

Marvellous Madame Troisgros

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For the past 79 years the name Troisgros and the city of Roanne, 100 km west of Lyons, have been synonymous with the very best French cooking.

And with a succession of strong men in white: Jean- Baptiste, who opened the restaurant in 1930 opposite the railway station; his sons, Jean and Pierre; and today, the latter's son, Michel.

But although Pierre's rotund silhouette and Michel's infectious smile remain the best advertisements for French gastronomy, the driving force for the past 25 years behind this team of broad shoulders has been an elegantly dressed woman with striking, cropped hair who, intriguingly, never really wanted to settle in Roanne.

Marie- Pierre Lambert was born in Valence in the Rhône valley and enrolled in the hotel school at Grenoble in 1973 because she realised that this was a profession that would let her see the world. Michel Troisgros was a fellow classmate who provided the 'coup de foudre' or love at first sight, as she described it, which immediately ensued.

Once they had graduated, she decided to follow him but it was not easy. 'Michel cooked in Brussels, the Connaught in London and in New York but in those days hoteliers were reluctant to hire couples', she explained. 'Today, it's very different, I'm delighted to say.'

In early 1983 they returned to Roanne for what was planned as a six- month stay since they were already planning to move to Sydney, Australia, to open their own restaurant. But in August Jean died and by the end of the year she and Michel were married. Her role now was working together alongside her in- laws at the Maison Troisgros.

Michel had to stay because the Troisgros' culinary distinction rested on two members of the family in the kitchen, but for Marie- Pierre it was initially difficult to carve out a role that embodied her strong personality, her love of organising and her technical training.

According to Marie- Pierre, her late mother- in- law was 'super kind', but she saw her role purely as *maitresse* of the restaurant, someone who welcomed the customers, made sure that everything was running smoothly in the dining room and was then on hand to bid them farewell. Marie- Pierre sought something a little more than this and found it difficult at first, but now admits that it was probably more difficult for Michel working with two Madames Troisgros than for her working with her husband and father- in- law.

The first manifestation of Marie- Pierre's distinctive contribution to the Troisgros mix came with the opening in 1996 of Le Central, a few doors along from 'la grande maison', as she refers to their three- star Michelin restaurant with rooms.

Le Central they describe as a 'café/ grocery store', its shelves stocked with vinegar, pasta, sauces and sauces while its walls are covered in powerful black and white photographs of their food and wine suppliers. Our dinner of a cheese soufflé; risotto with ceps; frogs' legs with ginger and garlic; and a tarte Tatin was as good as any I have eaten here.

Today, Marie- Pierre seems even more in her element at La Colline du Colombier, the extraordinary set of *gîtes*, or self- catering cottages, she has created out of a former farm close to Iguerande, a village known to food lovers the world over for the oils of J Leblanc, a 30- minute drive north of Roanne. This being a Troisgros enterprise, it also boasts an excellent restaurant.

Le Colombier, which takes its name from the former dovecote that now houses a circular kitchen and a stunning bathroom immediately above it, is the culmination of Marie- Pierre's eight- year search for a location and set of buildings that would allow them to do something original and exciting in the rolling, lush countryside.

'When we started to look', she said, 'all we were shown were crumbling châteaux and maisons bourgeoises. But while we wanted something that expressed the Troisgros style, we wanted something far more relaxed, far more in keeping with the 21st century.'

They, and architect Patrick Bouchain, have also managed to find a most unusual solution to the commercial problem presented by the fact that the farmhouses did not provide quite enough bedrooms to make the conversion viable.

Taking inspiration from the huts in which the local winemakers used to store their tools in the vineyards, they have built three *cadoles* as the most snug, and perhaps most romantic, bedrooms. The sleeping quarters are like half- igloos in particularly pastoral mode, with an ultra- modern living space built in front on steel struts to allow 180- degree uninterrupted views of the bucolic countryside; and equipped with every modern convenience including a log- burning stove. The weather was glorious on the morning we left so, sadly, there was no chance of us being snowed in.



The handsome former barn that used to house the cattle at night is now Le Grand Couvert, a restaurant with as many striking features as in any capital city: an open kitchen (pictured top left); enormous lights hanging from the ceiling; and paper tablemats in the shape of an egg stamped with that day's date to reflect the freshness of the food. A final, distinctive touch is that in front of each place is a soup bowl and spoon as a tureen of soup is served to all before the meal gets under way.

The 35- euro autumn menu comprised dishes of various hams; bruschetta of snails and green beans; a mousse of chicken livers and crayfish; salmon with a red pepper sauce; and a lip smackingly good pot- au- feu. Although it did feel slightly peculiar to enjoy these well- cooked pieces of beef in the same place as cattle had once lain their head.

But while she talked about Le Colombier and her time chez Troisgros with great passion – she did say somewhat modestly that she only thinks of herself as Michel's 'right arm' – her smile broadened as she talked about their elder son, César.

To their collective surprise, at the age of 18 he had shown an interest in cooking, subsequently honed at the Paul Bocuse school for chefs in Lyons and stints in the kitchen at Michel Rostang in Paris and El Celler de Can Roca in Girona, Spain. His current home is the kitchen of The French Laundry in Napa Valley, California.

But whether he will make as reluctant, but subsequently effective, a convert to the charms of Roanne as his mother, only time will tell.

www.troisgros.fr