

MY LUNCH AT THE WORLD'S POSHEST ALL-YOU-CAN-EAT BUFFET

Les Grands Buffets in the south of France has a seven-month waiting list for its spread of limitless lobster, foie gras, pressed duck and chocolate fountains. Forget the Toby Carvery – buffets are going gourmet. Hannah Evans books a table



Hannah Evans at Les Grands Buffets, Narbonne, France, photographed by Jude Edginton

I regret my strategy of starting my meal with a **dozen oysters** and **two lobsters** – my dress is already tight by the hors d'oeuvres



Lobsters, crabs and clams at Les Grands Buffets



The record-breaking cheese board



Hannah Evans chooses dressings



The chocolate fountain

Ever since the cabaret singer Edith Piaf first sang her valedictory hymn, *Non, je ne regrette rien*, in 1960, the song has been one of France's unofficial anthems; a declaration for living life with no regrets. I wonder if Piaf would have sung the same tune if she'd ever dined at Les Grands Buffets, the totally bonkers all-you-can-eat restaurant in the south of France with a seven-month waiting list, where diners can pillage the best of French gastronomy – foie gras, caviar, frogs' legs, you name it – for just €57.90 (just under £50) a head. Because I have. I went this week for lunch and let me tell you, I have a lot of regrets. I regret starting my meal with a round of a dozen oysters and two Atlantic lobsters, which meant by the time I moved on to the hors d'oeuvres I was already feeling cosy in my dress. I regret plunging from my crustaceans entrée to the pressed-duck main course, which I then chased with a portion of coquilles St Jacques and moules. I regret not leaving enough room for

the cheese board or the sweet bread vol au vent, and I regret prioritising a second portion of chocolate profiteroles over a crepe suzette. I regret getting distracted at the ice-cream stand and not trying the tarte tatin. And I absolutely regret the baguette basket. Ultimately, I regret my entire strategy. And if you're going to eat at a luxury buffet like this you need a strategy, otherwise you risk turning into Le Grand Bébé. Somebody call the midwife – and get me a Rennie. While food snobs and critics have been cooing over multi-Michelin-starred restaurants like Alchemist in Copenhagen, which has a waiting list of 10,000 people, or Ynyshir in Wales, voted the best restaurant in the UK, where tables are booked up two months in advance, real foodies have been rolling up their sleeves at the latest fine-dining phenomenon: luxury buffets. Forget tasting menus and tiny portions; these restaurants are all about eating as much as possible. Leading the way is Les Grands Buffets, which opened in 1989 and has been a shrine to classic French food since. Every

year some 400,000 people arrive in the small Roman city of Narbonne to eat either lunch or dinner here: 600 at lunch, another 600 at dinner, 365 days a year. Traditionally buffets have been the fodder of weddings, funerals and service stations. Plates piled high with a grotesque mess of cuisines: noodles dolloped next to curries and risotto. These places are cheap as chips. At the Toby Carvery, one of Britain's buffet establishments, guests can tuck in to limitless breakfast – sausages, fried eggs, bacon, Yorkshires – for £6.49. Some call it heaven; I call it a fast track to heartburn and an advert for Gaviscon. However, the new generation of buffets is anything but tacky. The ingredients are top quality, the dishes refined and they come with a much bigger price tag. The Sunday feasts at the Ned, a members' club and hotel in the old grade I listed Midland Bank in the City of London, are legendary. On the menu for £100 are bottomless lobster, 38-day dry aged Hereford beef, pork from rare breed Gloucestershire Old Spot pigs and Jersey rock oysters. If you want to enjoy free-flowing Thienot Brut NV Champagne it's £65 extra.

Last week the Ned launched a new unlimited beef menu at its Lutyens Grill restaurant on Fridays, served from midday to midnight. That's bottomless 44-day aged rare-breed prime rib, carved tableside from the trolley, for £100. Arguably the country's most famous all-you-can-eat is the Grove, an upscale hotel in Watford that starred in the Netflix documentary *Million Dollar Buffet*, which came out last November. Here guests pay £82 to feast on a ludicrously generous array of international foods, from fresh sashimi to stone-baked pizza. "It's absolutely crazy. Anything you could possibly want to eat, done incredibly well, under one roof," a friend who visited last year told me. Perhaps that's why the Grove's buffet has gone viral on TikTok, with videos of its stands racking up 23.8 million views. The biggest sign that buffets are now cool is the Dover, a sexy, très chic Italian in Mayfair that opened discreetly at the end of last year. I am sure that the owner, Martin, would wring my neck if I called it a buffet, but this week I heard about the Dover's Sunday Lunch Club, a monthly

event where for £85 you can eat as many tartare bites, smoked salmon blinis, servings of lasagne, cauliflower cheese and gelato as you want in your two-hour sitting. When I browse for a table at the next meeting, there is just a handful of sittings left. And that is largely the point: a seat at an all-you-can-eat restaurant table is hot property. The Ned's feasts sell out months in advance. When *The New Yorker* reviewed Les Grands Buffets, the writer had to wait five months. When I browse online before my lunch, the next available table for dinner is in November. Once you've booked, guests are reminded that they can't change the time, date or size of their reservation. And if they fail to show up, they'll be charged 50 quid a head anyway – plus an administration charge. Now I may not be the smartest person, or the sportiest person. I'm terrible at maths and, aged 30, I still can't drive. But one thing I have always been very, very good at is eating. When I was a child my friends' parents would always remark to my mum and dad how much I could put away. I used to think they found it

endearing. Impressive, almost. Hannah the Hoover they called me. In reality, they probably were deeply concerned. And their faux surprise concealed how pissed off they were that I'd cleaned out their fridge in just one sleepover. I am proud to say my ability to eat has not waned as I've aged. And so all I can think as I arrive at Les Grands Buffets one Wednesday in April for lunch with a companion is, "Buckle me up, baby. I am ready." Arriving at Les Grands Buffets is just as surreal as exploring it. Sandwiched between a Lidl supermarket, a KFC and a leisure centre, this is not where you expect to find France's most coveted restaurant. When I was growing up I was always told not to go swimming on a full stomach or I would drown from indigestion. That message clearly wasn't relayed in France because the restaurant is right next to a water park. As soon as you walk through the double gold and black doors, though, you are transported into a palace of gastronomy. Inside is vast. There are four dining rooms, each extravagant in its own peculiar way. For example, the Salon

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