

Eating the future

at Futuroscope, France

Words and photos Nick Harman



Forget the Fat Duck, if you want to taste full on Molecular Gastronomy without breaking the bank, grab the kids and hop over the Channel to France's second largest theme park



'You have to wear gloves for this part, Health and Safety you know?' says Chef Noel Gutrin pulling on a pair of enormous gauntlets. 'You also have to wear goggles, he adds. 'Not me though as I already wear glasses.' His team, standing around looking like arc-welders in their own goggles, all laugh politely. Whatever kind of kitchen you're in, and this a very weird one indeed, it's always a good idea to laugh at the head chef's jokes.

This is in fact the kitchen at Le Cristal Restaurant at Futuroscope in France, the theme park you've probably never heard of. A short ride from Paris, and with its own dedicated TGV (Train Grande Vitesse – High Speed Train) stop, it's a French theme park based upon multimedia and audio-visual.

There are other fun attractions and shows, such as water cannon to drench people on the boat rides, a robot that kids can climb into and go dancing in and a space age revolving view tower that takes you high up into the sky. It's also, thanks to Le Cristal, one of the few places in the world where you can sample full on Molecular Gastronomy dishes without going a six-month waiting list and spending your life-savings.

Futuroscope opened in 1987 and is now the second most visited theme park in France and is quite unique. Educational in a fun way, it

attracts a more middle-class kind of family who don't want to be besieged by consumerism. And for us Brits the best bit is that it's a simple short train ride from St Pancras while Ryanair goes to nearby Poitiers in an hour.

Chef Noel has made Le Cristal a place where you can sample the cuisine 'of the future' and have a laugh while doing it. He hands me a meringue that I pop into my mouth and suddenly I'm belching smoke as the sweet treat dissolves. 'Children love it,' Noel, says shoving one into his mouth and blowing smoke out of his nose.

There is a Fat Duck connection here as Hervé This, the father of MG and who has worked alongside Blumenthal and Pierre Gagnaire, is also an advisor at Le Cristal.

Chef Noel demonstrates spherification for me, the technique whereby drops of liquid receive a calcium skin so that they become spheres, or virtual caviar, on the plate until 'popped' by your fork. It is pretty much the most basic form of MG.

More grown up is a dish of Foie gras. The Foie is pan-seared traditionally then served with lollipops of 'toffee apple' enveloped in a clever MG fruit gel. With it comes a Prothy cup of mousse made from morel mushrooms and stock that's been blended and fired through

the kitchen version of a soda stream to make it ethereally light so that it bathes the palate in flavour.

It's all great fun and most importantly it tastes good. The menus represent cutting edge molecular gastronomy with good old-fashioned flavour packed French cooking. Even the under 8's are catered for with a menu that will have them enthralled and entertained right through lunch.

In fact for foodie mums and dads despairing of ever eating a decent meal with the kids, Le Cristal is a real solution and Futuroscope itself is a great day out for families. Plus in the evening the park comes alive with water displays and laser shows and with cheap accommodation all around the area, staying over is easy.

We have seen the future and it tastes great. ■

Futuroscope

2011 prices in the Park start at 33 euros per adult for a day and 27 euros for a child

Prices including hotel and the Laser Show in the evening start at 49 euros 50

Rail Europe

Return fares from London to Poitiers start at **£112** in standard class. All prices are per person and subject to availability. For bookings visit www.raileurope.co.uk