

ON THE MAP



JOE RAY
GOURMET GRID

Courtesy Joël Scheitler - Luxembourg

A PRIZE-WINNING TRAVEL WRITER 'EATS HIS GREENS'

1. A COOK IN THE KITCHEN AT L'ARPEGE.

2. TINY AMUSE-BOUCHES IN THE KITCHEN AT L'ARPEGE.

3. CHEF JEAN-MARIE AMAT IN HIS GARDEN IN LORMONT.

4. 'GRILLED PIGEON WITH SPICES' AT THE TABLE AT RESTAURANT JEAN-MARIE AMAT IN LORMONT, FRANCE.

All photos by Joe Ray

Shortly after being awarded the Society of American Travel Writers' 2009 Lowell Thomas Travel Journalist of the Year Award, Paris and Barcelona-based 'mondo-blogger' Joe Ray took the *New Waver* into the kitchens of two top chefs with green fingers, also capturing their special touch on camera. For starters, his own story...

Having no 'Plan B' is a good motivator.

I came to Paris in late 2001 with a plan – better stated as a 'dream' – but no idea what I'd do if it didn't work out. I busted my butt. I also began concentrating on what I knew – food. I had been a cook in a dozen restaurants across the United States including a diner, a family Italian joint, a Pho kitchen in Boston and a high-end Asian joint in San Francisco and wanted to put that experience to use.

The travel part came from a US food editor who told me, "If you can't get into your car and get it, it's for the travel section." I've since spread my wings a bit and even write the occasional travel story that has nothing to do with food, but I still tend to stick to what I know. The photos, on the

other hand, are a joy. It's a completely different job and just as time consuming, but it's another way of getting to know someone and learn about how they work.

How did I end up spending so much time in Barcelona? I'd spent years in Paris without getting out – or realizing I needed to. I was jogging on the Canal de l'Ourcq and thinking of nothing when I suddenly thought: *I'm going to Barcelona for a couple months.* Two months turned into six and gradually I split my time between the two cities. The enthusiasm for food there is fantastic – and now my heart leads the way!

I came across Jean-Marie Amat and his new restaurant in Lormont [north of Bordeaux] thanks to a recommendation from prominent French food critic François Simon. I started blogging with François more than a year ago – he had been working on the French side of his blog but wanted something different for his English-language offerings and asked me to join him – talk about an offer you can't refuse! We have a lot of fun with it, but take it seriously and are building up a following. I love the different takes we have on food and its functions and writing with one of the greats is a wonderful honour.

With Amat, it was all discovery... He's a man unto himself – quiet and reflective, the person who makes the least noise in the kitchen. All the pretence is gone from the man and his food. You like his food or you don't. He likes you or he doesn't. I was lucky he let me in.

Passard is a tougher nut to crack. He's a professional and a showman, spending amazing amounts of time on the floor talking to his customers – there's more to weed through when he talks, but watching him work is a gift. He has an eye for detail and will stop everything to correct the tiniest flaw. He also has his eye on the clock and his mind on the customer. My favourite part of shooting the photos in his kitchen was when he checked the time then looked down at some roasting pork while doing a calculation in his head.

"Accelerate the pig!" he cried. Sure enough, the pig was done in time.

The man who always dines alone is in tonight.

His connection to Jean-Marie Amat is 'purely' gustatory and the chef creates five courses on the spot, just for him. The man always sits by the window and consumes each dish with dig-

nity, concentration and a businesslike efficiency. The only contact he has with Amat himself is a handshake and a brief exchange of words as the chef heads into the garden surrounding the Château du Prince Noir in the Bordeaux suburb of Lormont.

That garden – the chef's connection to the land – is part of a growing eco-sensitivity burgeoning in French kitchens. It's not a conscious 'go green' switch, simply going organic for going organic's sake. Instead greener, local and more seasonal products are the ones that taste the best. This might be considered an accidental 'greening' – the movement is being led by the senses more than by a desire to do good.

Sounds crass? You can be as green as you wish, but nobody, including the man dining alone, is going to eat it if what appears in his plate doesn't look, smell and taste perfect.

"I'd rather live in rhythm with the seasons. That's the chef's metronome," says Amat. "Besides, I don't feel like doing the same things over and over."

His L-shaped garden, flanking one of the corners of the château that houses his restaurant, and spilling down hills in several directions, tends



CHEFS ARE BEGINNING TO USE THEIR INFLUENCE AND UNIQUE POSITION ON THE FOOD AND SUPPLY CHAINS TO CREATE A DEMAND FOR BETTER AND GREENER PRODUCE FROM THEIR SUPPLIERS

to serve more as an inspiration – for instance, when edible flowers garnish a plate of perfect sashimi – and sometimes provide the basis for a pumpkin soup-like dish.

On this night, he's making a fennel, courgette and basil soup, "with a little honey to round it off," Amat adds.

He takes a plastic spoon and gives me a taste directly from the pot.

"It's cold!" I blurt, surprised.

"It needs garlic," he counters, modestly.

With many ingredients coming from a stone's throw away, it's so full of flavour, it hardly matters.

"*Le potage – la soupe* – has fallen off the map, yet you can have a lot of fun with them," says Amat. "Chefs are treating them like they're a punishment for kids, yet people ask for them and they're right." Access to good ingredients is a big part of why.

Chefs are beginning to use their influence and unique position on the food and supply chains to create a demand for better and greener produce from their suppliers.

"We're now finding suppliers who play that game. There's a real difference," Amat. "When someone comes in and proposes a new product we talk price, but it's so natural to go down that road. It's part of what it means to have the best."

The best chefs are also finding that if they can't get something that's up to snuff, they'll grow it themselves.

Amat has been working for years to put Bordeaux cuisine – which he says was a gastronomic "*terre brûlée*" (scorched earth) in the 1970s – back on the map. Now, thanks to his garden and years of sourcing the right products, he's like an artist with a perfect, minimalist palette.

"It was a huge amount of work to get our garden going. For a while, all we managed to harvest was rocks," he jokes, "but now it's a pleasure and we want to be able to put that on the plate." His lobster '*comme dans un jardin*' (As if in a garden) is a prime example: perfect vegeta-

bles, changing with the seasons and practically untouched form a bed for sliced vacuum-cooked lobster tail. There is very little middle ground in a dish like this one. Throw something together without perfect products and you lose your good name in a hurry! Do it right, however, and you're a genius.

Perhaps the best example of the 'product power' is Amat's grilled pigeon with spices – deeply flavourful pigeon with an unusual mix of seasoning that includes cumin, cinnamon, powdered sugar and soy sauce. I combine some of the garden-grown fennel tips next to the pigeon on my plate with a forkful of the bird itself and one acidic, bright and wonderfully pungent bite later it has sealed itself in my 'lifetime memory' forever.

A TGV (*Train à Grande Vitesse* – High Speed Train) ride away in the City of Light, Alain Passard beats a similar drum. The Michelin three-star chef is what Brillat-Savarin would call a 'born roaster' – a skill Passard inherited from his grandmother. Yet when the mad cow disease scare ripped through France in 2000, Passard reinvented himself, moving away from meat in 2001, and sending shockwaves through the three-star world.

By 2002, frustrated with the offerings from his suppliers, he began growing his own vegetables in the French countryside, eventually building his farming venture to its current size of three farms that cover a total of six hectares and employing farmers in the Sarthe, Normandy and near Mont Saint-Michel. One is certified organic and the others are treated that way anyway.

As with Amat, the word 'organic' doesn't pop out of Passard's mouth every other sentence. Instead, it's all about seasonality, local products and the best sourcing.

It isn't easy. I tell Passard how American food icon Alice Waters recently mentioned her disappointment with the raw products available to French consumers, and he responds like an understanding diplomat.

"She must have had some rough experiences,"



Left : CHEF ALAIN PASSARD AT WORK IN THE KITCHEN OF HIS THREE MICHELIN STAR RESTAURANT, L'ARPEGE IN PARIS.

Above : APPRENTICE ADRIEN ANTOUN HELPS CHEF JEAN-MARIE AMAT PLATE DISHES AT AMAT'S RESTAURANT IN LORMONT, FRANCE.

© Joe Ray

says Passard, "You have to ask yourself 'Do you want something good? Do you want something healthy?'"

So how do you get all that stuff stacked up in his kitchen?

"It's desire. It's a choice. They don't just fall into your lap. You have to work to find them."

Fairly damning words coming from a chef who should be able to snap his fingers and get the best stuff, yet a clear explanation for why he chose to go 'off the grid': if he can't get the good stuff from his purveyors, he'll grow it himself.

"Now, I want a passport" he says – describing the guarantee of provenance and quality he seeks, "...for everything."

"I want *grand cru* vegetables. I want to talk about the carrot the way a *sommelier* talks about Chardonnay," he explains.

At L'Arpège it shows. Walk into Passard's kitchen and his produce has an extra depth of colour and flavour that would make his colleagues drool with envy. You need only one look and one bite to realise he's playing in a league of his own.

In the kitchen they cook big beets in a salt crust and, nearby, there's a tiny baking pan full of courgette blossom and fennel with bulbs so young and thin they resemble lemongrass.

Passard has succeeded to the point where other chefs now buy their vegetables from him. And now he's worked meat back into his menu – all

of which he sources with the same fanaticism he devotes to his vegetables.

Chez Passard, it's not chicken. It's not even *poulet de Bresse*. It's *antique volaille du Haut Maine*. "From Pascal Cosnet," he adds, subtly implying that no other bird is up to the task.

Though the product's sensory values prevail above all else, greener methods, seasonality and proximity are also key ingredients of that concern for quality.

"You've got to be disciplined. Tomatoes are for June, July and August. After that, they're done," he explains. "The guy who does organic is still going to grow them [off season], but that's the problem. He's still going to do it. I tell my gardeners the same thing I tell my cooks: you've got to taste. Otherwise, it's pointless."

Who knows? The man who dines alone may soon be making a trip to Paris. ■

Restaurant Jean-Marie Amat

Château du Prince Noir, 26 bis rue Raymond Lis,
33310 Lormont. +33 (0)5 56 06 12 52
www.jm-amat.com

L'Arpège

84, rue de Varenne, 75007 PARIS. +33 (0)1 47 05 09 06
www.alain-passard.com