

Bernard Loiseau: 'He lived and breathed cooking'

Bernard Loiseau was a culinary giant – but fear of failure led him to take his own life. Charlotte Cripps gets a taste of haute cuisine at a contest set up in his memory

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Troubled mind: Bernard Loiseau, the three-starred Michelin chef, who took his own life

There is no doubt that the French take gastronomy extremely seriously. But when the top French chef Bernard Loiseau tragically killed himself in 2003, there were those who wondered if it had all gone too far. The 52-year-old chef, who was first awarded three Michelin stars in 1991, was famous for his classic low-fat frogs' legs dish with parsley and garlic puree, at his Burgundy hotel-restaurant, La Cote d'Or at Saulieu. He was known to worry obsessively about his cuisine and to put himself under enormous pressure to be the best. Then one day his wife of 13 years, Dominique Loiseau, found him dead in his bedroom. He had shot himself in the mouth with his hunting rifle.

Loiseau was one of the world's greatest chefs and his death sent shockwaves through the culinary world. Soon rumours were circulating like Chinese whispers that the three Michelin star chef had killed himself in fear of losing a star. The rumours were picked up in the press, and soon the story was out all over the world.

In fact, Loiseau knew a few days before he pulled the trigger that he hadn't been downgraded in the Michelin guide. Even though it was published a few days after his death, he had received the call with the news he had been waiting for before he shot himself. But this doesn't mean that his chronic perfectionism and workaholic lifestyle didn't play a part in his downfall.

What did drive a talented chef, with a thriving business, to take his own life at the height of his powers? I am tiptoeing around the sensitive subject with his widow, Madame Loiseau, who believes he wore himself out trying to be perfect. "He was depressed every winter in January and February, because they were quiet months in Saulieu. That year he was depressed again, but I did not realise that something would happen," says Madame Loiseau. "We had no financial problems at the time, despite reports in the press. He knew he had not lost the three stars – but somebody had written in a newspaper months before that he could lose a star. This maybe gave him more stress than before and made him more fragile – but he was disturbed by a lot of things because he was a perfectionist. He never took holidays and on the rare occasions we went away, he would return home early to the kitchen. He was tired – really tired. He had worked so hard for 27 years. Everybody knew he was depressed but nobody could imagine he would give up. He was a winner."

Sitting upright next to her regal 19-year old daughter, Berangere, overlooking the turquoise Indian ocean in a hotel in Mauritius, Madame Loiseau says: "He lived and breathed cooking to such a degree that he never

switched off. He always had to be the best. He didn't even want to spend time with the children because the whole day long he wanted to be in the hotel restaurant to make sure everything was perfect."

Madame Loiseau felt it only right to keep the show on the road after her husband's death in order for his spirit to live on. After his suicide she took over her husband's restaurant business the next day, hiring his protégé, Patrick Bertron as chef at Le Relais Bernard Loiseau, formerly La Cote d'or, where guests have included Madame Chirac and Robert de Niro.

As another way to preserve his memory, Madame Loiseau and his protégé Bertron decided to host a prestigious culinary festival, held in Mauritius, in which six European Michelin-starred chefs create a first and main course, in a cooking contest. The Bernard Loiseau Culinary Festival, now in its fourth year, is held every year at the Constance Belle Mare Plage, a five-star resort in Mauritius, located on one of the most beautiful beaches of the east coast. This year's contestants, who have been flown to the resort specially for the cooking competition, include Alfred Prasad of London's swanky Tamarind restaurant.

In the true spirit of Loiseau, who was generous with his culinary knowledge, each Michelin-starred chef is assigned an island chef at the hotel, to train to cook their creations: a starter with fresh palm heart as well as a main course interpretation of the typical Mauritian dish, chicken and prawn curry. It is then judged by a VIP jury including Madame Loiseau, Bertron and others, including, this year, the seriously suave Jean-Luc Naret, director of the Michelin Guide. Loiseau's suicide is a sensitive subject for him, given the rumours at the time. "Nobody is exactly sure what happens in the mind of a man who kills himself," says Naret.

Loiseau's protégé, Bertron, 47, who has kept the three Michelin stars at Loiseau's establishment ever since his death, describes winning the stars as "probably the equivalent of winning a gold medal at the Olympics". "I haven't felt it as overwhelming. I'd been working with the regular pressure for so long. I was his assistant for 21 years and he was first awarded three stars in 1991. This is what I do every day. I felt it was my duty and my destiny to carry on."

Loiseau's death was a terrible shock to Bertron, who spent most of his time with the culinary giant in the hotel restaurant. "I kept a respectful distance from my boss, although he considered me a close friend," says Bertron. "He was so passionate about cooking and wanted to share it with everybody. His cuisine was ultimate but inside he was always anxious and insecure. It was more than the Michelin star pressure – more like a burn-out. And all of a sudden – bang!"

Although only the jury will taste the competition food, the six contestants will get together to each cook one course, in a special six-course dinner for all of us attending the festival to eat. To top it all, Bertron will cook the festival's gala dinner himself, bringing his three-Michelin-star Burgundy cuisine, lock, stock and barrel to Mauritius. Top quality produce is flown direct from France, as well as other parts of the world, while detailed recipes as long as his arm hang from the hotel's kitchens. "My culinary style is based on what Monsieur Loiseau taught me but the cuisine is not a museum of Bernard Loiseau. Naturally there are some of his classic dishes – but I have made it my own," Bertron says.

With only 72 three-Michelin star chefs, 272 two-Michelin star chefs and 1, 653 one-Michelin star chefs worldwide, I start to salivate at the prospect of dinner over the next few days.

According to the Michelin man, Naret, you have to be a tough cookie to get a Michelin star. "It's all about maintaining impeccable quality every single day, with undercover inspectors visiting restaurants at least ten times a year."

Nothing could prepare me for the sensory overload I was about to experience. The two dinners are served in the enchanting setting of the hotel's Deer Hunter restaurant, where deer roam freely and bathe in the lake. That night I sit down at a table with more glasses and knives and forks at my disposal than I have at home in my kitchen cupboard. The banquet begins with Tamarind chef Prasad's light starter of spiced Arbi cake with sago, on cucumber and watermelon raita with a tamarind sauce. The meal is topped off with a bright blood-red pudding full of strawberries courtesy of French chef Olivier Nasti.

Barcelona chef Angel Pascual cooks duck foie gras and apples grilled on charcoal, aubergines and smoked palmtree. The German chef Rolf Fliegau, known for his inventive presentations, has created an abstract salmon, cucumber and wasabi dish. Monnoir's ingenious main course comes with a plastic pump of sauce inserted into the potato, along with his Angus beef fillet. Dirk Schroer from Germany cooked Legine, an Australian fish, with caramelised gravy, leek ravioli and shitake mushroom.

The following night I hurry to the three-Michelin-star dinner. I'm seated next to the corporate chef of Constance Hotels Experience, Bruno Le Gac, a passionate chef who organised the culinary event with the Loiseau team. As soon as we tuck into the Bertron's first course of marinated gambas with spices, pineapple chutney and citrus-mango juice, the silence is such that you could hear a pin drop. After grilled scallops with asparagus, which is like biting into air, the crescendo of noise around the table is one of grunts and groans of pleasure.

Le Gac explains that the great Bertron cooks from his heart, with such passion and emotion that I almost cry. "Patrick is very talented. Of course it is technique but a lot of his talent is intangible. It is a gift."

Haute cuisine is another world. And it is one, says Madame Loiseau where restaurateurs are under constant pressure, watching out nervously for undercover Michelin inspectors. "Every table has a story," explains Madame Loiseau. "But when a guest is monosyllabic you often wonder if it is an inspector – or a customer pretending to be one."

At the end of culinary event the proud winner, German chef Shroer, exclaims his excitement at returning for next year's contest, where he will sit on the judging panel.

Although Loiseau would have cooked all the chefs all out of the kitchen, the general feeling is that the dead chef would have been proud. Madame Loiseau says: "Bernard would have been happy as he loved to share his knowledge and passion. This is the spirit of the festival."

For more information on the annual Bernard Loiseau Culinary Festival: www.constancehotels.com