

# AGAINST the odds

In defiance of expectations, the three Michelin starred chef **Anne Sophie Pic** chose to launch her latest venture not in Paris but in Lausanne, at the Beau Rivage Palace. Sudi Pigott discovers the story behind her success.

**C**hef Anne Sophie Pic clearly delights in confounding expectations. Very few women ever receive the ultimate three-star rating from Michelin. When Pic achieved the honour for her family restaurant in Valence in south-eastern France two years ago, she was the first French female chef to do so in more than 50 years and joined only five other three-starred women chefs in the world.

Stellar chefs such as Ducasse, Ramsay and Robuchon have used their status to build mini empires. Not so the revered Pic, although in a recent Le Figaro guide to the richest French chefs, she is the only woman to figure in the top 20. Despite being inundated with offers to open a second restaurant in Paris, earlier this summer Pic defied predictions by opening not in the French capital but at the Belle Epoque hotel Beau-Rivage Palace in Lausanne. With stupendous views of Lake Geneva and the glittering peaks of the Alps, her new dining room seats a mere 48. Its design is as pared down and elegant as Pic and her haute dishes, and echoes their daring play on layering, textures and luminescence. 'Quite simply there was a meeting of minds and a shared sense of family and history with the Beau-Rivage, and then there's its incomparable setting too,' says the elfin, impeccably chic Pic, often described as un petit bout de femme – a little slip of a woman. It's a description that belies her steely resolve, determination, drive and, she smiles, her appetite.

Pic couldn't have come from a more illustrious restaurant dynasty: her grandfather André and father Jacques gained the maximum Michelin accolade, making Maison Pic the only three-generation, three-star restaurant in the world. It's all the more surprising then that Pic is entirely self-taught and initially shunned cuisine 'to open my mind beyond the kitchen.' She took a degree in business studies, a course that included spells in the US and Japan, a culture that has clearly influenced her style. 'I like the purity, the poetry and the refined aspect of the plate,' she says.



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JEFF NALIN

The pull of the kitchen proved irresistible. At 23, Pic acknowledged that 'what really mattered to me was not running a business but concentrating on creativity through cooking'. The plan was for Pic to attend Lausanne Hotel School but her father's sudden death changed everything. 'It was devastating,' says Pic. 'I lost my mentor and when Maison Pic lost its third star in 1995 it was like my father dying all over again. It became my obsession to regain it, largely to honour my father's memory.'

Pic was inspired, she admits, by the self-taught 'thinking chefs' such as Michel Bras, who pushed back boundaries. If they could do it, she told herself, so could she.

'It was a struggle as I was both daughter of the former boss and a woman. I wasn't welcomed in the kitchen and, as I'm very proud, I didn't like to ask for help. Eventually I was ready to take over,' she smiles modestly 'I had to learn to be mentally tough. Cuisine has been very male chauvinist in France, but at last it's beginning to change. I have always done everything possible to be technically strong. It started as a way of showing those who mocked me that I could make it.' ►



Asparagus is smoked over beech for an unusual taste.

'The whole tempo of the kitchen can work differently without the macho shouting, which merely gives the impression that there's something wrong. It is just as intensely concentrated and tense in my kitchen, but quieter, which makes for better food.'

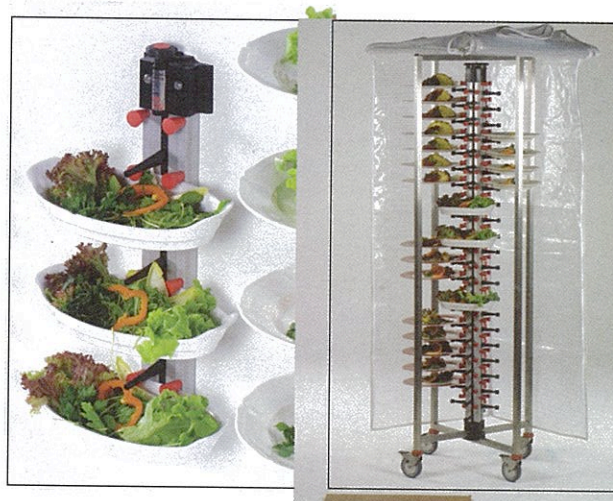
Pic clearly has an extraordinary palate, which she refers to as her 'inner laboratory'. Her approach revolves around continuous tasting and redefining. 'With three stars I have more pressure. I must keep the star. It is still the most important honour; three stars gives you so much strength. However I'm always striving to improve. I never like to stay still.' Achieving the maximum Michelin stars at Beau Rivage would provide the kind of challenge Pic evidently thrives on. 'It's just the beginning here but I believe we are already cooking at the same level as at Maison Pic,' she says. 'I hope we will deserve stars soon.'

'Paradoxically as a woman I can be more creative. No one knew quite what to expect of me and I haven't been influenced by working in anyone else's kitchen. I've been able to evolve a cuisine that is a little different,' explains Pic confidently. 'Crisp and soft, sweet and acidulated, light and intense; all of these come into play when eating. I like to get inside the ingredients. I don't believe in too many flavours on the plate. Everything has a purpose. My food is all about tone, texture, colour and balance, and should feed the emotions – and the soul.' ►

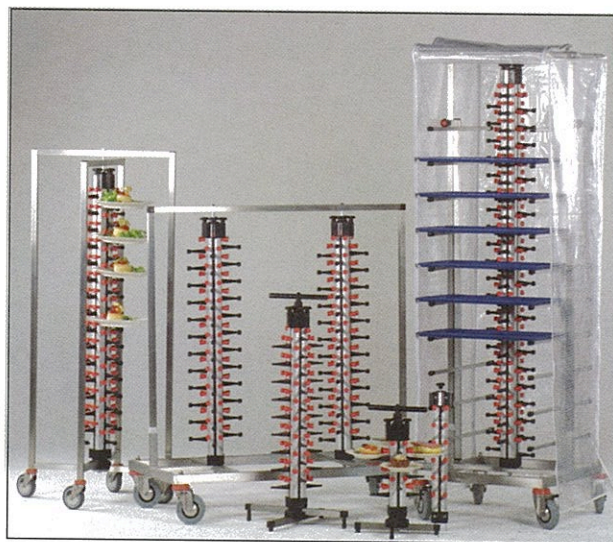


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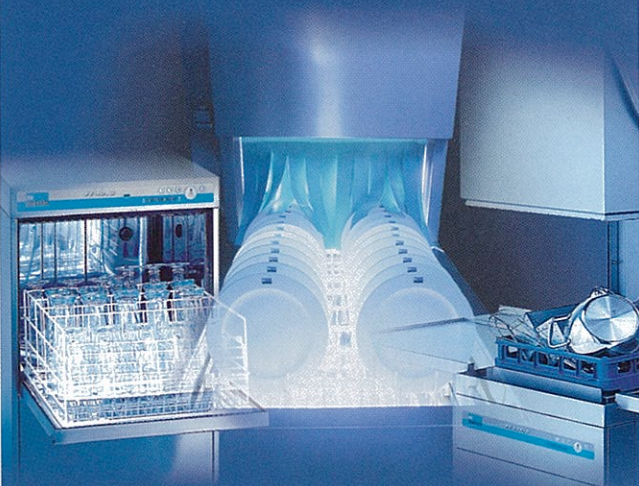
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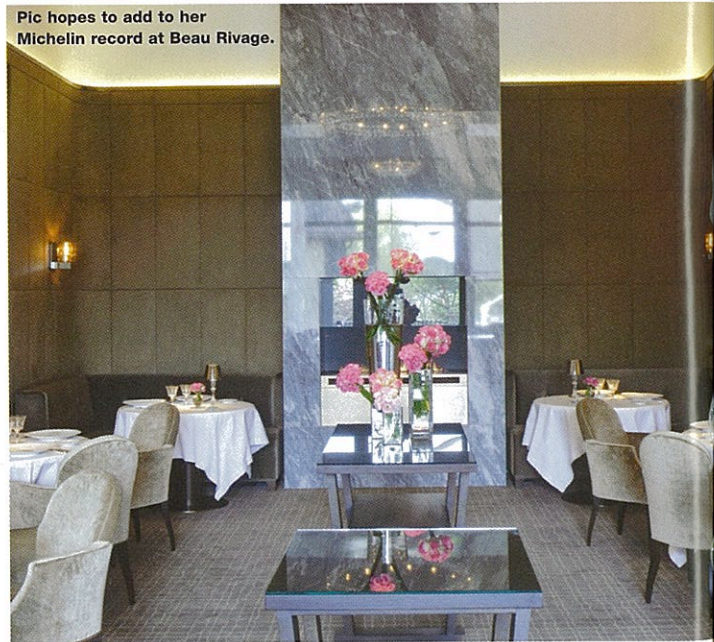
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A third of the dishes are new creations, exploring the Swiss *terroir*. A third are dishes perfected at Valence, and a final third pay homage to Pic's father and grandfather's revered recipes. 'This is the way forward,' she explains. 'To know the best from before but to continue to find my own creative culinary path.'

In her quest for lightness Pic is exploring dishes on her Beau Rivage menu that implode with liquid centres and contrast hot and cold. 'There should always be a hidden surprise: a nuance

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Pic hopes to add to her Michelin record at Beau Rivage.



of something sensual, delicate and unexpected.' Pic is intrigued by unusual smoked tastes, too. Asparagus is lightly smoked over beech and served with a layer of Aquitaine caviar.

The subtle, bitter roast of Blue Mountain coffee is an inspired partner to low-temperature steamed turbot, a gossamer-thin ravioli made entirely of turnip and an ethereal Menton lemon and butter sauce. 'This is my lighter, modern take on a classic Meunier dish. I believe anything can go with anything so long as the flavour balance is right. I'm willing to take risks.' ■

*Emotions menu (six courses) Sfr185 (£107 at time of going to press) Pic Collection menu Sfr330 (£191) [www.brp.co](http://www.brp.co)*