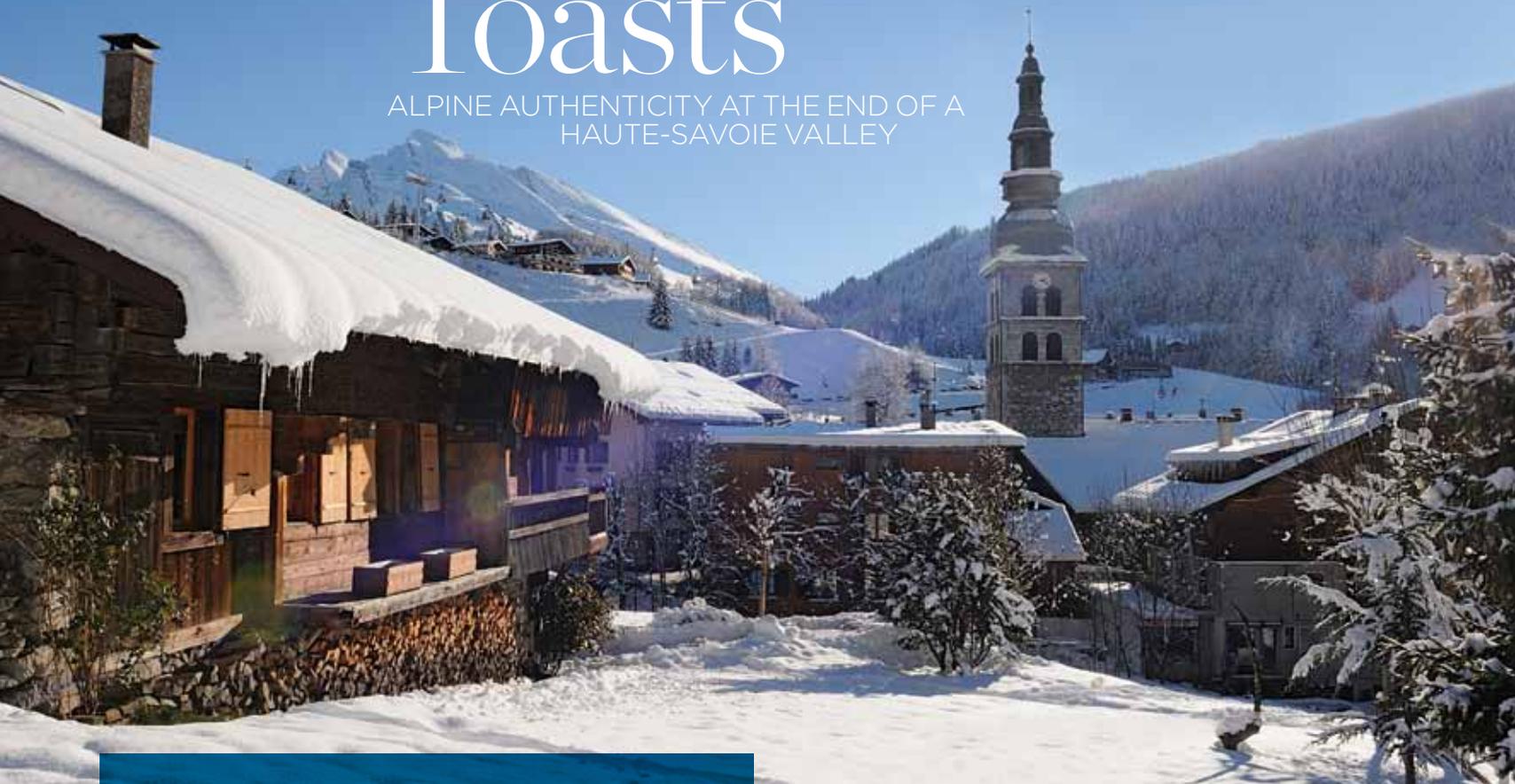


# French Toasts

ALPINE AUTHENTICITY AT THE END OF A HAUTE-SAVOIE VALLEY



➤ THERE'S AN UNOFFICIAL GÉNÉPI DEGUSTATION TAKING PLACE at my hotel in La Clusaz. At La Ferme\* — an erstwhile barn turned slopeside chalet — proprietor Stephen Requet is supplementing the bar's offerings with his personal stash of the herbal homebrew to ensure that my friend and I get a proper taste of the Haute-Savoie. Requet laments that the moon isn't bright enough tonight to pull the traditional single-blade wooden paret sleds down from the restaurant's rafters for a hair-raising run into the village. It's that kind of a night. And La Clusaz is that kind of a place.

Altitudewise, La Clusaz is no Chamonix, but it makes up for it with diverse terrain and an authentically French atmosphere with nary a British "pub meal" available. The jaggedy Aravis mountain range is the backdrop for the resort's five interconnected skiing areas, which include bowls, wooded trails, and off-piste terrain full of rocky jumps. My friend Carolyn's North American accent is the only one I hear during our three-day visit. "How did you two find this place?" a woman (who hears my accent) asks us one night over après-ski drinks at the suitably swanky La Scierie bar in town. "From a French friend who



BY TERRY WARD

COURTESY OF LA CLUSAZ (2)



knew I was hoping to actually speak French during my ski holiday,” I tell her. In French, naturally.

On a snowshoe tour late one afternoon, Carolyn and I fumble clumsily behind Astrid Marty — a spry local mountain guide with the Aravis Guide Company — through fresh powder that sparkles like scattered diamonds through the gaps in our raquettes. A few days later, we push the limits of off-piste pursuits by strapping into skis behind galloping horses for the Nordic sport of ski joëring, which has recently become a hit locally. “*C’est super!*” come the cries from dog-walking locals as we glide like waterskiers behind the fjord horses, flying through the backyards of centuries-old stone chalets and floating atop powder in pastures where Abondance cows will graze come spring. Those cows produce milk for the area’s famed Reblochon cheese, which you can taste at local farms or at La Clusaz’s weekly Monday market, under the shadow of the town’s early 19th-century Savoyard church.

Back at La Ferme, we toast our fortune at finding our way to the end of this particular valley over a bubbling hunk of raclette. But oh — the *horreur!* — when, in the course of lifting my glass, I tip a giant jar of cornichons into the purse of a woman at the neighboring table.

I immediately offer to pay the cleaning bill, but the purse’s owner, surprised to find American skiers in these parts (even those of the pickle-spilling variety), orders up another round of *génépi* for us all. “Oh please,” she says, refusing my offer, “It’s a nice purse, but this isn’t Courchevel.”

And with that, we toast the casual conviviality of La Clusaz. ❁



Though the Haute-Savoie town of La Clusaz is small, the views, and the hospitality, are nothing short of grand.