wife, Susan, makes sheep's yogurt and fudgy cruche (her recipe is on p120).

Another must-visit is chocolaterie **Piste Noire** (pistenoire-courchevel.com) in Courchevel 1850, run by Florencia, an Argentinian who moved to the area to be with her ski instructor husband. She makes her chocolates the traditional Argentine way, in trays, which are then cut up into small bars. We came away laden with unusual and delicious flavours.

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Michelin-starred La Bouitte; head to Bouc Blanc for cosy vibes and good food; Ski Talini's Chalet Polaris; a good meal is the way to finish a blue sky powder day; Ski Talini comfort

Most chalet companies, fancy or budget-conscious, follow the same formula: breakfast is pastries, cereal, fresh bread and so on, plus a daily hot option – anything from pancakes to a bacon sandwich, with the higher-end companies also offering eggs any way you want them. In the afternoon there's a cake waiting for you, followed by three courses for dinner, often with canapés, aperitifs and a cheese board. What sets some companies apart is the quality of the food offered, and at both chalets I was thrilled at how good it was.

At Ski Talini, whose holidays are described as 'fit for foodies', the chefs visit the local markets, hunting out the best seasonal produce and tweaking their menus to reflect what they've bought. A high point was a whole vacherin mont d'or cheese, bought that day because it looked good, and baked in the embers of the chalet fire as the cheese course. Both chalets

were also full of little touches to make you feel cosseted. A cup of tea or coffee brought to your room first thing, packs of tissues, chocolate bars and lip salves to take with you up the mountain, and ski hire done in the chalet so you don't have to trek to the shop with your ski socks in hand. Bliss!

The chefs in the chalets also knew their stuff. Both were professionally trained and did their jobs calmly and quietly, happily catering for individual requests, while also turning out menus to exacting standards. A pudding of white chocolate cream with raspberry gel at Alpine Escape's Chalet Ecrivain and a starter of stuffed saddle of rabbit with black pudding and walnut salad at Chalet des Anges with Ski Talini were highlights of the week. Wine pairings were well judged and featured some local varieties as well as those from further afield – no boxed vinegar here.

DINING OUT

Visitors to the Three Valleys are spoiled for choice with restaurants, from self-service to Michelin Man-approved, and everything in between. But if you want good food without paying top euro, it's a great idea to ask the local ski instructors. A star recommendation was **Bouc Blanc** (+33 4 79 088026), a big old place up the mountain from La Tania that we slid into as a blizzard descended. It's places like these – noisy, bustling, warm and full of people enjoying a break from the bitter weather – that make me love European skiing (although there's also a magnificent terrace if the sun is shining).

The menu is full of classics – steak tartare with a nice touch of DIY accompaniments, omelettes every which way, pasta and grilled meats, plus Savoie specialities such as tartiflette (a hefty dish of potatoes, reblochon cheese, bacon and onions), pierrade (meat cooked

on a hot stone), raclette and the like. Puddings are equally hearty, and they also do a café gourmande, a French invention that gives you a small portion of almost everything on the dessert menu, accompanied by a coffee (yet another reason why I count France as my spiritual home). The caramel crème brûlée was excellent, and that's coming from a crème brûlée naysayer. Expect to pay about €30 (£25) per person for two courses without drinks.

If you've got the dosh and want to go to town at lunchtime, book early to get into **La Bouitte** (la-bouitte.com), in the St Martin side of the third valley. If you ski down to the resort, they'll collect you in their own minibus. How's that for high-end? Once in, you're given the choice to remove your ski boots or keep them on (take them off, for heaven's sake) and you're shown to a chi-chi hut where heated racks will dry out your boots, and cosy, furry slippers – for the boys

as well – wait to replace them.

The restaurant is as fine dining as it gets – three Michelin stars of it to be exact – and the food is everything you'd expect with that accolade. The great thing is they've stayed true to their roots, and the Savoie influence can be tasted in everything from the traditional cross-shaped bread you share to start your meal to the local cheeses and a petit four of cruche, a Savoyard sweet that's a cross between a biscuit and fudge. The menu also lists all the local producers who supply the restaurant, and it's wonderful to see so much produce coming from close by. A three-course meal – weekdays only – is €140 (£120) per person.

For something a little less wallet-busting, although still a treat, the **Portetta Hotel** (portetta.com) in the village of Moriond (on the Courchevel side) is definitely worth a ski over. (And if you're staying in that resort, their outdoor

bar, Fire and Ice, is a favourite stop for après-ski, not least because they hand out homemade pizza by the slice.) Run by the same group that owns the swanky Lime Wood hotel in Hampshire's New Forest, restaurant Cucina Angelina is the brainchild of chef Angela Hartnett, and her signature style of refined but lick-the-plate-good Italian is perfect for hungry skiers. For three courses without drinks you'll pay about €50 (around £43) each. →



hungry traveller.

Chalet Ecrivain from Alpine Escape (above) and Ski Talini



A WINNING RECIPE

All this great food hasn't gone unrecognised. St Martin de Belleville, Ski Talini's home resort, has just been awarded Gastronomic Resort of the Year in the World Snow Awards – the only French resort to be shortlisted. And it's easy to see why. The small village is tucked away in the Third Valley, much lower than the better-known (but less picturesque) Val Thorens. As well as boasting **La Bouitte**, it's home to some great bakeries and delis, and several working farms you can visit and eat at, such as La Trantsa (see box on p119).

While I'd embarked on our trip with a fairly good idea of the high-end food I'd encounter, it was this small dairy farm that brought

home the true charm of the Three Valleys. Among the stylised chocolate-box perfection of the chalets, it's easy to forget that these are also working towns. If you want a real taste of French Alpine life, it's worth looking up Serge, Susan and their farm. But do make sure you enjoy all the other diversions the Three Valleys has to offer. After all, skiing is hungry work. **📍**

● *A week at each chalet, including seven nights' accommodation, half-board with drinks and personal concierge service, starts at £750 per person for Ski Talini and £500 per person for Alpine Escape, based on two sharing. More information at courchevel.com or courchnet.com and en.st-martin-belleville.com.*

Susan Jay's Savoyard cruche

MAKES 40 PIECES. HANDS-ON TIME
30 MIN, PLUS SETTING

MAKE AHEAD This sweet treat will keep in an airtight tin for around five days.

Line a 30cm x 20cm tin with baking paper. Melt **250g salted butter** over a low heat, then slowly stir in **250g plain flour**. Stir constantly over the heat for 10-15 minutes until lightly browned and smelling biscuity. Add **125g caster sugar** and stir for 5 minutes more – it should be golden but not dry. Transfer to the tin and level the top with a spatula. Leave for an hour or so to cool completely and firm up (or chill for 40 minutes), then cut into pieces with a sharp knife – it's quite crumbly. Serve with coffee or tea as a petit four.

PER PIECE 82kcal, 5.3g fat (3.3g saturated), 0.7g protein, 8g carbs (3.2g sugars), 0.2g salt, 0.2g fibre

NEXT MONTH

A food and wine lover's guide to Cape Town and the Cape Winelands



TRY THIS AT HOME

RECIPE PHOTOGRAPH: JONATHAN KENNEDY. FOOD STYLING: REBECCA WOOLLARD. STYLING: MORAG FAROUHAR