

Eating my way round Nice

By James Merriman

The dish arrives, releasing a strong aroma of garlic. I look down – and a pool of velvety butter shimmers back at me. I take a bite, hoping for the best.

To my surprise, it tastes wonderful – delicately tender, like high-quality chicken, the rich garlic butter enhancing every mouthful. But what is this mystery dish?

My day exploring Niçoise flavours had started much earlier, on a perfect autumnal Saturday. Stepping out of the hotel, I found cloudless blue skies. For late October, the sun felt warm, but the gusty offshore wind kept me cool. Along a quiet shopping street, oak trees were still in full leaf, their greenery still holding on to summer. The enticing smell of coffee and pastries from a boulangerie drew me in. I sat down to a flaky almond croissant—the size of a small rugby ball—and a rich, strong café noisette.

I headed south, across Massena square, to Nice's largest food market, Cours Saleya. I was greeted by a fragrant wall of mint, laurel, thyme, rosemary, and oregano—the full bouquet that makes Herbes de Provence, each scent fighting for my attention. I battled the crowds to the fruit section, admiring plump red Thomas de Prince apples, lemons from the Italian border, wrinkly to my fingertips, and juicy Corsican clementines. The vegetable stalls displayed cherry tomatoes from Brittany, giant white Cevenne onions like mini moons, and foot-long stalks of garlic. Finally, I spotted imposing wheels of Camembert and chunks of charcuterie.

The market sparked my appetite. In a nearby square, a stand was selling Socca, a Niçoise speciality: a savoury pancake made of chickpea flour, delivered fresh throughout the day by a man on an adapted



A nice plate of frogs' legs

bicycle with a front-mounted warming vessel. It was tasty, though my mind insisted it looked like a sweet crepe in need of Chantilly cream!

I walked off my snack along Nice's famous Promenade des Anglais. The wide palm-lined walkway was full of couples, families, and tourists enjoying the sunshine. The pale-pebbled beach and the layered blue sea glistened in the sun. Four Mediterranean yellow-legged gulls bobbed on the water like life buoys. Rows of blue and white chairs with umbrellas lined the shore. I sat back, soothed by the sound of the lapping waves.

Leaving the promenade, I strolled into the old town. Narrow, car-free passageways, framed by grand 18th and 19th century churches and apartments painted in mustard yellow and terracotta red.

On a back street, I found a quaint delicatessen preparing Pan Bagnet, a French sourdough bun stuffed with slabs of tomatoes, thin wisps of spring onions and green peppers, generous amounts of tuna, tiny local olives, perfectly cooked hard-boiled eggs, and Provençal basil, all doused in peppery olive oil. The friendly owner added anchovies at no extra charge.



The bay of Nice with Promenade des Anglais

Eating a sandwich this size is a challenge, and the battered metallic table wobbled so much I had to steady it with my foot to save my lunch!

Craving exercise, I hiked up to the Colline du Château. The steep staircases climbing the hill presented a solid workout in the afternoon sun, but the views were worth it: I could see the entire length of the promenade stretching towards the airport in one direction, while in the other the food market, and the old town.

I headed down the other side on a much more gradual path which opened up at the port area. In the harbour, small traditional fishing boats were dwarfed by the towering superyachts moored beside them.

As the sun fades, I headed to dinner in the old town. In the restaurant, I noticed unusual lighting made with old wooden wine baskets hanging from the ceiling,

contrasting with the modern cordless USB lamps on the tables. The waiting staff wore wooden bow ties, and there was a wall-length chalkboard with 'have a good meal' written in at least 50 languages. Despite the cosmopolitan vibe, the cuisine was classic French.

A short while later, the dish I ordered arrived. The familiar aroma of garlic greeted me again ... as I looked down at four frogs' legs, served with a simple green salad.

A surprising, delicious, and quintessentially French finale to a day spent eating my way through Nice.



The Nice Pan Bagnat