

BELOW LEFT: *Opened to the public in 1929, the Molitor was for decades the place where fashionable Parisians went to swim and be seen; the world's first bikini was unveiled here in 1946*



Molitor, Paris's fashionable art deco lido, has resurfaced as a hotel – and has invited back the street artists who colonised it during its abandonment / By Stephanie Plentl

A bigger splash

It's impossible to miss the Molitor. Dipped in a distinctive shade of 'tango' yellow, this mistress of reinvention occupies an entire block of Paris's 16th arrondissement. Inaugurated in 1929, the Molitor reigned for 60 years as the city's most glamorous swimming baths, transformed into a chic skating rink each winter. When it closed, it was claimed as a canvas for graffiti artists and a site for raves (one party, in 2001, drawing a crowd of 5,000.) In 2014, with interior designer Jean-Philippe Nuel at the helm, it morphed once more, its glorious pools reinstated with the addition of a luxury hotel, Clarins spa and gourmet restaurant.

This latest incarnation cleverly incorporates much of Molitor's colourful history. Most of the original building had to be razed (the concrete had badly decayed) but the tender launched by the Mayor of Paris in 2007 was won with a promise to bring back the pools. After all, it was here that the bikini was first

showcased to the world in 1946; this was also where US Olympic gold swimming medallist (and later, Tarzan actor) Johnny Weissmuller served as a lifeguard; and in 2001 the pools achieved literary fame in Yann Martel's novel *Life of Pi*, in which the young hero is named Piscine Molitor.

Today, Molitor is a cultural destination. The art deco features are back, most prominently in the brass railings, bright blue changing room doors and exquisite stained glass windows and floor mosaics that appear in the casual-chic restaurant and retrofitted bar. But so is the graffiti: an appointed art curator, 27-year-old Joyce Attali, has been tasked with inviting the world's best urban artists to adorn sections of its interior walls (and for some of them who sprayed in the Nineties, this isn't the first time they've painted the Molitor.) Paris-born Mr Brainwash's 'camera boy' motif looms large over the hotel foyer and Hijack (Mr Brainwash's son) has repeated a prowling cat motif on the corridor walls. >

BELOW: *Its art deco features rebuilt, Molitor is now a hotel, restaurant and spa. Inside the blue-doored changing cabins, street artists have personalised the space with their work*





ABOVE: MGallery runs the hotel side of the project; the 124 bedrooms, some with porthole-like roundel windows, also incorporate street art for sale



ABOVE: The restaurant's unusual concept sees the in-house team pairing up with a series of highly experienced guest chefs – one inspiring the other

Swimming in the sacred pools is now the preserve of hotel guests (the hotel, MGallery, has 124 bedrooms that start at £235 a night), Molitor members (annual membership is £2,600) and those wishing to pay £140 for a day pass. However, in keeping with its bohemian era, Molitor aims to host regular public exhibitions. 'Under the Wave' in 2014, for example, took visitors on a free artistic stroll around the pools, peeking behind the blue doors of the changing cabins (renamed 'cabins of curiosity') that have been personalised by artists such as Balder, Kashink and Artiste-Ouvrier. The Molitor has also formed a foundation, which recently gave 42 street artists the opportunity to create lithographs in the iconic Idem workshop (where Picasso, Matisse and Chagall all produced prints). The lithographs, by names such as Nunca, Futura and Blek le Rat, are currently exhibited in each of the bedrooms, and are available for sale.

Every inch of the Molitor is photogenic (indeed, when I visit, there's a photo shoot for Baby Dior happening), but one of its

best vantage points is undoubtedly from the ground-floor restaurant, which runs adjacent to the turquoise 'summer' pool that glows purple and blue at night. With its unusual concept of a 'house of chefs' devised by award-winning chef Yannick Alléno, the restaurant itself is a celebration of old and new.

Julien Mercier – who at 44 is considered the new guard – is head chef, and is implementing Alléno's plans. Every season, different culinary experts are chosen to join him and create a signature menu that stands alongside Mercier's dishes. Each of these older guest chefs is a *Meilleur Ouvrier de France* (MOF), a highly prestigious title bestowed every three years by the French government to the top culinary craftsmen in the country. Begun in 1924 to preserve artisan heritage under threat from industrialisation, this unique contest involves rigorous training and meticulous execution throughout the scrupulous judging process.

Mercier says this is the first time he has encountered such a cross-fertilisation of

talents: the adage "too many cooks" springs to mind, but the chef is generous with his kitchen and eager to learn long-forgotten techniques. "Gabriel Biscay, our first MOF [awarded in 1989], had a rich and classical way of cooking that I liked very much," he says. "He introduced us to a dessert called Omelette Elizabeth – a very old-fashioned dish that is half frozen and part-prepared in front of the guests – and no one in our team, or probably in our generation, had heard of it." Mercier says his team are excited to hear who the next MOF will be and what expertise they will share.

Mercier describes his own cooking as "very precise. I want the guests to be able to recognise each item clearly and to be able to mix and match taste and textures." Think codfish with capers, anchovies, olives and pistachios, or beef tenderloin in *jus*, with flesh so soft you could eat it with a spoon. For nostalgic locals and curious visitors, the restaurant seems the ideal way to savour Molitor's melange of eras. **A**

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