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BOUTIQUE BEDS AND VALUE FINE DINING IN PARIS

YOU know the winds of change are blowing through French cuisine when the guys at the top, rather than the up-and-comers, announce that they are going back to basics. Alain Ducasse, the French chef with the most Michelin stars, has announced that he's moved on from the food of "pomp and ceremony". The jet-setting maestro who runs 27 restaurants in eight countries is reverting back to the simplicity of "essential tastes". As I tucked into an intensely flavoured dish of duck with turnips at the Hotel Plaza-Athenee in Paris, it was an easy stretch to agree with the new direction.

Christophe Saintange, the executive chef in charge of the Plaza-Athenee's kitchen, is interpreting Ducasse's new regime with panache. "We wanted to make the cuisine more simple - not food for the sake of demonstration," he says. That's only half the point, though. It's tougher to make a dish with only a couple of ingredients look as if it's worth the money. As the old French saying goes, if you want to know how good a chef is, ask him to make an omelette. If he makes a mistake, he can't hide it under a sauce, an added vegetable or anything else.

The dining room of the Plaza-Athenee has been gussied up, but that only makes the streamlining of the food such an inspired decision. For those of us who have been disappointed by failed fusion experiments in expensive French restaurants, the heritage menu is a dream, from the freshest of langoustines with equally fresh caviar to the poulet rotie, or roast chicken as we say in English. The a la carte menu also follows the simply perfect route, from sole meuniere through calf's sweetbreads with carrots, lamb with artichokes and, of course, the duck with turnips. As I tucked into a dessert of baba au rhum comme a Monte Carlo, it reminded me of the old aphorism that a baked apple is a luxury to a millionaire. Perfectly cooked, of course, by a master chef.

Culinary trends come and go but Parisians remain as trend-conscious as New Yorkers when it comes to chasing down hot new restaurants. Not only is the food at Jadis (translation, 'in times past') borderline brilliant, but chef Guillaume Delage is one of the most talented chefs in France. The prices are very reasonable, though, for classic-

with-a-twist dishes like skate in brown butter and succulent lamb shoulder on a bed of mogette beans. At Frenchie, the man in the kitchen is Gregory Marchand, who has done time at the Gramercy Tavern in New York and Jamie Oliver's Fifteen in London. You come to this restaurant in a cobblestoned street in the old garment district of Paris for some of the best market-driven food in town, from house-smoked trout on edamame puree to juicy slices of roast pork on celeriac.

L'Agrume is another bargain-basement magnet for those in search of fine food without a hefty price tag. A five-course dinner costs only 35 euros (\$49). Opened last December by chef Franck Marchesi-Grandi, formerly of the Plaza-Athenee, who cooks alone in the open kitchen, L'Agrume is the magic bistro of every traveller's fantasy. If the langoustine ravioli is on, look no further. Get here

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early - before 9pm - because the small dining room fills with locals every night. And save room for the chocolate ganache dusted with cocoa powder and served in a mint 'soup'.

Top-quality comfort food is the forte at three-star chef Guy Savoy's rotisserie/restaurant L'Atelier Maitre Albert. Across the Seine from Notre Dame, the cavernous dining room teams centuries-old limestone walls with slick modern decor. It's the near-perfect backdrop for succulent roast chicken, beef, veal and fish served with textbook mashed potatoes and mushroom and spinach gratin.

The simply luxurious route is also worth following when it comes to choosing a hotel in Paris. I love staying on the Left Bank and one of my favourite boltholes is the Hotel Montalembert. This smart hotel galvanised the Paris hotel scene when it was restored and reopened nearly 20 years ago, but the contemporary design of Christian Liagre has stood the test of time. Many boutique hotel rooms in the French capital are glamorous but snug, and the Montalembert's chambres are

no exception. Everything is there, of course, from the Louis-Philippe-style furnishings to L'Occitane toiletries, marble bathrooms and flat-screen TVs, but the friendliness of front office staff ensure you don't miss one of the city's grande dame hotels.

The clincher for me, though is the fact that the Montalembert is next door to L'Atelier de Joel Robuchon. The former Michelin three-star chef, often accurately tagged as the best French chef of the 20th century, dropped out of the Michelin rat race at the age of 50, but couldn't resist the lure of the kitchen for long. He opened this New York-style, counter-only restaurant a few years ago and - surprise - it scored one star within months. The simple yet sophisticated menu ranges from cannelloni stuffed with foie gras through tapas, the best steaks ever and tasting dishes.

A winning formula that keeps the black and red lacquered dining room permanently packed for lunch and dinner.

"Best boutique hotel we've ever stayed at" raves dodie86 from Perth on Tripadvisor in praise of the Hotel Keppler, tucked into a posh side street about three minutes walk from the Champs-Elysees. It's hard to disagree. The lush interior is the work of French interior architect Pierre-Yves Rochon, who designed the interiors of The Peninsula in Shanghai, the three-star restaurants of Joel Robuchon and Alain Ducasse and the Monte Carlo Bay in Monaco. As you step inside the main door, the feeling is one of entering the home of a stylish, very rich friend. Solo travellers and romantic couples alike will feel very at ease in the bars and restaurants and the plush bedrooms. Best of all, though, no matter how early you have to leave in the morning, the staff make sure you enjoy a full breakfast to keep you going for most of the day. A rarity in France, where retail and hotel staff work strictly to the clock. Both hotels can be booked through Preferred Boutique Hotels at www.preferredboutique.com.