

THE SUNDAY TIMES

TRAVEL 6 / COVER STORY

Leave the liquid nitrogen at home, says **Heston Blumenthal**. When it comes to eating in the mountains, unfussy and traditional dishes are the order of the day

The first meal I ate in the Alps wasn't exactly a shining advertisement for mountain food. I was 14 and on a school ski trip to a place called Passo Tonale, in Italy, and at dinner we had macaroni, with a sauce made exclusively from tinned tomatoes. OK, there may have been some subtle nuances to this dish that I didn't appreciate. After all, back then I didn't even know what an oyster looked like. But it was tasteless all the same, as if Basil Fawlty had been asked to cook an Italian meal, in the dark, with only two ingredients. I don't remember anything about the skiing, either. This was definitely not a case of love at first sight. Then came a procession of events that meant I wouldn't get a chance to fall in love with skiing for another 20 years.



Heston Blumenthal with Sat Bains and Marcus Wareing at Chivo, in Courmayeur. Top right, Maison Vieille

I look for family-run places that do a good pasta, pizza or suckling pig – gutsy food – with a nice bottle of wine to give that decadent edge

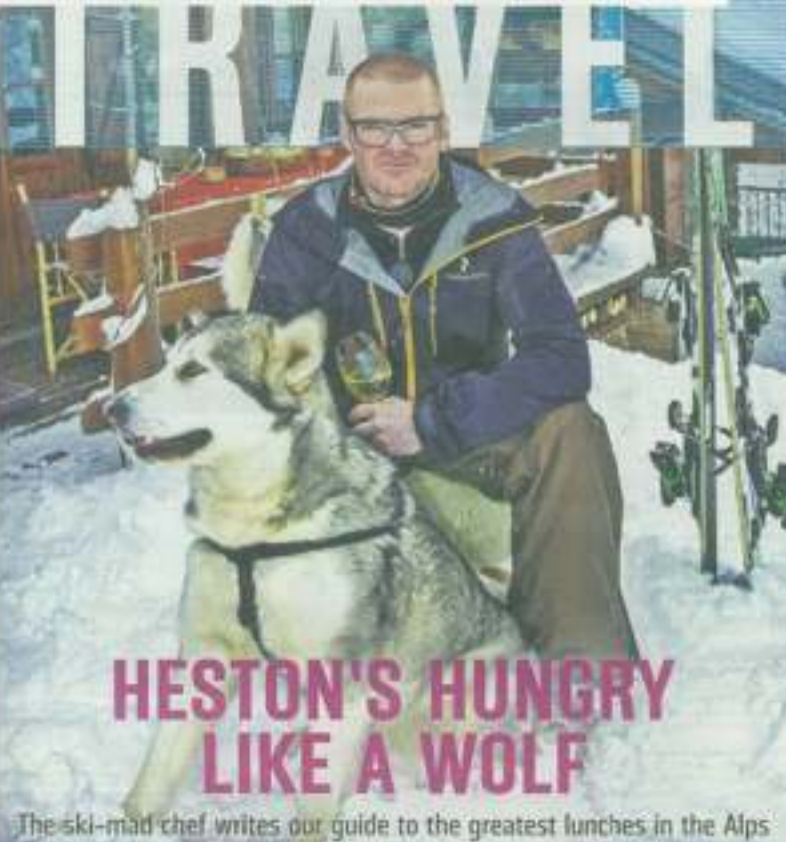
the birth of my son and daughters, the opening of the Fat Duck and a knacker's look caused by years of kicking while I was younger. Eventually, I had a back operation. The surgeon told me: "Look, if it all goes well, you could go skiing in a year's time." He was only using it as an example of what I might be able to do, but it just so happened that I was finishing my first BBC series, and my producer suggested that I come along on a trip to the Austria ski resort of Ischgl. On the first morning I had a lesson, and within 20 seconds of getting on the first drag lift, with my ski crumpling on the snow, I was grinding from ear to ear. That was it. I was hooked. I've been skiing every year since. A couple of years ago I actually managed to get on the first drag lift, with my ski crumpling on the snow, I was grinding from ear to ear. That was it. I was hooked. I've been skiing every year since. A couple of years ago I actually managed to get on the first drag lift, with my ski crumpling on the snow, I was grinding from ear to ear. That was it. I was hooked. I've been skiing every year since.

My recipe for a great ski lunch

Two resorts in particular stand out because of their mountain food: Zermatt, in Switzerland, and Courmayeur, in Italy (see panel). It was in Courmayeur that we launched the Mountain Gourmet Ski Experience last winter, and this January, we'll be back. It's designed to showcase Courmayeur, but also to show the Italians a little bit of what's been happening in the UK, because British gastronomy is going through such an exciting phase. Two of Britain's best chefs, Marcus Wareing and Sat Bains, will be there, alongside Courmayeur's finest. I'll be hosting the event and serving one of my special hot chocolates. We did black forest gâteau hot chocolate last year. This year we might do a brown-bread one, with a balsamic reduction and a little chocolate bar on the side, with some white truffle on it. We did a tasting last week, and it's shaping up really nicely – although when he hears about the white truffle, Amin Momen, who's in charge of the budget, might just have a heart attack.

■ The Gourmet Mountain Experience runs January 9-12 and starts at £2,500pp, including three celebration dinners with wine, five-star accommodation, a lift pass, guiding, flights, equipment rental and crumpers (020 7371 9111, mountainand.com).

Heston Blumenthal was talking to Sean Neeson



The ski-mad chef writes our guide to the greatest lunches in the Alps

HESTON'S HUNGRY LIKE A WOLF

Heston's favourite Alpine spots to eat

COURMAYEUR
Maison Vieille
Giuseppe, the owner, is the local version of Brian Brown, with a booming Italian voice, and he lives a superb spaghetti with hot sauce (made with cod's milk). We've had Christmas lunch here a couple of times, and one year we gave him a Christmas pudding and asked him to cook it for us. He brought it out drizzled with chocolate sauce. Chocolate sauce? But it worked. When you think about it, all the bits in a Christmas pudding – dried fruit, alcohol – go with chocolate, and it sparked an idea. The next year, I did a Christmas pudding for Watson with a hidden chocolate sauce inside. Mains from £12, maisonvieille.com

Chivo
Next to Chateau Branlant, Chivo is where you go for a plate of beautiful anchovies, served with just a bit of butter. They also do a great little tagliatelle, made with cherry tomatoes, white wine and sausage from the village of Giguet, up near the San Bernardino Pass. Mains from £12, chivo.com

Christiana
On a sunny day, the side terrace at Christiana is the place to be. The pizzas are fantastic, especially when Carlo, the owner, melts a little lava on top as they come out of the oven. Mains from £9.50, no website

Petit Mont Blanc
If you ski down to the bottom of the lift at Zermatt, you'll find Petit Mont Blanc. Every day, on the back terrace, they have five or six amazing suckling piglets roasting on spits, and you can scoff them as you ski into the valley. They serve the pork on a big slice of wood, dripping with juices, along with pickled green tomatoes and ricotta topped with melting lumps of (soft) goat fat. Mains from £14.50, www.petitmontblanc.com

Chateau Branlant
It's one of the smartest and coolest restaurants in Courmayeur, and does a lovely Marmosita line – tonight, as well as having a great wine list. You'll find superb Italian wines here, including Luce, from Fiescolano, along with local hybrids from the Aosta Valley. Mains from £11, chateaubranlant.com

ZERMATT
Zam See
My first choice for a Christmas holiday would be Zermatt. You've got the most beautiful mountain – the Matterhorn – towering above you, and up on the slopes, there are fantastic restaurants such as Zam See, in an old barn. If the sun's out, you can sit outside, surrounded by ancient wooden hay bams and cow sheds. Zam See is known for its prosciutto curry, and has a great wine list, but when I really like its apple strudel, done with handmade filo pastry. I don't normally eat desserts when I ski. I'll have. Mains from £15.50, chivo-see-restaurant-zermatt.ch

Chez Vrony
As I said, I like simple things done well when I ski, and Vrony's spaghetti starter is a classic of fresh eggs, with truffle oil drizzled over the top, served with a slice of roast parmesan and chives. It's best eaten on the terrace, because the views up to the Matterhorn are stunning. Mains from £15, chezvrony.ch

Finderhof
You remember that book, *Real Men Don't Eat Quiche? Well, I'm definitely not a quiche person. Normally, the pastry's too sticky and the egg custard's overcooked. But here there are two quiches – one with bacon, the other vegetarian – which are as good as any you'll find. Mains from £15, finderhof.ch*

Blatten
This is another lovely place, not far from Zam See. They serve a really good wild boar dish when it's on. Mains from £12, blatten-zermatt.ch

CHAMONIX
La Salle à Manger
Not all great meals come out of a restaurant kitchen. Last winter, I skied the Vallée Blanche, the glacier run above Chamonix, with two of my kids. Before we went, we called in at a deli and bought ham, cheese, bread and wine. On the way down, our guide stopped in a flat area called La Salle à Manger. We sat in the sun on an upturned ski, with no one else around, pulled out the picnic and had the perfect lunch. A day with Courmayeur mountain guide starts at £395 for up to eight people, guidescourmayeur.com

10TH ANNIVERSARY special issue

A decade of dream trips

MARLON BRANDON'S SECRET ISLANDS
THE HORNBY WINTER THOBS

ANGELA MISSONI
HESTON BLUMENTHAL
JOHN SIMPSON
FIORA BRUCE
ALAIN DUCASSE
AMANDA WAREING
ANTHONY HOROWITZ
ALICE TEMPERLEY

ultratrade

The Daily Telegraph

Supplement of the Year

mountain HIGHS

Not just to ski that we head for the hills, but to experience as rarefied as the high-altitude air. Ultratravel's snow specialists select the mate winter thrills, from heli-skiing in Canada to Michelin-starred dining on the slopes

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SIMON JOHN OWEN

THE BEST GOURMET WEEKEND
Courmayeur, Italy

Being just three days with a trio of Britain's leading chefs in Italy's heartlands, I think I can say with some confidence that this year's ski trip, again after skiing, there is always good food in Courmayeur and to many mountains that in a week you could eat lunch and dinner in a different place every day. But this year, the area became the ultimate gourmet destination, thanks to the passion of chef Heston Blumenthal and co-owner of Mountain & Co, Amin Momen, who brought together their own loves – of food and skiing – to create the area's first Mountain Gourmet Ski Experience. The Italian ski area has long been known for its food, but

