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Chef Patrick O'Connell, center, of the Inn at Little Washington prepares for a dinner event with chef Patrick Bertron and Dominique Loiseau.

Savoring memories that are bittersweet

When a French chef comes to cook at the famed Inn at Little Washington, it recalls a time years ago when his predecessor first made the trip

BY PHYLLIS C. RICHMAN

It was a scene as familiar as a fairy tale. At the Inn at Little Washington in Washington, Va., chef Patrick O'Connell was sharing the stove with another Patrick, a chef from a legendary kitchen in France, the two of them showing off their specialties for a full house of diners.

Patrick Bertron, of the Relais Bernard Loiseau in Saulieu, offered plates displaying a small Wagyu beef steak, a one-inch cube of vegetables formed into a tiny checkerboard, and an even smaller tart of beef tartare flavored with dried cassis flowers and a morsel of marrow. O'Connell countered with a few of the Inn's greatest hits: truffled white bean soup with a truffled rice fritter, a gorgeous carpaccio of lamb with Caesar salad ice cream, and an unforgettable truffled breast of pheasant with champagne braised cabbage.

There was plenty of laughter that night two weeks ago, and much conversation, about food and so much more. But a bittersweet note sounded through it all. For there was someone missing from this dinner marking the 60th birthday of Relais & Chateaux, the international association of 520 castles, mansions and exclusive inns that was conceived in France in 1954. Exactly 20 years ago, another event just like this one had taken place here, and it had led to the birth of a grand friendship that was cut short by tragedy just nine years later.

In the 1980s, one of the grandest of France's Relais — waystations or stopovers — was La Côte d'Or, which dominated Saulieu, a small Burgundian town fenced in by vineyards. There lived a gentle, smiling giant of a man with his petite, energetic wife, Dominique, and their three lively children. The father, Bernard Loiseau, yearned for his inn to win three Michelin stars, so he lavished \$10 million on two pools, plus fountains, antiques, wood beams, a spa and fitness center, a wine tasting room, a billiards

room and a large, stone fireplace.

His cooking signature was deceptive simplicity, a style so pure that he ignored spices and stocks, and was known to turn water into sauce. The better to taste each ingredient, he said. (Chef Paul Bocuse was known to have paused on a riverbank once to quip, "If only Bernard could see all that sauce going to waste.") Loiseau's famous pike perch was merely sautéed for five minutes, skin side down, then sauced with eight bottles of fine burgundy reduced — at barely a simmer, never brought to a boil — to one bottle, then



Chef Patrick O'Connell, right, plates dishes with chef Patrick Bertron of Relais Bernard Loiseau for a gala dinner at the Inn at Little Washington to mark the 60th anniversary of the Relais & Chateaux group. For more photos, go to washingtonpost.com/style.

parted, Loiseau had only one unfulfilled wish: for a good hamburger. So I sent him to Lindy's Bon Appetit in Foggy Bottom on the way to the airport.

Relais & Chateaux's 60th birthday arrived in October with a not-so-new idea: 27 chefs from its properties around the world would come to cook in American kitchens. Chef Michel Rostang, whose eponymous Parisian restaurant is known for truffle sandwiches, went to the Eden Roc at Cap Cana in the Dominican Republic. Chef Raymond Blanc of England's Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons took his team to North Carolina's Farrington House Inn. Sophie Pic, the fourth woman to win three Michelin stars, produced a \$600-per-person dinner with chef Thomas Keller at Per Se in New York.

Festive as all the events were, tragedy had taken a toll. The smiling Loiseau had lived at the mercy of a black cloud called manic depression. The accumulation of responsibilities — TV, frozen foods, restaurants and transforming his debt to publicly traded stock — had left him exhausted and depressed. Then he heard a rumbling that his third Michelin star was to be snatched away. Such humiliation would be accompanied by enormous loss of income, respect, prestige, maybe even his television shows.

The way out that Bernard found was to die by his own hand, in 2003, at age 52.

Thus 11 years ago ended the talent, the friendships, the happy family in the castle. The clientele of Loiseau's restaurant dropped 40 percent the first year.

Yet it survived. Eventually thrived. And it has never lost its third star.

Dominique Loiseau, a former journalist and teacher and the author of a technical book still used in restaurants, stepped up to the plate. First, she promoted the sous-chef, Patrick Bertron, and kept the restaurant's team intact. "A team is like mayonnaise," she explained. "All the products have to be at the same temperature for it to work." She and Bertron complemented each other.

Bertron was shy and preferred to stay in the kitchen. Dominique liked greeting the clientele. ("Each table has a history. It can be very moving.") She was comfortable appearing on television. Her observations of other chefs' widows warned her to welcome changes. She cited one who "kept the house like a museum. A museum has no future." Dominique has added two restaurants, each with a Michelin star, to Loiseau's namesake.

How did she survive the tragedy? Dominique personifies the iron fist in a velvet glove. "Nobody ever saw me weep," she told me. "Not even my children." When I commented that she looks the same as she did 20 years ago, she responded, "For Relais & Chateaux, we have to be perfect."

It was a poignant return with Bertron as chef of the restaurant now called Relais Bernard Loiseau. Yet his dishes remain familiar: to start, the little cheese puffs known as gougeres; the pike perch, again with sauce of burgundy kept barely simmering — never boiling — until it is reduced by 90 percent. This time, the carrot thickener was a mere token, upstaged by butter. Then a man walked past each table with an open box of hay, which left the diners puzzled.

At breakfast the next morning, I asked Bertron about his style, his direction, and who had influenced him. Nobody, he answered. He doesn't know any other chefs. He has never been anywhere before now. He relies on his own ideas, inspiration directly from his head to his kitchen. To illustrate, he waxed poetic about biking with his children and being captivated by the aroma of the hay in the fields. He developed the idea of flavoring a sauce with hay. He took it further: He sent one of his staff to walk around the dining room with a basket of warm hay to intensify the smell of the pike perch. Wasn't that reminiscent of Fiola in Washington or Alinea in Chicago? No, said Bertron, their hay had been smoked. His was not. He summed up his style as searching for the "Wow!" factor.

Meanwhile, O'Connell was growing manic. Dominique was on the attack. "There she goes again," he said between laughs. "My mother didn't correct me this much." Dominique had just corrected his pronunciation, following a correction of his grammar. Then: "Stand up straight," she ordered. The more she corrected him, the more O'Connell laughed.

As so often in America, the talk wound down with reminiscences of hamburgers. The night before the Inn's dinner, O'Connell's entourage had been invited for cocktails at the French ambassador's residence. At the end of a jovial evening, they gathered for dinner at Daniel Boulud's new DBGB, where almost everyone ordered the Frenchie, a \$19 burger enriched with pork belly confit, layered with arugula, tomato-onion compote and moribund cheese on a peppered brioche bun.

Bernard Loiseau would have loved it.

Phyllis Richman is a former restaurant critic of The Washington Post.