

ANNE-SOPHIE PIC

The poetry of flavours

GASTRONOMY

By Shirine Saad

On Avenue Victor Hugo in the quaint town of Valence, tucked between Lyon and the Provence, perched on the banks of the Rhône and its golden vineyards, the venerable Maison Pic is known only by fine gastronomes and connoisseurs. Some journey from afar to savour the delicate, robust cuisine of chef Anne-Sophie Pic, widely known as one of the greatest chefs in the world. Time is suspended at the Maison, where the succession of luxurious rooms envelop visitors with languorous elegance—inviting them to linger in a plush leather sofa or in the courtyard under a linden tree for an apéritif and a long conversation—surrounded with both contemporary design and the antiques of typical French mansions. Between the Maison's glorious past and Anne-Sophie Pic's refined spirit, guests are invited to an experience solely devoted to the pursuit of pleasure.

The granddaughter and daughter of two Michelin-starred chefs, Pic hails from the great tradition of south-western French cuisine, with its robust gratins, venison feasts, black blood puddings, pungent cheeses and dramatic wines. She cooks with the region's bounty of fruits, vegetables, herbs and flowers, using more fish than meats to concoct dishes that are as complex—but lighter and subtler—than the regional classics. Rather than seeking to impress with cutting edge techniques, as many of her male counterparts do, she channels her sensibility into a cuisine that is a genuine reflection of her sentimentality.

Inspired by childhood memories, trips around the world, music, books and paintings, each dish is a poem celebrating terroir and the sublime emotion of a shared meal. For holidays, Pic favors beets sautéed in coffee butter and served over tart berries, rather than the cliché truffles and lobster. For special occasions, she concocts her specialty dish: a single ravioli filled with smoked cheese and immersed in a watercress, ginger and bergamot consommé, which is named after a Proustian French candy: les Berlingots. On any casual night her favourite sandwich is a French bistro classic: a melting Croque Madame, swathed in unctuous Bechamel—ideally at home, with her family.

The fourth woman in France to be awarded three Michelin stars since the legendary Mère Brazier in 1933, and the only living Michelin-starred female chef, Pic has faced many challenges throughout her career, particularly in a field dominated by testosterone-fueled competition. But she has gracefully carved her position in the world of gastronomy, balancing her roles at the Maison, and



running both the hotel, gastronomic restaurant, café and cooking school at Lausanne's Beau Rivage Palace and at La Dame de Pic in Paris. Her cuisine is both masculine and feminine, steeped in tradition and innovation, complex, unexpected, sometimes provocative, but ever delicate, sensual, intuitive and never brash.

"Tradition implies temporality and I'm very sensitive to that," explains the chef. "I believe that a cuisine needs time to take shape, to be imagined. Tradition equally sends me back to the notion of heritage and transmission from my father and grandfather. At the same time, my first emotions and culinary discoveries are associated to the family cooking, of my mother and grandmother. These emotions gave birth to my research around the quintessence of taste, of striking the right note, of balance."

The family's history in gastronomy was pioneered by Pic's great grandmother, Sophie, who established her restaurant, L'Auberge des Pins, in the Ardèche region and delighted diners with poultry fricassées, gratins and rabbit stews. Her son, André, took over and won three Michelin stars in 1934; in 1936, moved to the Nationale 7 road that slices through the country's north-south axis from Paris to Menton—establishing the Maison Pic—and whipping up specialties like the 'poularde en vessie,' gratin de queues d'écrevisses' or 'boudin de brochet à la Richelieu.' In 1956, his son Jacques maintained the maisons three-star ranking with an avant-garde take on the classics—with novel combinations such as seabass filet with caviar or sweetbreads and mint.

"For me tradition and modernity are two faces of the same coin," continues Pic. "Rather than oppose them, I bring them together. We shouldn't forget where we come from, but that doesn't mean we can't keep moving. As Jean Cocteau put it, 'tradition is perpetual movement. It moves forward, it changes, it lives!'"

Pic's creations always follow the rhythm of nature and seasonal produce. She regularly meets with farmers, fishermen, butchers and purveyors of rare ingredients to source the best produce available from the region. Working with raw products, she lets her palate lead, seeking to contrast unfamiliar tastes such as acidity, bitterness, torrefaction, iodinity and smokiness. Fearless, she selects forgotten roots such as turnip and cabbage, cinnamon leaf rather than powder, tea and cacao grind as condiments, dashi broths, infused butters and smoked meats.



Images: courtesy of Anne-Sophie Pic.



Pic creates visual poems with these ingredients, relying on her imagination to create new flavour pairings. She compares this cognition to a composer playing with musical notes. The chef then heads to the kitchen of her cooking school to research and prepare test dishes, recreating a dish at least six times before settling on a recipe. Meticulous, she jots down notes on every test, every impression to help process and resolve her ideas. Each dish must reach visual perfection: Pic uses tweezers to dispose every element, painstakingly layering flavours, textures and colours. Her 'tomate plurielle' is a burst of raw tomatoes, iced consommé tinged with blackcurrant and elderflower burrata ice cream. The blue lobster, roasted with lobster-flavoured butter and doused in red fruit dashi, is served with cherry chutney and beets. Coconut shells are used to cook a freshly shucked coquille St Jacques while John dorys are covered in sweet Tahitian vanilla sauce. Her bread is spiked with cereals and genmaicha tea, coffee or voatsiperifery pepper.

"My cuisine is an expression of my emotion and my intuition," muses Pic. "As a self-taught chef, I've heavily relied on my instinct to create. Now my cuisine is filled with the unexpected, even difficult flavours—I work hard on the aromatic complexity of my dishes. I enjoy powerful flavours."

Pic walked into the kitchen after studying luxury management in Paris and working at Moët & Chandon (New York) and Cartier (Tokyo). Homesick, she returned to Valence in 1992 determined to learn about gastronomy and hospitality. Her father assigned her to the kitchen and trained her, but passed away a few short months later, leaving 23-year-old Pic alone to run the reception of the prestigious institution. She gave the administrative side to her husband David Sinapien, whom she met at business school. After the restaurant lost a Michelin star in 1995, she decided to return to the kitchen. A few years later Pic received the Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres distinction; while the restaurant earned back its three Michelin stars (2007) and a host of coveted awards

including the Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur in 2012. In 2009 Pic opened a restaurant at Lausanne's Beau Rivage Palace; in 2012 she inaugurated La Dame de Pic in Paris. And this year, travelers of Air France's first class will savour her dishes on board.

"Anne-Sophie is perpetuating the great tradition of her father and grandfather," says Paul Bocuse, who mentored the young chef when she found herself alone in the kitchen. "Behind her fragile appearance is a truly great chef."

What drives Pic is not glory or fame. Reserved, delicate, generous, she prefers to be referred to as a cook, not a chef, and values time with her family over

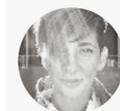
covery of new sensations and savours. I'm trying to transmit this emotion with my cuisine and to offer it to my guests."

Ultimately, Pic's is a poet's work: creating a fleeting, overwhelming sense of aesthetic, sensual and emotional delight. "A meal at my restaurant must be a unique, magical moment, outside [of] time," concludes the chef. "I love this idea that a meal is ephemeral in a society sometimes too focused on possession. From the moment spent at the restaurant, the diner keeps nothing but memories. My job consists of making sure that those memories are unforgettable, and constitute a moment of eternity."

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industry ceremonies. She is maternal and firm in the kitchen. The first to taste everything and the last to check a dish before it leave the pass. Above all, Pic is driven by the quest for the activity that the French have so perfectly cultivated and preserved: pleasure.

"I associate gastronomy with pleasure and taste," she says. "I was fortunate to be born into a family where we ate for pleasure's sake. I have numerous and moving memories of family meals where everything was an excuse for the dis-



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ANNE-SOPHIE PIC

After a brief career in luxury marketing, Anne-Sophie Pic chose to return to her roots and took over the Maison Pic in her hometown, earning three Michelin stars and a reputation as the best woman chef in the world.

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