

# CÔTE *of many* COLOURS

A summer spent grazing on big-flavoured local delicacies like socca – chickpea pancakes – and getting lost amid **Nice**’s cacophonous food markets leads British-Indian food writer Gurdeep Loyal to discover unexpected parallels between Niçoise and Punjabi cuisine



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The spectrum of ultramarine blues that glimmer off the Côte d’Azur in Nice have mesmerised the creatively minded for centuries. When Henri Matisse arrived here in 1917, he wrote of the sea being “bluer than anyone has ever painted it, a colour entirely fantastic and incredible”.

That same kaleidoscope of sapphires was the first thing to hit me when I landed there alone last summer. Escaping the compulsive chaos of east London, I was intent on a month-long retreat of solo contemplation and productivity, at the end of which a completed manuscript for my first cookbook, *Mother Tongue – Flavours of a Second Generation*, was due with my publisher. Southern France was not an obvious backdrop for writing about the evolution of British-Indian identity through the migrating culinary traditions of my motherland Punjab. Yet, as I curiously ate my way around this Gallic province, unexpected parallels between the spirits of Niçoise and Punjabi gastronomy seemed to emerge, aligning the two magnetically.

Situated in the eastern corner of the Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur region, Nice is a city steeped in ancient Roman, Genoese and Neapolitan cultures, only having become an official part of France in 1860, after 500 years under the Kingdom of Sardinia. Today, it’s rooted as much to its Italian legacy as it is to its own unique position along the French Mediterranean – a spot where the sky meets the ocean in a dazzling spectacle that appears suspended in time, even as the city seems to be simultaneously propelled forwards.

This feeling of “grounded momentum” is embodied most inventively in the cuisine of Nice, where an emerging new generation of chefs, producers and culinary creatives is reimagining the city’s historic traditions through the lens of modernity. Two of the most pioneering are brothers Hugo and Grégoire Loubert, whose stylish restaurant **Lavomatique**, nestled in the cobbled lanes of the Old Town, is housed in a converted laundrette. Their contemporary small-plates menu champions heritage local ingredients through dishes such as smoked mackerel with leeks and pickles, and duck hearts with teriyaki, paired with low-intervention wines from some of the region’s most innovative growers. ►►



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A few doors down, epicurean boutique **Trésors Publics** echoes this sense of custodian duty to traditional French craft – selling handmade kitchenware and groceries in a hip, understated setting that is anything but antiquated. For co-founder Nicolas Barbero, this means building personal connections with every artisan. As he proudly says: “Each year, for two months in January, we drive through France to visit our makers and find new ones – we’ve visited more than 150 since we opened. The very best tend to be old companies that don’t have catalogues or websites, so you have no choice but to go to them.” His anecdote catapulted me to ingredient farmers in India, where growers of the finest spices most prized by cosmopolitan chefs are just as indifferent to the pulls of today’s technology.

The Old Town’s labyrinth of lanes – lined with boulangeries, fromageries and chocolatiers – lead to the striped awnings of the **Cours Saleya**, one of the best daily food and flower markets in France. Apricots, peaches, figs, jujubes, medlars, pomegranates, persimmons and sunshine-coloured citrus are the most striking fruits on offer; freshly picked stalks of rocket and dandelion nestle alongside bitter chicory, Swiss chard and globe artichokes; fat bulbs of white, purple and pink garlic hang entwined, like bunches of flowers. In season, it’s courgettes that take centre stage – notably the



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plump, melon-like varieties that are a Nice speciality, and wicker baskets of courgette flowers, their bright yellow petals curled up like claws ready to be stuffed and fried.

As with markets in Punjab, it’s the boisterous, unhurried exchanges between market traders and shoppers that are the beating pulse of gastronomic Nice – spirited conversations that keep the city’s Franco-Italian legacies alive. At one stand, a veteran stallholder savours these, sternly instructing customers that the heaped pyramids of dried French aubergines and sun-dried tomatoes he sells “simply must be marinated the Italian way – with just olive oil and garlic, and nothing else”.

Like the Indian home cooking of my heritage, Niçoise is an unpretentious cuisine of ample abundance and flavourful frugality, where traditions of pickling and preserving are entrenched. Herby, salt-brined cornichons and vinegar-pickled garlic are local staples – but preserving in sugar is what the region is best known for. Confitserie **Maison Auer** has been a shrine to artisanal crystallised fruits, candied chestnuts and fruit jellies since 1820. The allure of its ornate baroque interiors and spotlit chocolate cabinets is overwhelmingly seductive, even today. This juxtaposition of tradition and modernity is equally apparent at the **Gare du Sud**, a historic





COURS SALEYA MARKET







disused railway station now home to more than 30 global street-food outlets; and, more strikingly, in the crumbling Place St-François, where the **Fish Market's** daily catch is gutsily splayed across fluorescent tarpaulin, right next to **Néron Glacier's** displays of haute-pâtisserie and frozen ices. The cassis sorbet – so intensely tart it made me pucker with every spoonful – triggered memories of sharp-sour mango ices in India, sold in equally ramshackle marketplace bazaars.

The northern perimeter of the Old Town is marked by fire-furnaced copper plates of socca (a chickpea pancake cooked until scorched and frazzled at the edges) and freshly baked pissaladière (a pizza-like tart topped with caramelised onions and anchovies). The focal point for this part of the city is Place Garibaldi, a picturesque square flanked with pastel-lemon architecture and trompe l'oeil – the area's tranquil yet feisty energy amplified by the salty perfumes of fruits de mer packed into the ice cabinets of **Café de Turin**.

Just off the square lies the popular pedestrian runway of Rue Bonaparte, where the city's youthful bohemian set sip iced rosé on the pavement of **Comptoir Central Électrique**, a former electrical supply shop now renovated into a vogueish bistro filled with eclectic vintage furniture and abstract lampshades. This buzzy avenue is lined with globally inspired culinary offerings ranging from pan-Asian and Italian to Peruvian and Greek. However, it's at the quieter end of the street, towards the port, that the traditions of Niçoise cuisine are being pushed the furthest – like at Michelin-starred fine-dining restaurant **Les Agitateurs** and prize-winning organic bakery **Boulangerie Lagache**, whose ornate vintage floors are home to the most future-focused breads in the city. Here, the abundant shelves are filled with baskets of crunchy-chewy baguettes made using traditional French wheat flour and croissants layered with rich ultra-fine French butter; the marble counter boasting reinvented French classics such as a torched lemon meringue tart and sugar crystal-flecked chouquettes (custard-filled pastry puffs).

My month of relishing food that embodies the very essence of being Provençal brought into focus the very essence of being Punjabi: an affiliated duo of culinary cultures as flourishing in tradition today as they ever have been, and as progressive in flavour-forward gusto as they always will be. ►►



# NICE

City Guide

WORDS **CLAIRE NELSON**



THE DECK HOTEL



## STAY

### THE DECK HOTEL

2 RUE MACCARANI, 06000

[deck-hotel.com](http://deck-hotel.com)

For those seeking affordable comfort close to the sea, The Deck is ideal – this beachy, blue-and-white hotel is tucked right between the Old Town and the promenade. While the breakfast add-on provides a generous morning buffet, guests will find coffee, pastries and board games available around the clock in the communal lounge.

### YELO JEAN MÉDECIN

47 BIS AVENUE JEAN MÉDECIN, 06000

[yelohotelcollection.com](http://yelohotelcollection.com)

A cool, comfortable design hotel in a classic Haussmann-style building, just a short stroll from Nice-Ville train station. Stylish interiors take inspiration from travels throughout the Mediterranean, with hues of olive, azure and terracotta, while the decorative touches spring from bohemian Bali.

## DRINK

### CAFÉS INDIEN

35 RUE PAIROLIÈRE, 06300

[cafes-indien.com](http://cafes-indien.com)

For three generations, this Old Town café (along with its sister roastery in Rue St-Réparate), has dedicated itself to the business of serving up high-quality coffee, ethically sourced from all corners of the globe. Order a robust espresso from the counter, or browse the shop for all manner of ingenious kit for preparing your beans back at home.

### LE COMPTOIR CENTRAL ÉLECTRIQUE

10 RUE BONAPARTE, 06300

[comptoircentralelectrique.fr](http://comptoircentralelectrique.fr)

A spacious lighting shop reborn as an eclectically cool bistro, where tables spill out onto the street, this is a convivial spot on buzzy Rue Bonaparte. Come for French wines, classic cocktails and small plates, and to immerse yourself in the social scene; this is where locals begin – or end – their night.



## EAT

## RESTAURANT ACCHIARDO

38 RUE DROITE, 06300

+33 4 93 85 51 16

Step into this charming taverna and feel the embrace of the Acchiardo family, who've run the place since 1927. Rustic stone walls are hung with photos of the previous generations, while the siblings currently in charge warmly greet guests and whip out plates of regional specialities such as merda de can (Swiss chard gnocchi) and daube, a hearty beef stew.

## LES AGITATEURS

24 RUE BONAPARTE, 06300

[lesagitateurs.com](http://lesagitateurs.com)

Three friends – and Michelin alumni – created this neo-bistro restaurant with the aim of delivering unstuffy haute cuisine. Here, traditional ingredients play with unusual flavours: smoked pigeon with pine needles, for instance. Lunch is tapas-style (“from the fingertips”), while the dinner menu escorts you on an adventurous tasting journey.

## LAVOMATIQUE

11 RUE DU PONT VIEUX, 06300

[lavomatique-restaurant.business.site](http://lavomatique-restaurant.business.site)

A former laundrette holds one of the city's most talked-about restaurants, albeit charmingly unassuming – the blue exterior retains the original price list for a wash and dry. Inside, brothers Hugo and Grégoire Loubert have created an exciting tapas menu paired with a well-considered wine list. If tables are full, try for a seat at the counter and watch the activity in the kitchen. Open Monday to Friday.



RESTAURANT ACCHIARDO



DOMINIQUE LE STANC OUTSIDE LA MERENDA

## LA MERENDA

4 RUE RAOUL BOSIO, 06300

[lamerenda.net](http://lamerenda.net)

Dominique Le Stanc traded in his two Michelin stars at the Negresco to run this intimate Niçoise spot, where the attention is fully on the food and less so the restaurant name. The old-world charm of chalk-board menus, no credit cards accepted and market produce collected by bicycle is part of the magic, but it's the skillfully cooked dishes – such as courgette flower beignets and tarte de tomate – that really stand out.

## CHEZ DAVIA

11BIS RUE GRIMALDI, 06000

[chezdavia.com](http://chezdavia.com)

Having honed his culinary career in Japan, chef Pierre Altobelli returned to Nice to run his family's restaurant, bringing his own contemporary reimagining to Niçoise fare. The menu is driven by seasonal market finds but might include delicate barbajuans (crispy ravioli), vivid whorls of pesto linguine, and smoked mozzarella with impeccably ripe figs. If you're not already a fan of tourte de blettes (Swiss chard tart), Altobelli's will convert you. ▶▶





NICOLAS BARBERO IN TRÉSORS PUBLICS



CAVE BIANCHI



TRÉSORS PUBLICS

## DO

### CAVE BIANCHI

7 RUE RAOUL BOSIO, 06300

[cave-bianchi.fr](http://cave-bianchi.fr)

You'll find the city's oldest wine merchants within the cool stone walls of a former Dominican convent. Proprietor Franck Obadia knows his wine – he doesn't just sell it, he produces it, too. He also spins a good story, so book a tasting session for an entertaining and educational Tour de France in a glass.

### MUSEUM OF MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART

PLACE YVES KLEIN, 06000

[mamac-nice.org](http://mamac-nice.org)

Dive into the world of pop art and neo-realism via MAMAC's collection of more than 1,300 works by artists from the 1950s to the present day. The building, designed by French architects Yves Bayard and Henri Vidal and opened in 1990, is a postmodern wonder in itself. Head to the top floor and walk the wave-like rooftop for 360-degree views across Nice.

## SHOP

### MAISON AUER

7 RUE ST-FRANÇOIS DE PAULE, 06300

[maison-auer.com](http://maison-auer.com)

If the ornate shop facade doesn't give away this confectioner's history – it dates back to 1820 – the original Florentine-style interior certainly will. Displays are laden with glistening fruits de glacé, boxes of truffles and all manner of chocolate made with cacao varieties from around the world.

### TRÉSORS PUBLICS

11 RUE DU PONT VIEUX, 06300

[tresorspublics.com](http://tresorspublics.com)

Antoine Bourassin and Nicolas Barbero scour the length and breadth of France for authentic artisanal products, and their stylish treasure box of a boutique straddles both the nostalgic and the contemporary. Find everything from Breton striped shirts and oyster knives to wooden toys and cooking pans. To leave without a perfect little something seems implausible.