





HEADING south

From a fragrant retreat and boutique hotels to Zen dining, new openings give *Le Midi* a new lease of life



Twilight
at the
former
cloister

CONVENT COOL

THE FORTIFIED HILLTOP town of Mane, about an hour north of Marseille in the Alpes de Haute-Provence, hasn't had anything to brag about since medieval times, when it was the seat of a mendicant order established by Saint Vincent de Paul. Now, more than three centuries later, the peach-coloured convent that once housed its nuns, and later Louis XIV's personal botanist, has been converted into an enchanting 46-room hotel and spa.

Surrounded by terraced gardens redolent of lavender and rosemary and ringed by olive groves, orchards and cypresses just below its imposing ramparts, **Le Couvent des Minimes** is the brainchild of Olivier Baussan, founder of the wildly successful toiletries retailer, L'Occitane. For his first-ever property, Baussan called on architect Bruno Legrand, a specialist in historic restorations, to bring the jumble of Renaissance and Baroque styles under one proverbial roof, beneath which he also debuted the world's first L'Occitane spa: a petite six-room space, anchored by indoor and outdoor pools and thermal



L'Occitane's founder has opened his first resort where homegrown herbs take centre stage

areas, where treatments benefit from the bounty of herbs (think verbena, lavender and honey) grown in the grounds.

Local provenance similarly informs the cuisine of head chef Philippe Guérin, who employs ingredients like thyme, sage and rosemary in dishes ranging from young pigeon to sea bass and John Dory to Sisteron lamb in Le Cloître, one of two restaurants on site. The hotel also features a convivial bar and

step-down library with a roaring fireplace, as well as a vaulted billiards room. But without a doubt, the main attraction of this unassuming retreat are the gardens, lined with thuya and dotted with aromatic Provençal bushes and flowers, named for each one of the Franciscan sisters who last called this place home. You won't have those bragging rights, not permanently anyway, but at least you can now experience a bit of that monastery magic for yourself. *Doubles from €205; Chemin des Jeux de Mai, 04300 Mane-en-Provence; couventdesminimes-hotelspa.com.*

FARHAD HEYDARI

PHOTOS FROM TOP: ELENA ELISSEVA/ISTOCKPHOTO, COURTESY COUVENT DES MINIMES (2)

With a redesigned rooftop pool area, a new 900sq m spa and a new fitness centre, the **FAIRMONT MONTE CARLO** is set to reopen in July