



**Written by**  
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4 Aug 2018

## Troisgros and the art of bienveillance



In my first book *The Art of The Restaurateur* (Phaidon, 2012), I profiled 20 top restaurateurs from around the world.

It was Danny Meyer, the well-known New York-based restaurateur, who put his finger on the otherwise imprecise art of being a restaurateur. 'My priority as a restaurateur is to look after my staff who will in turn then look after my customers. If my staff are in a good mood then they will impart this feeling to everything that they have to do for the customers in my restaurants.'

I thought of this highly intelligent approach last Saturday afternoon, although the setting was quite different. We were in the beautiful, stylishly rural surroundings of the Troisgros hotel and restaurant in Ouches, a small village outside Roanne in eastern France, and it was close to 4.30 pm.

We had just finished a late lunch, thanks to the very late arrival of our train into Roanne, a lunch that had comprised one utterly memorable dish. What is here called a 'red salad' is composed of crayfish, thin shavings of foie gras, the most delicious 'confited' skins of tomato, French beans, fresh leaves, all generously topped with shavings of black truffle. Now I was to sit down with Michel – with his charming wife Marie-Pierre hovering in the background (she seems incapable of ever sitting down!) – to have a chat.

I was able to pass on a compliment. It had been 15 months since I had first had the pleasure of eating here (see [The Troisgros settle in](#)) and a great deal had changed. Not so much the food, of which more later, but the gardens, the surroundings, the style of our welcome, all seemed more established than on my previous visit. But the most impressive had been the obvious growth in the confidence of the waiting staff.

This considerable improvement I was able to articulate to the Troisgros, a comment that obviously gratified them. Although they had previously run their three Michelin star restaurant (an honour they have held for over 50 years) within their own hotel in the centre of Roanne, the transition had not been easy. There are fewer rooms but the hotel occupancy levels are currently much higher than they used to be. This has necessitated a considerable amount of management time being paid to what Michel referred to as *bienveillance*.

This word caused a certain amount of confusion until a young waitress came along and offered to find the English translation. 'Goodwill', was the word she came back with, but it actually means 'kindness'.

This expression of empathy is what the Troisgros feel they must show to their staff. If we look after them, Michel was effectively saying, they will look after our customers. And the Troisgros believe in this approach so wholeheartedly that they actually close the hotel and restaurant from this Monday 6 August to Wednesday 15 August, a period when they would expect to be fully booked. But, as Marie-Pierre put it so succinctly, 'our staff are exhausted by this stage of the summer and they have earned the rest.'



This approach manifests itself in one other way. While the young team in the kitchen may change (although Michel and César, their elder son, tallest in the picture above with his partner on the right, are permanent fixtures and will be joined again by Léo, their second son, in September), the more experienced faces in the dining room remain unchanged. They offer the same warmth; the same smiles. Perhaps slightly aged but only slightly.

With this philosophy emanating from the kitchen, coupled with the accumulated reclamation of the 80 years since Michel's grandfather opened the restaurant opposite Roanne train station that still operates as Le Central, it is not surprising that we were to eat, and drink, so well. Although our first three courses at dinner left me slightly disappointed.

We were guests of two old friends, who, as this was their first visit to Troisgros, had asked Michel to prepare a menu. One of Michel's distinguishing marks as a top chef is that, via a trait

perhaps inherited from his Italian mother, he is always interested in acid in his food. Freshness and sharpness are the qualities that he is positively looking out for and one of his best cookbooks is actually called *La cuisine acidulée de Michel Troisgros*.

This is a trait that I also appreciate but the acidity was perhaps too strong, or just too prevalent, in our first three courses: raw ceps with diced yellow plums, the first of the season; mussels covered in segments of sharp red grapefruit with light Indian spices; and three crayfish with an over-sharp raspberry sauce underneath.

With the next two courses, and our two desserts, normal Troisgros service was resumed. The first was a rectangle of perfectly cooked sole topped with caviar, sitting on a delicious creamy golden sauce. This was, we learnt, the distillation of the fish stock enhanced by a subtle addition of dashi, the stock that is ubiquitous in Japanese cooking.



Then out came the carving trays and two spherical, brown objects appeared. This was a dish I had eaten before and is described on the menu as 'sweetbreads and pigs ears à Mionnay', a dish that Michel happily explained when he came to join us at the end of service.

'It was 45 years ago when I was 15. I had been sent to Mionnay to work for three months in the kitchens of the late Alain Chapel. For the entire time I was allowed to prepare one dish, the *petit friture*, or small fried fish that was served in a very large napkin. That was the era of very large napkins,' Michel joked.

His dish is a tribute to his time there and also a homage to a great chef who died at the age of 53. Sweetbreads, crisp cubes of pigs ears, black truffles are encased in a tube that is then expertly fried, before being cut in front of us and served with a rich sauce.



We drank burgundy, the particular strength of Troisgros' excellent wine list. We began with two white burgundies, out of deference to our host's wife's taste, a Bernard Moreau, Premier Cru Morgeot 2013 Chassagne-Montrachet and a Jean-Marc Boillot, Premier Cru Les Referts 2012 Puligny-Montrachet, and thanks to Jancis's eagle eyes, a Georges Roumier Premier Cru Les Cras 2007 Chambolle Musigny.

Then we enjoyed two one-word desserts. The second of which was justifiably described as *papillon*, the French word for a butterfly, and it was just that, made from thin layers of sweet pastry that the waiter cut in front of us.



Before that I loved a dessert simply called Orientalism, three shallow scoops of ripe melon, each filled with almond cream dotted around with small pieces of diced ginger. It was delicious.



This culinary artistry aside, and the generosity of our old friend the host, what distinguished our meal chez Troisgros was the friendliness and the professionalism of those who looked after us. As in so many other places where this standard of service is the norm, a great deal of *bienveillance* is involved.

**Troisgros** 728 rue de Villeret, 42155 Ouches, France; tel +33 (0)4 77 71 66 97

(The address belies the fact that this establishment is in the rural heart of *la France profonde*.)