

French chef's star rises in a 3-star world

Anne-Sophie Pic follows in family's huge gastronomic footsteps

By Patti Nickell

Contributing Writer

LAUSANNE, Switzerland — Anne-Sophie Pic looks like Hollywood's idea of a French woman — tiny, gamin, with eyes as large as saucers and a shy, waifish smile. If they were to make a movie of her life, she would no doubt be played by recent Oscar winner Marion Cotillard or, in years past, Leslie Caron.

Yet, Pic is anything but a delicate flower. At age 40, she has reached the pinnacle of her profession. As a three-Michelin star chef at Maison Pic in Valence near Lyon, France, she is following in the (Sasquatch-like) footsteps of her father and grandfather, each of whom earned three Michelin stars at the restaurant.

Among her accomplishments, she also can list cookbook author (*Au Nom du Père*, published in 2004); recipient of the World Cookbook Award; cooking-school proprietress (it opened in 2008); a 2001 French chef of the year award; a chevalier of the Ordre des Artes et des Lettres (the French equivalent of knighthood); parent of 4-year-old Nathan with her husband, David; and oh, yes, she recently opened her second establishment, Restaurant Anne-Sophie Pic at Beau-Rivage Palace in Lausanne, Switzerland.

When I sat down to talk to her in the hotel's swanky bar, she was still in her chef's whites, having just settled the kitchen down for the evening, and was heading off for a few hours' sleep before an

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early-morning flight back to Lyon. Yet there she sat, exhibiting not the least hint of anything akin to stress.

Pic, although not exactly a household name in the United States, is poised to become the next big European sensa-

tion, described by some of her press materials as "a woman of taste, a woman of spirit ... shaped by history ... and a new style."

The "shaped by history" part is obvious. At 23, after spending some time in the United States and Japan, she returned to France and announced to her father, Jacques, that she wanted to be the heir to the Pic culinary throne. That would take more than a pretender, as the family dynasty had spanned a century, beginning in 1889 when her great-grandmother Sophie opened a café specializing in authentic regional cooking.

In those days, women never aspired to be chefs, but Sophie saw the tradition carried on (with the appropriate recognition) by her son, André; his son Jacques; and eventually Jacques' daughter Anne-Sophie, who remains true to her great-grandmother's passion for local produce.

"I take much of what I do from her," Anne-Sophie Pic said in fluent English. "I'm all about using the products of a particular region in my cooking."

She loves fish, particularly sea bass with caviar, a dish her father created, and turbot, her own favorite, but she insists that "all fish are interesting if they are fresh."

She is equally passionate about vegetables — asparagus and peas being her favorites — and chutneys, which she says she uses "to bring

out the sweetness of the vegetables."

She partners with fishermen, market gardeners and farmers who share with her their knowledge, which she then translates (the "new style" part of the equation) into such signature dishes as langoustine, marinated and then roasted, served with creamy green peas and spring onions with minted licorice, or the roasted cushion of milk-fed Velay veal with prune chutney and warm spices.

"I always include a hidden surprise, a touch of acidity, a nuance of color," Pic says. "I like to call it the feminine touch, sensual and delicate."

At first glance, there seemed nothing delicate about the seven-course dinner Pic served me in her beautiful namesake restaurant at Beau-Rivage Palace. Certainly not the price (\$225.) Once I began eating, however, I realized that the touch she employed in creating her dishes was — for lack of a better word — delicate.

I started with a frothy asparagus-and-caviar concoction so light that it seemed to dissolve before it reached my stomach. A manageable portion of fresh morel mushrooms with Reggiano cheese, morel cream and tarragon preceded the steam-cooked turbot in a butter sauce with a hint of lemon. The palate cleanser before the meat course proved to be my favorite — blue lobster

with berries and red fruits, foamy cream with celery, green pepper and lobster juice (if you don't think that combination of flavors sounds as if it would work, trust me, it does.)

The main course was a roasted saddle and rack of lamb with tender sweet onions, capers and black olives. By now, I was beginning to wonder if there was an alternate definition of delicate, but there was more to come — a cheese trolley and, for dessert, a have-to-taste-it-to-believe it dish of creamy grilled peanuts and rhubarb marmalade topped with sorbet.

(Note: The restaurant does have dining options that don't cost \$225 and take 3½ hours to finish.)

With her newest gastronomic temple having opened in April, Pic is commuting from her home base in Valence to Lausanne for part of every month, which is good news for Swiss diners, because Anne-Sophie Pic and Beau-Rivage Palace are indeed a match made in culinary heaven.



CHRISTIAN COIGNY AND THIERRY ZUFFEREY

French chef Anne-Sophie Pic is the third generation of her family to earn three Michelin stars.