

MR PORTER EATS

IS THIS THE BEST RESTAURANT IN THE WORLD?

Meet the Parisian dream team bringing the “power brasserie” home



Giorgio Armani

Upton Blue Slim-Fit Stretch-Wool
Seersucker Blazer

Jil Sander

Slim-Fit Stretch Cotton-Blend Poplin
Shirt

Giorgio Armani

Blue Slim-Fit Stretch-Wool
Seersucker Trousers

Prada

Grey Unstructured Double-Faced
Wool and Cashmere-Blend Blazer

From left: restaurateur Mr Gilles Malafosse, chef Mr Benoit Dargère and architect Mr Joseph Dirand

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PORTER

It's no secret that Paris is home to one of the most spectacular city centres in the world, populated not by skyscrapers, but the stonework of the 18th-century *hôtels particuliers*, government edifices, and of course the museums that hold art as priceless as their views of the Seine.

The Louvre in particular remains one of the city's crowning glories, with kilometres' worth of galleries above and below ground sweeping in an elaborate horseshoe around the eastern edge of the Tuileries Garden – its many wings populated with artefacts ranging from relics of the Egyptian pharaohs to Flemish Old Master paintings, an [Apple](#) store (yes, there is an underground shopping mall, too), and the splendid array of objets d'art housed within Les Arts Decoratifs.

The latter institution benefits from a breathtaking vista, looking out onto the museum's verdant grounds, with the Eiffel Tower just to the right. Its restaurant, LouLou, does too, which is one of the reasons acclaimed interior architect Mr Joseph Dirand agreed to design it, transforming the existing Saut du Loup restaurant into a buzzy new [nightspot](#) that opened earlier this year.



From Givenchy, Balmain and Chloé boutiques to sumptuous private homes and hotels from Courchevel to Mexico City, Mr Dirand's sophisticated touch can be found across the planet, making him a sure-fire drawcard for the restaurant's cosmopolitan return. Alongside Mr Dirand, behind the revamp is Parisian restaurateur and entrepreneur Mr Gilles Malafosse who, together with chef Mr Benoit Dargère, form a power trio carving their own lucrative niche as the kings of a Parisian museum-restaurant revival.

"I began to work with Gilles together on the restaurant of the Palais de Tokyo, Monsieur Bleu," says Mr Dirand of the first project they completed in 2013. "The volumes of the space were pretty much unheard of for a Parisian restaurant. For me, it was a golden opportunity to revive the idea of the 'power brasserie' we have lost in Paris – the kind of place we find more often in New York or in London despite the fact that it originated here.

"The idea of a brasserie is of a more-or-less classic décor designed to mix all sorts of different people, different generations, locals and tourists. The project, as all of my work, was based on the idea to find the most coherent story for the space. Monsieur Bleu is in a 1930s building – the architecture is quite radical, but with a softness and roundness at the same time."

"I wanted the rooms to feel like they belong in the museum, as though I was reconstructing the home of a collector"

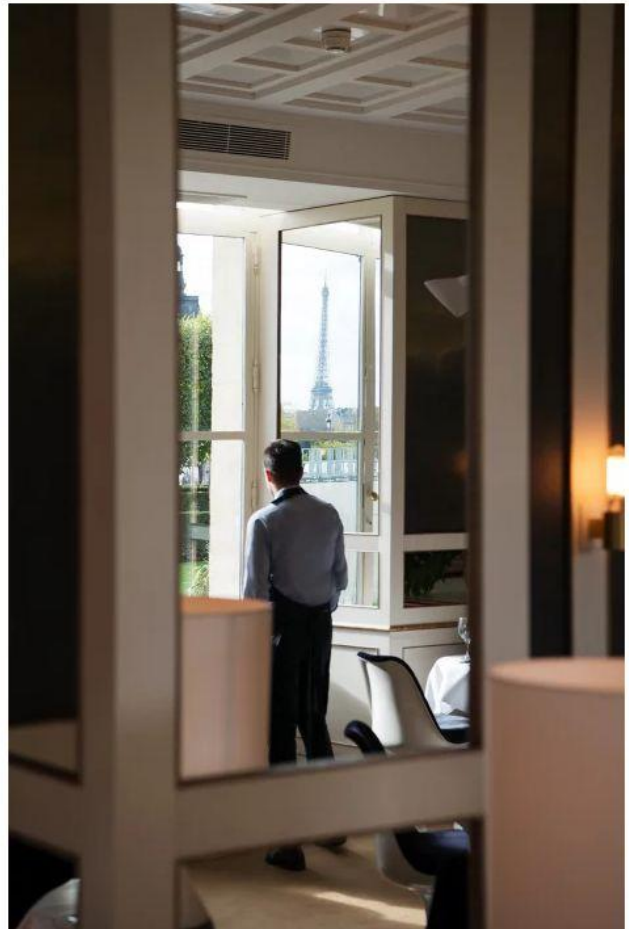
LouLou, it turns out, was a different story and Mr Dirand nearly turned down the project because of its original architectural structure – something he has now turned to the place's advantage.

"Compared to those volumes, I found the space of LouLou much less interesting at the beginning," he admitted. "The ground floor has a very low ceiling, and before I started the project I had never been to the first floor, so I didn't know that it was much higher. At first I didn't want to work on the project, until I discovered the first floor – and that view!"

Mr Dirand fast demonstrated that a low ceiling would prove no challenge at all, dividing the ground floor into a series of intimate partitioned salons.



Scallops and orange flavored butter, fine puree of cauliflower



“I was first attracted to Joseph’s work by the attention to detail in his drawings,” says Mr Malafosse, a self-made restaurateur (of Petrus and Le Flandrin fame) who discovered Mr Dirand during the course of an unrealised hotel project for the iconic La Samaritaine building, just a stone’s throw from LouLou. “It’s not only about the obvious aesthetic strengths, but also the functionality of his work, which I find rare for an interior architect. He has a sense of brutalism and radical lines, but there is an enveloping and cosy aspect at the same time. Joseph puts himself in the client’s head and he understands the restaurant business – he is able to imagine the ambience and the DNA of a space.”

To set about designing his second “museum restaurant”, Mr Dirand focused immediately on the change of context, with LouLou’s connection to a museum of decorative arts a clear starting point for the project. “The restaurant had to feel like an object itself and pay homage to its surroundings,” he said of the two-storey walk-up, with its problematic corner staircase, which Mr Dirand transformed with dramatic red velvet curtains.

“I wanted the rooms to feel like they belong in the museum, as though I was reconstructing the home of a collector, for example,” says Mr Dirand. “The fact the museum represents so many periods of the 20th century meant that I was able to work with ideas from different decades, with some elements more 1930s and others more towards the 1960s and 1970s. I wanted to balance a masculine and feminine attitude, but more specifically a masculine interior that is a tribute to women. This is why the work of Carlo Mollino came to mind – also the size and format of the various spaces already had the feeling of functioning like a small house.”



Saint Laurent
Ribbed Cashmere Sweater

Officine Generale
Cotton Oxford Shirt

Acne Studios
Ace Skinny-Fit Stretch-Denim
Jeans



Giorgio Armani
Upton Blue Slim-Fit Stretch-Wool
Seersucker Blazer

Jil Sander
Slim-Fit Stretch Cotton-Blend Poplin
Shirt



Prada
Grey Unstructured Double-Faced
Wool and Cashmere-Blend Blazer

Prada
Stretch Cotton-Blend Poplin Shirt

Mr Mollino is a potent choice of reference material for Mr Dirand – he was a reclusive 20th-century polymath who became known on the art scene for his racy polaroids of scantily-clad lovers, and among architects for his ergonomic furniture and curvilinear buildings (the Teatro Regio in Turin is essentially womb-shaped). It was Mr Mollino's own home though that had intrigued Mr Dirand.

“The big difference between someone whose home is designed for them and someone who designs their own home is that the former will tell a linear story, whereas the latter is more likely to mix all sorts of different things for an effect that can't even be reproduced,” says Mr Dirand. “Coupled with the fact that Gilles and Benoit wanted to create an Italian restaurant, it made sense to look at Mollino's work and his home in Turin for inspiration to make something sexy, with a touch of Parisian eroticism (like a maison close) mixed in. At the same time, there is this impression when you look out the window that time stopped more than a century ago.”

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That Franco-Italian mix of decades past has produced two sensually appealing environments chez LouLou: the dimly lit ground floor is sectioned off with peekaboo rattan panels into a series of comfy dining spaces (its ceiling in black lacquer, its floor in Breccia di Medici marble), and the more expansive first floor features two main chambers decorated with Flemish-style landscape murals hand-painted in Paris, facing its expansive views of the Tuileries.

Yet whether you choose to sit upstairs, downstairs, or on its sunny garden terrace, Mr Benoit Dargère's menu remains a constant, attracting the international fashion set who have descended upon the establishment in droves, both in and out of fashion week.

“We chose an Italian menu quite simply because we felt like it,” explains Mr Dargère, charged with his third project for Mr Malafosse (he remains in charge of Monsieur Bleu and Le Flandrin, another family establishment in the 17th arrondissement).



Truffled eggs

“I work in tandem with Italian chef Diego Compagno, in such that I bring my French point of view and he brings an Italian one, so we are able to create a fusion between the two. Of course we respect certain Italian classics, too, but there are other dishes where we allow ourselves more freedom, particularly to adapt to a Parisian palette.

“The autumn menu integrates products from the south of Italy, but with a French elegance. Downstairs, we also have our charcuterie bar with exclusively Italian cheeses and meats from across the country, whether is it ham or fresh hazelnuts from Piedmont, Sicilian pistachios, and other delicacies from Diego’s region of Venice. The space looks onto leafy gardens, it has a sunny aspect, so the flavours of the Mediterranean, both wine and food, felt natural to us.”

