

Jon Fauer, ASC

FILM AND DIGITAL TIMES

AATON
Special Report

Visite d'un jardin privé
Exposition Koréens au
Musée de la Ville de Paris
Entrée libre, le 1 et 7 juin, 10h-18h
112 bis Avenue de l'Élysée - Paris

AATON



2 Rue de la Paix in Grenoble has long been on my list of places to visit. In the center of Grenoble, a university town at the foot of the French Alps, Aaton cameras have been built here for the past thirty years, along with Cantar, Indaw, Keylink and other famous Aaton products. Presiding over an enterprise of more than 70 craftsmen and women, Jean-Pierre Beauviala (above right) is the personification of the company--an eminence, not grise, and often called the only man in the world who can truly explain, in plain English (and French) timecode on film.





Aaton is an artisanal camera company.

That's a word I never would have dreamed of using with cameras or high technology. *Artisanal* conjures up images of magnificent cheeses, handmade pastries, ice cream, intricate jewelry or fabulous delicacies in a country market. In France, even the smallest villages have "zones artisanal," where products are made by hand, with artistry, care and pride, by artisans who learned their skills as apprentices to masters with knowledge passed down for generations. *Artisanal* comes from mid 16th century French, from Italian *artigiano*, based on Latin *artitus*, someone instructed in the arts.





The architectural philosophy at Aaton is a series of storefront workshops where passersby can look in and the artisans can look out.



As the company grew over the years, additional storefronts were purchased, then upstairs, then across the street. Today, over 70 people work at Aaton.

Jean-Pierre Beauviala established his company as a series of storefronts in the heart of Grenoble, a couple of blocks from La Halle de Ste. Claire, an indoor and outdoor market with artisanal cheese, butcher and bake shops.

I'm reminded of the first time I visited France as a kid, and after being asked whether there were cowboys in New York, I was grilled about what we ate. "Tu manges bien? (you eat well?)" That was a concept I had never contemplated. "Of course we eat as much as we want," I replied. "No, no," my French classmates said, "there's a difference between eating much and eating well."

JP began his career as a professor of electronic engineering at the University of Grenoble. But what he really wanted to be was an architect. Until one day, he became a filmmaker.

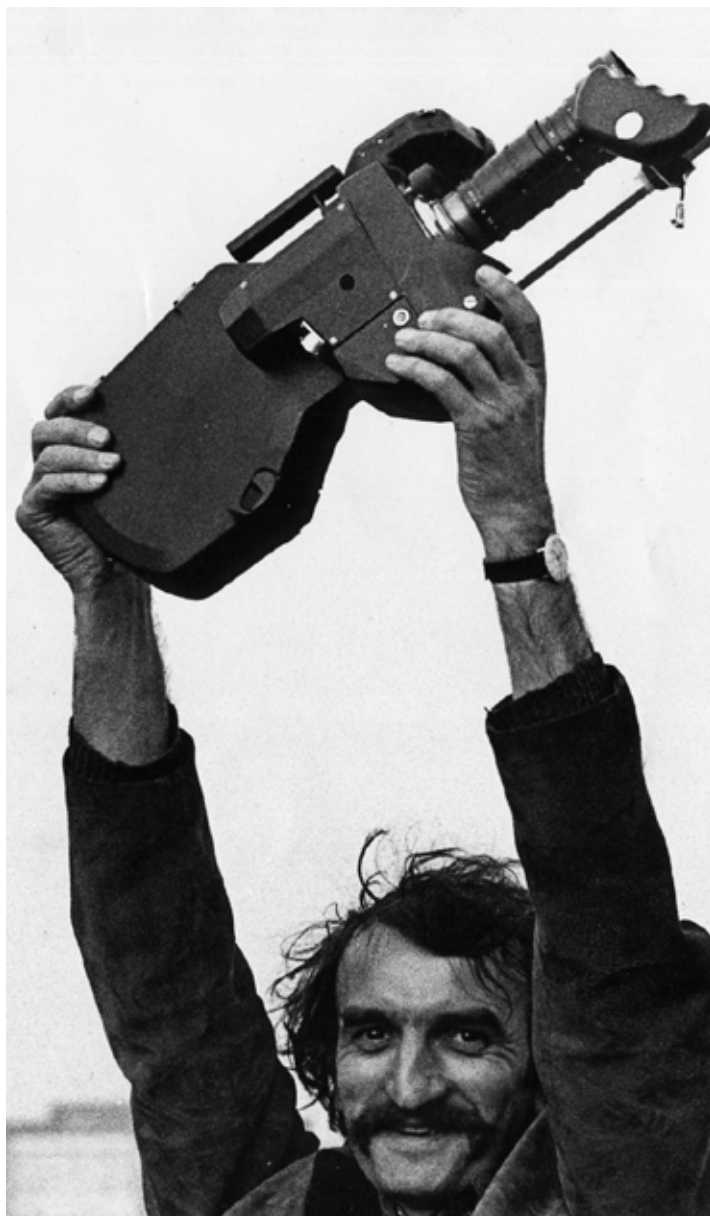
In the late 1960s, Grenoble was undergoing major renovations and construction that changed not only the physical layout of the city, but also the social fabric as well. Small shops were being replaced by large supermarkets. Citizens were transplanted from traditional homes to large apartment complexes. JP decided to do a documentary about this social-architectural problem, and like many Renaissance men, after being frustrated by the tools available at the time, decided to build his own cat-on-the-shoulder handheld camera to do the job.

The rest, as they say, is history. As those who failed to learn the lessons of history, and see it repeated, remember, all great cameras were built by artisan-filmmakers.



Rue de la Paix. Aaton storefronts are the blue ones, on both sides of the street and the floors above.

What's with the Name?



The following story was told to me by Björn Blixt.

After working for a while at Eclair Camera, Jean-Pierre decided to build his own 16mm camera. He got in contact with Rune Ericson, and Super 16 became standard on the Aatons.

Anyway, Jean-Pierre did not have a name for the camera. At that time he was reading a book on monotheism. The Egyptians were polytheistic. One Pharaoh, Amenophis IV, wanted to reduce the political power of the priests, so he declared that there was only one God, Aton, the God of the sun disc. He took the name Ekn Aton which means “from the sun disc.” Tutankamon was his famous son.

A name for a camera ? What about Aton ,”sun disc”? But then you’ll be listed after another camera company that begins with “A.” Add an extra “a.” Voilà. Aaton.

(Above left:) JP with first Aaton 7A camera in Stockholm, 1973. Photo by Anders Petersen.

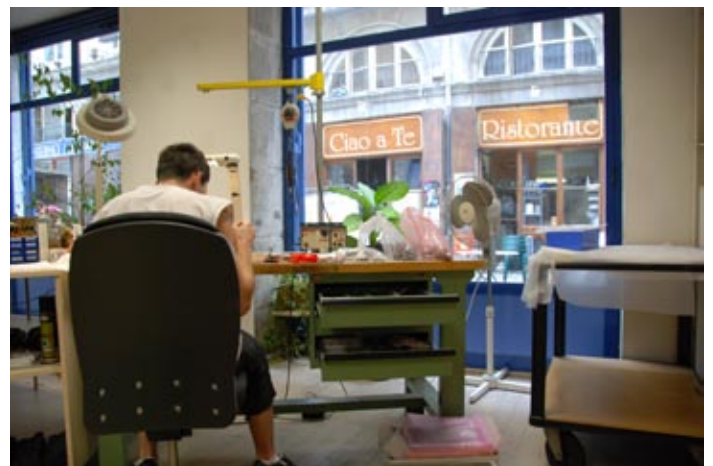
(Above right:) The original Aaton cameras were assembled on the top floor of this building at rue President Carnot in Grenoble, a few blocks away from the current facility.



Jean-Pierre Beauviala in his office, with (left) Elaine Fasula and (right) Pascale Geraci. Elaine makes the famous Fasula barneys and camera covers (www.elainefasula.com). Pascale is in sales.



Frank Fischer (left), head of camera sales, and Laurent Iosti, after-sales assistant.



Most of the assembly areas face the street. It's a pleasant environment.



Electronics assembly area.

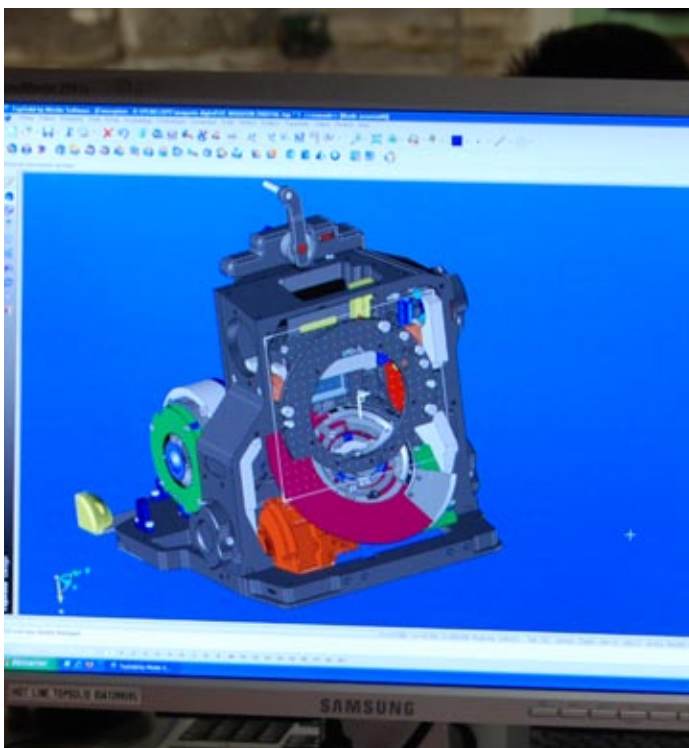


Jean-Marc Bouillon assembling a Cantar.

Putting Penelope Together



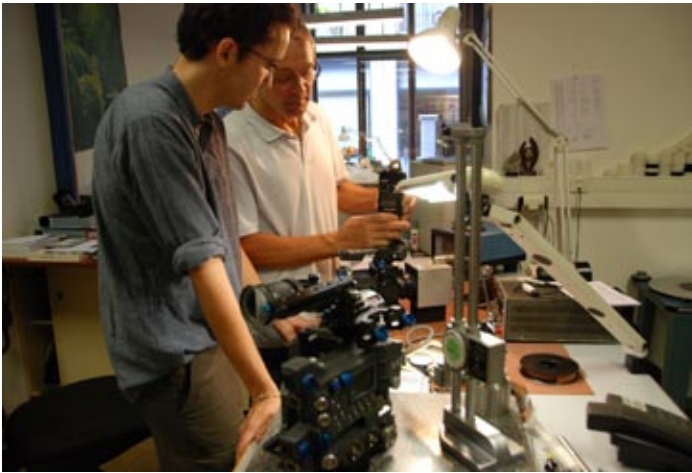
Yves Riviere and Michael Valentin in the CAD department. 3D modeling shortens development time enormously.



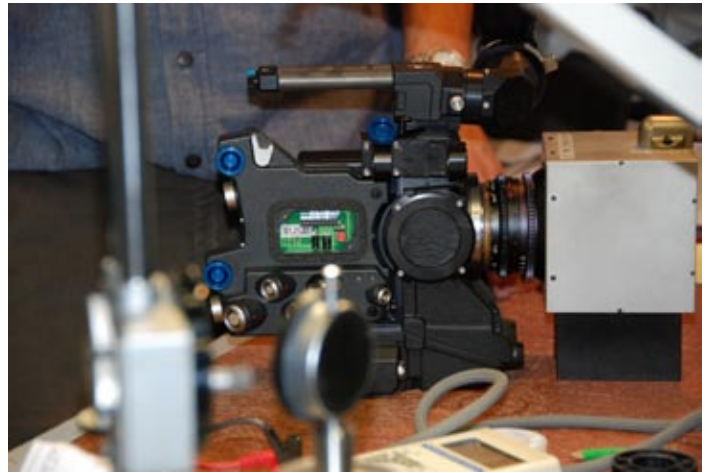
Inside Penelope: lens mount, mirror shutter, motors...



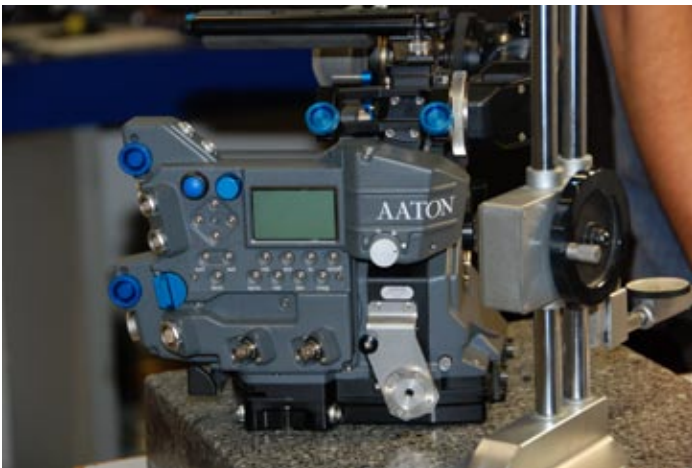
Nicolas Pinaut, electronic engineering



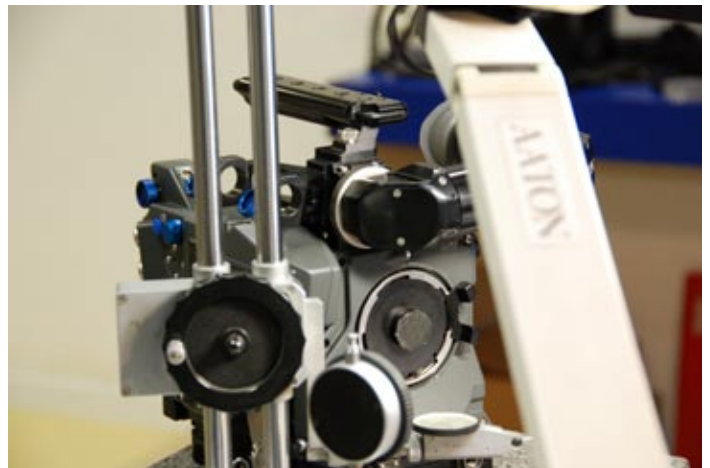
Alain Guerre-Dailly and Simon Roche testing the viewing system of Penelope.



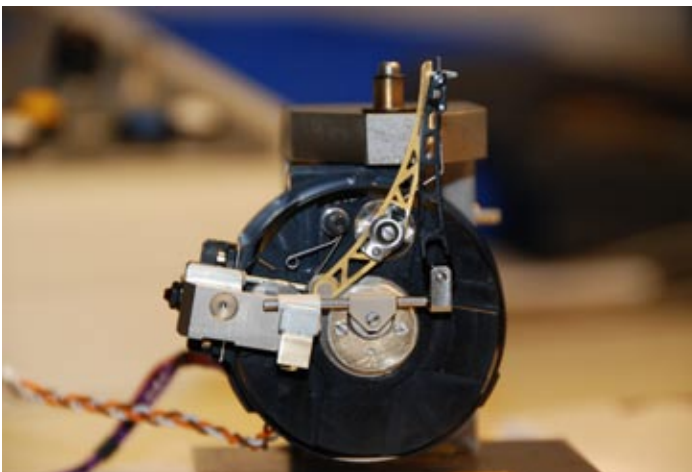
Twenty Penelopes are shooting films at the moment. Of these productions, 19 are being shot in 2-perf and 1 in 3-perf. None are being shot in 4-perf (Penelope isn't available in 4-perf).



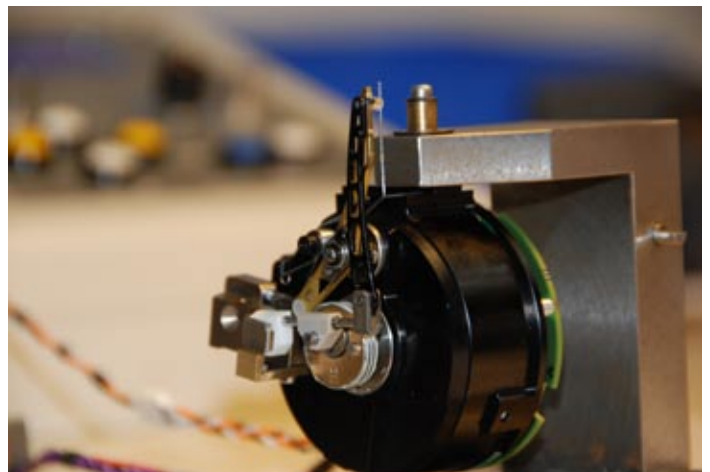
The first two Penelopes in the US are at Abel Cine Tech, currently in production on "The Fighter" starring Marc Wahlberg and Christian Bale.



Two 2-perf features are now in production through Panavision France. Supplied by Group TSF, Canal Plus is doing a mini series in 2-perf: composed in 1.78 and protected for 2.35 for possible theatrical release.



Penelope's single claw movement is steady to 5 microns (.005 mm) (.0002 inch).



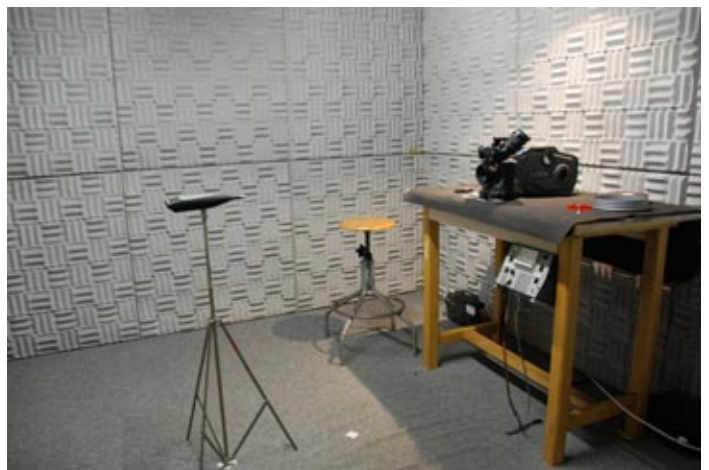
Penelope uses 3 motors. Here's the one driving the movement. The other two drive the mirror shutter and the magazine.



Every Penelope is built by one craftsman. It takes about a month to put her together. Here's Sebastien Reyes working on the front casting.



Dutch angled film posters of Aaton productions on the walls.



Penelope is tested in the sound isolation room. The cameras are better than 23 db.



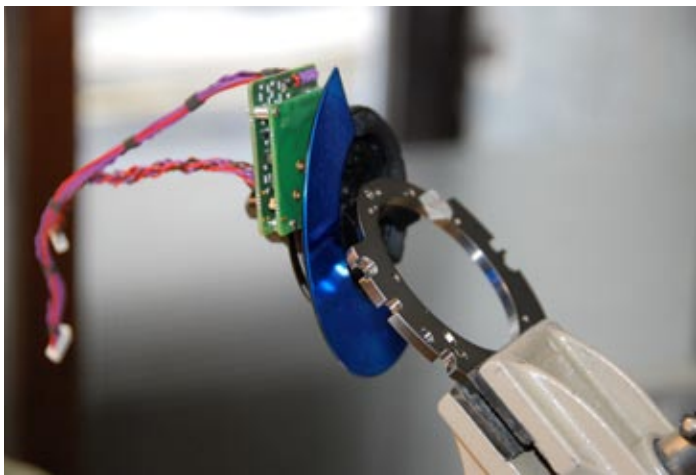
Every camera is tested for steadiness. Alain Guerre-Dailly projects a film test.



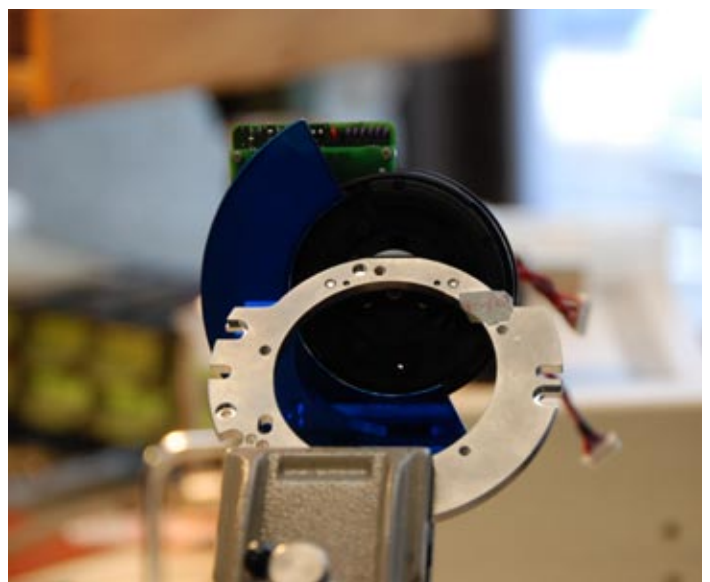
Steadiness film tests are processed in-house in this practical mini-lab.



Roland Seinturier works on the mirror shutter.



Here's the mirror shutter and lens mount assembly



Andre Benoit assembling an Aaton 35-III magazine.





Joelle Varreau, head of purchasing

Noelle in her supermarket of parts.



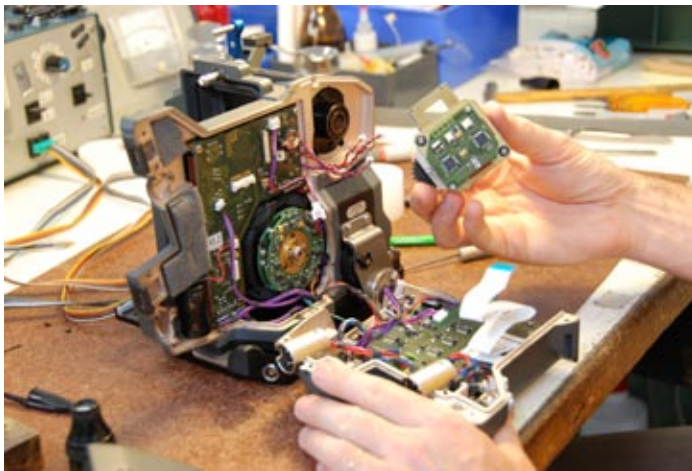
Alain Bellet, Keylink product manager.



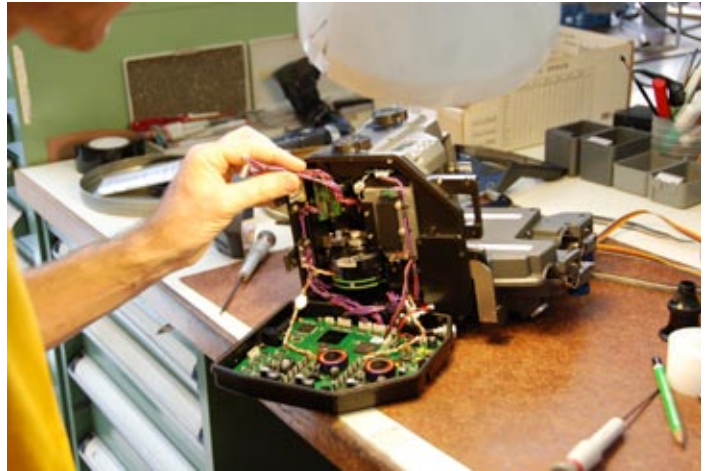
Pierre Michoud going over electronic boards of Penelope.



Electronics boards in camera right side cover



Magazine drive motor seen in center.



Electronic board in bottom housing. Motor seen above.



There's the apocryphal story of Mother Theresa, who, when asked by God what wish she would like granted, said "To end all poverty and hunger." God said she could have one more wish. Mother Theresa said, "What I really want to be is a film director." What Jean-Pierre Beauviala really wanted to be, I think, was an architect. Here he is amid renovations on his apartment.



Combined over the last 30 years from many apartments in a historic building originally built by the king's "procureur general" in 1560, the sprawling complex offers marvelous views over Grenobl and the Alps beyond.



So that's how they made spiral staircases, here in wood. Stone stairs are made the same way--a solid piece for each step, including the supporting center.



Aaton K



The Aaton K film recorder records 2k and 4k digital images onto color intermediate, release print, b & w separation, and all reversal/negative camera stocks. It is assembled in a separate, modern building on the outskirts of town. It uses a movement similar to Penelope for steadiness to 3 microns. (Below, left) Patrice Lavergne and JP.





The Aaton K development team, left to right:
Gaëlle Giuliani, Ke-Hua, Christian Crolle, Thierry Baud, Frédéric Nodeau



If you go...



A short 10 minute drive from Aaton, the Grand Hôtel d'Uriages-Bains in the hills above Grenoble is a delightful place to stay. Its thermal hot springs date back to Roman times. A castle crowns hill above the peaceful small village, with its Napoléon III architecture, charming park, tennis courts and manicured park. Many of the delightfully modern rooms in the hotel (helix staircase) are named after famous guests and film personalities who stayed there: Coco Chanel, Stendhal, Colette, Sacha Guitry, Truffaut, Jean Reno, Barbara Hendricks...

Christophe Aribert, imaginative chef, and his team of 15, prepare amazing dinners in the hotel's famous, 2-star restaurant, Les Terrasses.





(Left:) Second Empire architecture of the belle epoque baths, now used for physical therapy. The spa has relocated to the hotel.

For lunch or dinner, 2 blocks from Aaton: Fantin-Latour 18-36 Brasserie.





AATON s.a.
2, rue de la Paix
38000 Grenoble
France
tel: +33 4 7642 9550
fax: +33 4 7651 3491

<http://www.aaton.com/>