

# A Stove of One's Own

LACANCHE, FRANCE | JULY 2008

At the age of 50, a time many men embarrass themselves with “boys and their toys” acquisitions designed to make them feel younger,—a Porsche, say, or a speedboat or billboard-sized television—I found myself on a plane, flying to France, about to buy an oven.



It was something of an accident, really. One of those it-made-sense-at-the-time decisions that can only be understood within a

context of the fiscal and physical madness known as “household improvement.”

Early in 2008, my partner, James, and I bought a pre-war apartment in Manhattan. A key part of the gut renovation, which I oversaw, was our wish to create a kitchen that wouldn't really look like a kitchen. This, not surprisingly, required finding an oven that didn't really look like an oven. Eventually, my research led me to Lacanche, a classic French range that's made in a tiny town in Burgundy, near Dijon. The stream-lined design of these powerful cooking machines hasn't changed much since the 1920's, or the same era when our apartment building was built. They are not mass-produced, in fact no ovens are kept in “stock;” every oven is made to order, and only a few thousand each year. The more I learned about Lacanche, the more I fell in love—madly, blindly, imprudently in love.

I am usually dubious about the likelihood that any material object can provide long-lasting happiness. However, the possibility of owning one of these gorgeous ovens began to assert a quite uncharacteristic hold on my imagination. Soon enough, when I should have been working on other projects, I'd find myself

sneaking away to the Lacanche website, to gaze yet again at the various models, colors and ways an individual range could be tailored to a customer's exact specifications. Did I want two gas ovens, two electric, or one of each? Five burners, six, eight? One day, I imagined the oven in a sexy black; the next, it was an orange more vibrant than a ripe persimmon.

After dithering and debating, I made the leap, and placed my order for a model called The Cluny. I also decided to make a pilgrimage to Burgundy, and Lacanche, to see where my oven would be born. Bon Appetit and Bon Voyage—all at once.

On the flight over to Paris, I read *My Life in France*, Julia Child's memoir about the years she spent abroad, with her husband, Paul, following World War II. Child is a charming writer, and most companionable in her tone and easy way of storytelling. This period marks the beginning of her culinary education—she was in her mid-thirties before she scrambled an egg—and Child is wonderfully self-deprecating about the many mistakes she made. Never apologize for what you've cooked, she proclaims. If the fish is too salty, or the cake falls flat, your family or friends probably will not notice. Even if they do, your contrition won't make the food taste any better. Just smile, and tough it out. This is counterintuitive, and hard to follow, but it's damn good advice.

After a few days in Paris, I traveled on to Lacanche. I could have blinked and missed it, as there isn't much to see. A small river called the Lacanche crosses the village, giving this spot its name. Only 700 people live here, and nearly 200 of them work at the oven factory. A cozy and enchanting spot, I decide Lacanche is Burgundy's Brigadoon.

The region is traditionally associated with France's steel industry, as iron ore was discovered here in the 17th century; several of the buildings on the Lacanche property date back to this time. Bullets were made here for Napoleon. Eventually, though, more peaceable types of manufacturing prevailed. In 1797, a gentleman named Jacques Etienne Caumartin turned the site into a production spot for iron cookers and heaters.

# A Stove of One's Own

LACANCHE, FRANCE | JULY 2008



Upon my arrival, I was met by Jean-Jacques Augagneur, Director of the Lacanche company. He had laser blue eyes, and a long, thin nose that plunged downward, until it nearly collided with his upper lip. Dazzlingly courteous, while simultaneously maintaining a certain French aloofness,

Monsieur Augagneur proved not only to be a businessman, but something of a philosopher and culinary historian, as well.

We walked to a small restaurant called Accueil (French for “welcome”), which is just outside the Lacanche factory gate, and is patronized both by the company’s white- and blue-collar workers. He ordered us a pressed ham terrine, covered in aspic, and rabbit, braised in a mustard sauce—simple Bourguignon food to him, but an exquisite treat for me. As we ate, Augagneur took a piece of paper, and began to sketch for me a quick history of cooking equipment and the domestication of fire.

While early man doubtless observed examples of fire in lightning, volcanoes, or even the sparks caused when two rocks hit against each other, nearly all primitive races had some mythology of how divine intervention first brought fire to earth. Since fire was so essential to man’s survival, worship and rites surrounding it have existed since pre-historic times. To assure it was never missing, it became customary for public fires to be carefully tended around the clock.

“Fire was especially sacred to the ancient Persians, and all across Iran, even today, you will find fire festivals celebrated and temples that were built by Zoroastrians to worship fire,” Augagneur told me.

Once men and women made the leap to bringing individual flames indoors, into their own shelter, the earliest fireplaces were

probably made up of stones, with a hole in the structure’s roof to vent smoke skyward. Although crudely effective, such techniques yielded a most inefficient burn and tremendous indoor air pollution. Dirt and ash fell on everything and everyone.

Gradually, such open pit fires were transformed into the hearth, with a flue and chimney. Pots would be hung in the fireplace, near or above the flames, and cooking would be done here. And so things remained, unchanged more or less for centuries, with the same area in the kitchen both heating the room and cooking food.

The next big advance was in the 17th century, when the French created something called the potager, a tabletop or long counter, made from stone, with carved-out declivities to hold coals hot from the fireplace—a prototype of today’s Weber grill, if you will. A grill would be laid over the coals, which could stay hot for several hours, and a pot placed here to simmer. A vestige of this device is the french word for “soup,” which is potage.



Finally, in the 19th century, the French top, or “simmer plate,” was created. This cast iron surface was placed on top of the pot bellied stove, or coal- or fire-filled radiator. It defused heat, so the pot didn’t have to be constantly monitored and stirred to prevent its contents from burning. Today’s Lacanche ovens are still based on this age-old method of manipulating heat’s intensity around food. Lacanche ovens are smaller, and they surround and envelop whatever is being cooked, focussing heat there.

# A Stove of One's Own

LACANCHE, FRANCE | JULY 2008

“In America, you are conditioned to think that bigger is best, but that is not necessarily the case in an oven,” Jean Jacques tells me. “You never want to cook a chicken in a huge pan, because the chicken, and all its juices, will dry out in the exposed space. Wrapping a piece of meat in bacon or pastry is the same concept. Less is more. Snug is better.”

**“Food and recipes can change your life. It is a matter of respect for the human body,” he said.**

I was struck by how effortlessly Augagneur has made the shift from talking about Zoroastrian mythology, to the physics of heat distribution, to the construction of a Beef Wellington. He also appeared completely unaffected by three rather ample glasses of Cotes du Rhone he drank during lunch.

“Food and recipes can change your life. It is a matter of respect for the human body,” he said. “You can feel something new through food. I believe this needs to be cultivated and explored. The further we get from the earth, it is at our peril.”

As if what Jean-Jacques just said was his cue, the waiter arrives with our dessert—bowls of just-picked strawberries. The odor of the fruit is overwhelmingly fresh and sweet; it lingers over our table. Strawberry fields forever.



Jean-Jacques startles me with his next question. “Now then. Do you want to see your Lacanche?”

You bet I did.

Leaving the restaurant, we cross the road and re-enter the factory. Before me are a group of several Spiertz iron presses that bend and mold sheets of steel into an oven's seamless cook top. These remarkable machines, rising

three stories tall, were made in Alsace in 1945, and have been in this factory for over half a century. They emit a low rumble that sounds like distant thunder, or war drums. All the workers wear a uniform of gray cargo pants, and a navy blue T-shirt that has the logo of SIL stitched over the left breast—Societe Industrielle de Lacanche. It's as if this is a secret society, a select club, and I am being made a novice.



There it was. Sitting up on a wooden pallet, about to be crated up. My Lacanche. The cruciform hardware, as I requested, is all polished nickel. Despite a greenish hue cast by the factory ceilings'

florescent lights, I can see that my oven's color, a pale, grayish brown called “Frangipani,” is luscious. I crouch and put my face up right next to the doors to admire the porcelain finish. I'd told Jean-Jacques earlier I felt like I was going to meet my adopted baby for the first time. “Do you hear a heart beat?” he now jokes.

I laugh, feeling a gush of pride, then a spasm of fear. I am not sure I'm a good enough chef to deserve such an oven. Is it beyond my power to control? Will I cook its goose, or will it cook mine? Doubtful that Jean Jacques would understand this panicky reaction on my part, I keep it to myself.

That evening, Augagneur delights me with a marvelous surprise. He has arranged for me to spend the night, and will also take me to dinner at, The Hotel de la Cote D'Or, in the nearby town of Seaulieu.

Cote D'or is the famed establishment created by the late Bernard Loiseau. For a time in the 1990s, Loiseau was probably the most celebrated chef in France, a success story of a man who, quite literally, cooked himself up out of nothing. He never went to

# A Stove of One's Own

LACANCHE, FRANCE | JULY 2008

college, but grew up and received all his education in kitchens. Loiseau was tirelessly ambitious, and leveraged himself heavily into debt while building this hotel, and in struggling to attain three stars in the Michelin Red Guide for its restaurant.

It is terribly hard to survive, much less triumph, in this cutthroat world of haute cuisine, and people became jealous of his success. Suddenly, for Loiseau, the world felt like it was full of enemies, and those who were anxious to see him fail. In February of 2003, worried he was on the verge of losing a Michelin star and that his business would collapse, Bernard Loiseau committed suicide, using a shotgun which was a recent gift from his wife.

Some of these facts I was already familiar with, as I'd read *The Perfectionist: Life and Death in Haute Cuisine*, a biography of Loiseau. But Jean-Jacques, who knew him personally, tells me more about the man. It was a mid-fall afternoon, and we were seated outside in the garden behind the hotel. The air was warm and butterflies were flitting among the day lilies, as we sipped a cocktail of prune puree mixed with Cremant, which is the sparkling wine of Burgundy. Every few minutes, an attendant would arrive with another tasty morsel—eel mousse with leek gelatin, or snails encroute. It was all quite heavenly here, if one could put aside the fact that the man who'd fretted over the laying of every brick, and planting of each daffodil bulb, had shot his own head off when the job was complete.

“Bernard was full of energy. He had a presence that just filled a room...when he was lit up, that is. He was a visionary who was excited for the future.”

“Then why did he kill himself?” A stupid question, as there could be no answer, but I had to ask it anyway.

“He truly was a perfectionist, which never makes life easy,” Jean-Jacques offered. “Probably there should be a sign along the highway as you drive into Seaulieu: ‘Warning, your Passions May Kill You.’”

After sunset, we moved into the hotel's octagonal dining room for what was doubtless one of the best meals I've ever eaten.



We began with radish soup, garnished with a foam made from the radishes' leaves. Then a specialite du maison, Frog's Legs laid out as spokes around two co-centric rings, one of parsley jus, and the center, a dollop of garlic puree. This appetizer

brought Loiseau international acclaim, its “secret” being that the garlic in the puree is slowly braised, changing the water several times, to leech out its bitter bite. It is incredible. I vow I will perfect this recipe for garlic puree, if it kills me. Oooops. Not a good thought to have in this restaurant.

For dinner, I select pigeon, in a red wine reduction. I greedily savor every bite, and it's not until I pluck something from my tongue that I realize this last crusty/crunchy nubbin I've been savoring was the pigeon's claw.

While ambitious desserts are served—peach sorbet with tarragon, and strawberries covered with a cloud of fennel-flavored spun sugar—I mention having visited earlier that morning at the Hotel De Dieu, a hospital from the 15th century built in the center of Beaune. One of the most famous buildings in Burgundy, it is sometimes called the “palace for the poor,” as the centerpiece of this architectural jewel is a room with a vaulted ceiling quite lavishly decorated with stained glass windows, sculpture and tapestries. There were also two long rows of draped beds, in which the poor came to either get well, or more likely, to die. It was like no charity hospital I'd ever seen.

Jean-Jacques nods, and tells me the Hotel de Dieu was commissioned by Nicolas Rolin, chancellor to the prime minister of the Duke of Burgundy. This was a time of great political turmoil, a period when the duchies were rich and powerful enough to rival the King of France. In 1435, the Duke of Burgundy and the King had united their forces to expel the English, but disbanded

# A Stove of One's Own

LACANCHE, FRANCE | JULY 2008

soldiers terrorized the countryside to such an extent that peasants fled their fields, causing widespread famine and many thousands to die of hunger. Beaune was one of the hardest-hit areas in Burgundy, which is doubtless why Rolin chose this spot for his Hotel de Dieu.

**“Back then, the thinking was that in order to be forgiven for your sins, you had to give.”**

“Of course, Rolin, and the Duke, were only being altruistic to a point,” Jean-Jacques concluded, with a sly chuckle. He took a sip of his wine and looked at me, down his long nose, above which glistened his piercing blue eyes. “Back then, the thinking was that in order to be forgiven for your sins, you had to give.”

It seemed that Jean Jacques was inviting me to join him in snickering at the Duke of Burgundy's wager with God, specifically, the Duke's sense that because he was rich, he had to give some back, or all his wealth would be taken away from him. Yet, isn't this the basis for much of charity—a superstitious compensation by those who are lucky enough to “have,” when they know that vast majority of people don't.



I wasn't sure it was actually a sin to come all the way to France to buy an expensive oven, but maybe it would be to only use it to make dinner for my boyfriend and me, or our families and friends when they came to visit. No, I had to do more with my Lacanche.

Regardless of whether or not I needed to be “forgiven,” I had to figure out a way to give.

Maybe, I thought, I could figure out some way to start cooking for others...