



Three-Michelin-star chef Michel Guérard in the grounds of his hotel and spa Les Prés d'Eugénie

# Losing weight, the Michelin-star way

Chef Michel Guérard is a founding father of nouvelle cuisine, but his cooking doesn't need to be indulgent, as **Carolyn Boyd** discovered at his hotel and spa resort in the Landes countryside ➤



She might not know it, on account of having been dead for 97 years, but Empress Eugénie – wife of Napoléon III – set a high standard when it came to holiday homes. Of course, things have changed since the mid-19th century when she used a small village in the heart of the Landes countryside as a staging post between Paris and her favourite seaside haunt of Biarritz. Back then, there was no such thing as Michelin stars or luxury hotels, but what did exist was something akin to a spa, given that the village had its own hot springs. In 1861, the ‘*station thermale*’ and the village took the name Eugénie-les-Bains in honour of its imperial guest.

People still come in their thousands to enjoy the treatments that are said to help with rheumatism and weight loss, many of them staying at the Empress’s former residence of Les Prés d’Eugénie. At the luxury hotel and spa resort, with its colonial-style buildings, exotic palm trees and exquisite decor, visitors can feel every bit as important as Eugénie and Napoléon. But while their memory lives on, it is thanks to Michel Guérard, the Michelin-star chef, and his wife Christine that the village of Eugénie-les-Bains has been a go-to destination since the 1970s.

With an unremarkable landscape, and being miles from any other gastronomic centre (such as Paris, Lyon or Bordeaux), or indeed much civilisation at

all (it is an hour north of Pau), it seems an unusual place for one of the founding fathers of *nouvelle cuisine* to have ended up, but it wasn’t necessarily the food that brought him here. “It was love, as simple as that,” says M. Guérard, the 82-year-old chef who, this year, celebrates 40 years of holding three Michelin stars.

As we sit in one of the elegant salons at the front of the hotel, his story begins to unfold. “I met [my wife] by accident in Paris, and I wanted to carry on in Paris,” he shrugs. When the couple met in 1972, Christine was working for her father Adrien Barthélémy, who had bought the thermal resort and accommodation in 1961. By this stage, M. Guérard had already won his first Michelin star, at the Pot-au-Feu in the suburbs of Paris in 1967, and his second in 1971, and was one of the founding fathers of the *nouvelle cuisine* movement.

In 1974, the couple married and his life took a new direction, one that meant his cooking was heavily influenced by the location. “When I arrived to join my wife, people came to lose weight. At the time, food for losing weight was just a plate of grated carrot, so banal,” he says. “I thought, you can lose weight, but also eat well.”

With that, his *cuisine minceur* (slimming cuisine) was born. Although a three-course meal contains fewer than 600 calories, the quality is astounding. Sitting on the sunny terrace of the restaurant, I try it

PHOTOGRAPHS: CAROLYN BOYD; CORENTIN MOSSIÈRE; STUDIO CYRILLE VIDAL; XAVIER BOYMOND



**'I prefer that we keep our traditions and regional characteristics, and I fight for that,' says M. Guérard**

for myself. A delicious salad came as the starter, with a dressing that was so tasty it was hard to believe it was so light in calories. A main course of cod cooked in baking paper with a consommé of lime and potatoes was also a surprise, but no more so than the dessert – the *îles flottantes* with a red fruit custard were a delight.

Alongside the *cuisine minceur*, M. Guérard is also keen to champion the local products so that the experience of eating both his slimming and three-Michelin-star menus are rooted in their location. "There's a kind of globalisation in cooking now, so you can eat the same thing from Los Angeles to Copenhagen. I prefer that we keep our traditions and regional characteristics, and I fight for that. What interest is there for a Chinese person, or a Danish person, or an American to come here and eat what you can eat elsewhere?"

When it comes to local produce, the Landes *département* is renowned for poultry – ducks, geese and game birds – a fact that was evident from the

sumptuous evening menu. The choice for dinner is a hard one to make. As my friend and I sip the house aperitif (known as Badinguet – the satirical nickname for Napoléon III), we find it impossible to choose. Distracted by the exquisite decor in Loulou's Lounge Bar, with its antique furniture, cosy fireplaces, a grand piano and objets d'art, I can't help thinking that Napoléon and Eugénie would have approved. Their portraits play a charming part in the decor – all overseen by Mme Guérard – of the salons and elsewhere, so it seems as if the imperial couple are still there.

With our table waiting, we finally make our decisions and wander through the restaurant with nervous anticipation that this could be one of the best meals we have ever eaten. We are not disappointed; my madras of crab with a grapefruit jelly is simply sublime, so much so that I force myself to eat so slowly as to enjoy every bite. To follow, it had to be a poultry dish to be true to M. Guérard's ethos, so I choose guinea fowl stuffed with herbs and foie gras, morels, truffles and olives, which is equally divine. The verbena soufflé dessert is a wonderful surprise; this herb is much loved by the French, and has something of a lemony flavour, which makes a fresh and light dessert. The wines to match were also a treat, all coming from the Guérard family's own wine *domaine*.

The next morning, we get a little insight into the ➡➡

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The spa, and the flower and vegetable garden; The kitchen and the cookery school; A fireplace and apothecary's cabinet in the spa's waiting area; 'Scampi carpaccio in garden attire', one of the *cuisine minceur* dishes; The Table des Prés d'Eugénie restaurant**

craft behind the cuisine with a session at the cookery school. Chef Stéphane Mack – who previously worked in the Michelin-star kitchen – leads students, from amateur home cooks to professional chefs, to cook recipes created throughout M. Guérard's 60-year career, including both the gastronomic and slimming cuisines.

For our demonstration, a fresh chicken is waiting to be cooked; by fresh, I mean head and feet are still intact, and I got the feeling that it was probably running around the day before. In the surrounds of the immaculate kitchen – complete with marble bust of early-19th-century gastronome Brillat-Savarin – Stéphane butchers the chicken piece by piece. He ends up with two beautifully cut chicken breasts; the legs are set aside for another dish, and almost every other part is put in a separate pot for the stock, “We don't eat the beak,” laughs Stéphane.

The chicken is key to a recipe that M. Guérard created in 1995: breast of Landes chicken, stuffed with foie gras. Unsurprisingly, it has become a classic and features in the book *Best of Michel Guérard*. When I ask him about it, he tells me: “[Using the foie gras] is a way of involving some softness in the chicken. I wrote it 20 years ago – we do lots of recipes, and some we stop doing, while others become classics. People love this recipe.”

That is not surprising when I see how it is done. The chicken breast is stuffed with Boursin cheese (of ‘*du vin, du pain...*’ fame), foie gras and thin streaky bacon, then either cooked on a charcoal grill or braised in a casserole pot. The gravy, meanwhile, a heady concoction of the chicken's giblets and feet, and vegetables and herbs, is by far the best I have ever tasted. As I delve in for a few more bites, I can't help thinking of Brillat-Savarin's famous quote: “Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you who you are.” Which, when applied to me, would be ‘everything’ and ‘a greedy pig’.

Thankfully, a possible remedy comes in the shape of a session at the estate's spa. Set next to an idyllic flower garden in a beautiful timber-beamed cottage in the grounds, the Ferme Thermale offers a variety of treatments for weight loss (as well as beauty therapy treatments). As I enter the wisteria-arched doorway, it is like stepping into Eugénie's realm. Everything about the setting is simply beautiful – from the warm changing cubicles with linen and lace-decorated dressing tables, to the huge open fireplace and apothecary cabinet in the waiting area.

**I am led into an enchanting room, where a marble bath with taps shaped like swans' necks is set at the side**

I am due to have five different treatments, and after getting changed into a waffle-fabric robe and slippers, I am led by a friendly therapist into a large but utterly enchanting room. A marble bath with taps shaped like swans' necks is set at the side, and there is an open fire, an oriental rug and antique furniture, and a small oval portrait of Eugénie hanging on the wall. The ten-minute bath is over too soon, and I re-dress in the robe and go back to the waiting area, where therapist gives me a refreshing ‘*tisane*’, a herbal tea that further aids (supposedly) the detox regime. The next three treatments see me in pools, under jets and under showers as the mineral-rich water pummels my skin and limbs. It all feels invigorating, rather than relaxing and I hope that all the indulgences might somehow be blasted away.

In the final treatment, I finally do lose weight, though sadly not in a way that will last. The therapist shows me into the treatment room, with its

**RIGHT: The lightly smoked roast lobster and confit onion from Michel Guérard's gastronomic menu; BELOW: Part of the hotel and spa complex at Les Prés d'Eugénie**



PHOTOGRAPHS: XAVIER BOYMOND, MPM

elegant white mosaic walls and green laurel leaf pattern. As we go through the door, she asks if I have ever had any 'mud' treatments. I start to regale her with prior experiences of thalassotherapy algae wraps, and then I catch sight of the pool in front of me and stop mid-sentence. "No, never done anything like that before!" I say.

A pool of opaque, beige mud stands before me. The therapist tells me it is the spa's signature treatment, and that I should count the eight steps carefully as I enter the pool (as it is very slippery), before leaving me to it. I count the steps and enter the middle of the pool, and my legs instantly float up to the surface of the liquid. It is a strange experience, a little like floating in the Dead Sea, only I am covered in a thin layer of silky kaolin clay, which is rich in minerals that benefit the skin and detoxify. After I spend ten minutes bobbing about like a cork in water, the therapist returns to show me how to use the shower and I emerge from the pool feeling like a monster from the mud lagoon.

Afterwards, my skin feels soft and my body energised from the treatment programme. I wonder what Eugénie would have made of it and what exactly constituted a spa treatment in her day – knowing that she would have needed pampering after a long journey from Paris. Whatever she got up to back in the 1860s, I couldn't help feeling lucky that Michel and Christine Guérard were my hosts and that Les Prés d'Eugénie is now simply a plane ride away. 🍷



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## Francophile *Indulge yourself the healthy way at Les Prés d'Eugénie*

### GETTING THERE

**By air:** Fly to Pau, Biarritz or Bordeaux, see map on page 29 for details.

**By train:** The nearest TGV stations are Pau (60km away) or Dax (70km away).

**By ferry/road:** Eugénie-les-Bains is a 6-8hr drive from the northern ports.

Alternatively, sail on the Brittany Ferries route to Santander in northern

Spain, a 4hr drive from Eugénie-les-Bains (tel: 0330 159 7000, [brittanyferries.co.uk](http://brittanyferries.co.uk)).

### STAYING THERE

Les Prés d'Eugénie is offering a package to celebrate the 40th anniversary of being

awarded three Michelin stars. It includes a VIP welcome with home-made garden *madeleines* and a bottle of the Guérards' wine; two nights with gourmet breakfast at Les Prés d'Eugénie; one celebration

three-Michelin-star dinner (*Palais Enchanté* menu, drinks not included); one *Landais terroir* dinner in the historic inn La Ferme aux Grives (drinks not included); and the book *Best of Michel Guérard*, autographed by the chef. The package costs

**i** **TOURIST INFORMATION:** Nouvelle Aquitaine tourist board, tel: (Fr) 5 56 01 70 00, [tourism-aquitaine.com](http://tourism-aquitaine.com); Landes tourist board, tel: (Fr) 5 58 06 89 89, [tourismelandes.com](http://tourismelandes.com)



from €1,395 for two guests. Otherwise, overnight stays from €250. For other rates and packages, visit the website (tel: (Fr) 5 58 05 06 07, [michelguerard.com](http://michelguerard.com)).