

Loiseau reaches out to budding Quebec restaurateurs

A hopeful message for next generation

JEFF HEINRICH
THE GAZETTE

Just over 10 years ago, Dominique Loiseau's husband, Bernard, put the muzzle of his hunting rifle in his mouth and pulled the trigger. The celebrity French chef had been despondent over media reports that La Côte d'Or, the couple's famed hotel-restaurant in rural Burgundy, might soon lose its three-star status in the Guide Michelin.

Tragically, he was wrong. The downgrade turned out to be a false alarm. It didn't happen.

A few days after his suicide in February 2003, Loiseau's widow, who until then had been responsible for running the hotel side of the business,

was handed control of the family's entire company, the publicly traded Bernard Loiseau SA, and quickly moved to consolidate its assets: several prime hotels, haute-cuisine restaurants and a line of refrigerated foods sold in supermarkets.

What her family and staff had worked so hard to build would survive, but it wouldn't be easy.

That first year, La Côte d'Or lost 40 per cent of its clientele. For the next seven, the company failed to turn a profit. Only in the past two has it got back into the black, and today, thanks to Dominique Loiseau and her husband's longtime right-hand man, chef Patrick Bertron, the \$13-million firm is not only surviving, it's thriving.

No debt, \$5 million in the bank, one restaurant sold in Paris and another opened in Beaune, the supermarket business targeted to festive

New Year's Eve meals to be even more exclusive, and still those precious three stars in the Michelin for the company's jewel in Saulieu, now called Le Relais Bernard Loiseau.

And that's no small accomplishment. In the here-today, gone-tomorrow world of the hospitality industry, things could have gone either way.

"It wasn't courage that made me continue, it was logic," Dominique Loiseau said Wednesday in Montreal, invited for a short stay by l'Institut de tourisme et d'hôtellerie du Québec.

"In our couple, Bernard was the cook and I was the hôtelière, and so after his death, I reacted like one: I said we must go on. It would have simply been impossible to pack up and leave."

That summer, she even found time to write a book about it — Bernard Loiseau, mon mari (Éditions Michel

Lafont, 370 pages, 2003).

Anyone who's seen Ratatouille, the Pixar animated feature that's inspired in part by Bernard Loiseau, whom the filmmakers met five months before he killed himself (and who renamed him Gusteau for the movie), knows just how precarious an enterprise a restaurant can be, how its magic and reputation can fade fast.

What begins in the kitchen can, over time, be compromised by commercial interests and lose the appeal of the critics, weakening the brand.

Dominique Loiseau and her team didn't let that happen.

Now, in her industry role as vice-president of Relais & Châteaux, a global network of top hotels and restaurants, including hers, Loiseau is reaching out to budding





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Samuel Thibault, left, 2013 bursary recipient of Grands Chefs Relais Châteaux, with Dominique Loiseau and ITHQ foundation director Paloma Fernandez in Montreal on Wednesday.

restaurateurs in Quebec to share her expertise and give them a chance to succeed like she has.

She and Bertron will be the guests of honour Thursday night at a gala supper in the ballroom of the Queen Elizabeth Hotel to raise funds for the Institut's charitable foundation. Bertron has de-

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signed the menu, using Quebec ingredients in signature dishes like crispy zander fish and truffle-browned sweetbreads.

Though times have been tough for the high end of the industry since the 2008-09 global financial crisis,

Loiseau believes the top restaurateurs of tomorrow — including here in Quebec — will always find clients for their calling, wherever they are and however they're able to pay for it.

“In this period of crisis, going to a restaurant is a small luxury, something we can all offer ourselves — and also

console ourselves with,” said Loiseau, 49.

And people like her have a duty to lead by example, she added.

“Every restaurateur, every hotelier, is a trainer,” she said in a mid-afternoon interview in the St-Denis St. institute's

empty dining room, after quietly inspecting the tableware as she entered.

“Whether it be for a maid or any other job, we are trainers par excellence.”

Loiseau first got to know Quebec and the ITHQ through former Auberge Hatley owner Robert Gagnon, who like her was a vice-president of the Relais for many years and also chaired the Institut. She came here six years ago as a tourist and now has returned as a bridge between the two organizations.

At \$1,500 a plate, Thursday's event will cater to 200 people and help finance the Institut's \$150,000 bursary program, which since 2009 has sent 10 Quebec chefs, sommeliers and food and beverage managers abroad for a year to work and study in a Relais establishment or edu-

cational institution.

Loiseau knows something about being honoured for hard work. In 2008, she was named a knight of France's Légion d'honneur, the order's entry-level rank. Awarding her medal, then-French president Nicolas Sarkozy cited her courage for taking over from her late husband so brilliantly.

“You could have broken down,” the president told her at the time, but “you raised your head high and fought to make sure your business lives on, magnifies and exceeds itself.”

That's the kind of businessman Samuel Thibault wants to be. Selected as one of this year's bursary winners, the ITHQ graduate is going off to study restaurant management at the International Butler Academy in Holland and work in Spain and possibly England. He's 23 years old.

“Service is hard work, paying attention to details — the flowers on the table — it's the details that make an institution what it is,” Thibault said Wednesday after meeting Loiseau at the Institut, a glass-fronted hunk of camouflaged concrete across the street from Carré St-Louis.

Hospitality is actually theatre, and the point of the performance is to please guests and put them at ease, said Loiseau, who while in Montreal has been getting a gastronomic tour of some of the city's finer restaurants: among them, Helena, Toqué and Au pied de cochon.

What about Montreal's boil-the-water crisis? Doesn't faze her a bit. “It's not complicated: I just don't drink the water. No problem.”

jheinrich@montrealgazette.com