

DESIGN PARIS

Time regained

A treasured literary haunt has been accorded a sequel, writes **Stephen Todd**.

Parisians' passion for food is grandiloquent, their love of literature no less epic. A spate of renovations to iconic historical establishments reads like elegant sequels to some great French classics.

Lapérouse, the legendary Left Bank haunt of writers including Baudelaire, Balzac, Victor Hugo and Proust, was given a refresh by French interior designer Laura Gonzalez last June.

In July, the airy Jules Verne restaurant, perched 95 metres above ground on a viewing platform of the Eiffel Tower, was reopened after a makeover by the Lebanese designer Aline Asmar d'Amman.

But none is as central to the French literary imagination as Drouant, founded in 1880 on a tranquil corner not far from the Opéra Garnier. The restaurant – previously a humble neighbourhood “bar-tabac” – became the headquarters of the Academie Goncourt in 1914. Since then the 10-member jury (known cultishly as *les Dix*) has met on the first Tuesday of every month in an upstairs dining room where personalised cutlery is engraved with their initials and their place at the table doesn't change until they retire or die. In which case a new juror is named to replace them, the cutlery re-engraved and one of the world's most elite debating clubs goes on.

The Prix Goncourt, the French literature prize created in 1903, is awarded each November, the president of the academy descending the elaborate wrought-iron staircase to announce the winner's name to a room full of French-language book lovers who have waited 12 months for this benediction from on high.

Past winners have included Marcel Proust (in 1919 for *In a Budding Grove*, the second volume of *In Search of Lost Time*), Simone de Beauvoir (*The Mandarins*, 1954) and André Malraux for *La Condition Humaine* (Man's Fate) in 1933.

Bought in 2018 by the brothers Stéphane, Thierry and Laurent Gardinier, who also own French gastronomy restaurant Taillevent, it's the kind of august institution that prides itself on withstanding the vagaries of time in the pursuit of *l'intemporel*.

Not readily meddled with, design-wise, then. Especially since elements of the existing interior hark back to a 1920s fitout executed by master decorator Emile-Jacques Ruhlmann, often referred to as “the father of art deco”. The imposing wrought-iron and mirrored staircase is his design, as are parts of the walnut cabinetry and some maritime-style ceiling moulds.



Clockwise from above: Interior designer Fabrizio Casiraghi; Salon Goncourt, where the winner of the Prix Goncourt literary prize is decided; the restaurant exterior; and the niche where author Colette dined weekly. PHOTOS: MATTHIEU SALVAING



Elements of the interior hark back to a 1920s fitout by ‘the father of art deco’ Emile-Jacques Ruhlmann.



Need to know

Drouant
16-18 Rue Gaillon,
Paris. Tel: +331 4265
1516

Goncourt
The Prix Goncourt awards a €10 (\$16) prize to the French novel the academy judges to be “the best and most imaginative prose work of the year” in the French language. The prize money is symbolic; but the glory of the Goncourt regularly results in multimillion-dollar sales.

“The new owners absolutely wanted to preserve these original elements,” says Fabrizio Casiraghi, the Italian architect commissioned to restore the interior to its former glory while simultaneously updating it for now. It's a tricky mission he has handled with élan.

“Our conception of the project is not as an historical reconstitution, rather a reinterpretation of art deco style,” says Casiraghi. “I kept some typical elements of this style and I twisted them in a more modern and contemporary shape.”

From the street, one enters via a round vestibule hung with thick velvet curtains into a room which is at first sight striking in its austerity. Handsome fluted columns and timber wainscoting are polished to a high sheen, as is the newly laid terrazzo with its geometric border and occasional inlays of eight-pointed stars.

“It's inspired by the original Ruhlmann ceramic mosaic floor we discovered when we pulled up the parquet,” says Casiraghi. But whereas the 1920s version was in

delicate ceramic, the architect recreated it in hard-wearing stone – adding travertine to the mix, a subtle nod to his Milanese origins.

Casiraghi, 33, studied at the Politecnico di Milano, which produced Aldo Rossi, Achille Castiglioni and Renzo Piano. After graduating, he moved to Paris to work with architect Dominique Perrault before stints at Milan's historical Villa Necchi and Dimore Studio. He set up his own studio in 2015.

I'd suggest he owes his sense of rigour to the first, his respect for history to the second and his fearlessness in the face of flourish to the third. All qualities play out perfectly at Drouant.

Charged with honouring the history of the place, Casiraghi scoured the archives of the Chamber of Commerce to locate Ruhlmann's drawings of a chair that never went into production. The “Drouant” chair is high-backed with a scrolled top, its elegant timber frame slightly flared. Casiraghi has had them upholstered in a sumptuous yellow velvet by Pierre Frey.

The conical crystal chandelier is a Casiraghi touch: its lustre conceived to cast a rich glow at precisely the point where the annual Goncourt winner is proclaimed.

To mark the centenary of Proust's Goncourt Prize for *In a Budding Grove* (or,

to give it its French name, *AL'Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs*), Casiraghi commissioned artist Roberto Ruspoli to decorate the walls of the Proust salon with drawings of nymphs partially covered with blue flowers. (In a judicious counter-manoeuve, he removed the painted Proust quotation that had emblazoned the exterior of the building and reinstated the original, rich timber panelling.)

In the short time since setting up his Paris atelier, Casiraghi has completed a boutique for fashion designer Christophe Lemaire in the Marais, an apartment in Venice and a beachclub in Mykonos. He's also been commissioned on several occasions to create scenography for the French *Architectural Digest* (a clear vote of confidence from the industry).

What's striking is that, beyond a pronounced rigour and certain restrained sense of sumptuous flourish, there seems to be no “Casiraghi style”.

“Nowadays a good architect has to be site specific as much as he can, understand the space, the context, the historical background of a place and just start from these elements to bring the space into contemporaneity,” he says. “This is what I try to do in all my projects: I prefer to be recognised for a certain sensibility rather than a clear signature.” **L&L**

TIME OUT

Colin Brookes

senior vice-president,
sales and services,
Asia-Pacific and Japan
Citrix Systems

First, business or economy? Always business when I can, so I can get work done while I fly. That and I'm 183 centimetres tall and 90 kilograms, so I don't fit into economy seats.

Favourite destination My favourite place to come back to is always Sydney. Even being born in the UK and living in Singapore, Sydney was my home for a long time, and it's always great to return.

Favourite airport Probably Changi Airport in Singapore, because it's comfortable and feels like the most efficient, both coming through customs and getting on to your plane.



Colin Brookes loves exploring new cities.

If I ran my own airline I would... Make sure that customer communication was the most important thing. When there's a delay, people want to know why, how long it will be, and when they'll know more information.

Where would you go with an unlimited travel budget? I would follow the tennis

grand slam [circuit] and the formula one grand prix around the world. My wife and I are big fans of tennis. I might also travel to a Test series cricket match between England and Australia.

Best trip ever Every time I move to a new city, that's the best trip. It's a whole new group of people to get to know and a new culture to immerse myself in, and new restaurants, bars and lunchtime coffee places to find.

In the suitcase My trainers and gym kit are the first things I pack, no matter where I'm going, and the rest depends on how many business meetings I will have.

First thing you do in a new city I am usually met by the local Citrix team and they will take me to the office. Because we all work remotely and with different teams, I often meet people that I've been working with for months, which is always exciting.

How do you make the most of a spare afternoon in a strange city? I don't have many spare afternoons, but if I'm on a different time zone, I'll usually find

myself awake when everyone else is asleep – that's when I'll head out for a run.

Most like to travel with and why My wife. She's a natural-born planner, so all I have to do is turn up at the airport. The agenda and itinerary are pretty much taken care of.

Cure for jet lag The first thing I do before getting on the plane is set my watch to the local time in my destination. That helps me begin the adjustment immediately. I also restrict myself to working regular hours in the new time zone.

Other travel tips I always say it's important to make time for yourself, even if it's just half an hour at the gym. Make sure you are enjoying what you do and if you have to work, make sure it's productive and balanced with other activities.

Anywhere you'd recommend for a special occasion I have to go with Tokyo. The entire city is great, and stepping into a different culture is an experience you'll remember for a lifetime.

Best overseas purchase Definitely a

solid battery pack that's full of adaptors. There's nothing worse than being in a strange city and worried about your phone battery dying, or being on a work call and your laptop going from 50 per cent to 12 per cent in a matter of minutes.

Best travel tale In Washington DC, I went for a 4.30am jog up to the Lincoln Memorial and ran into all the FBI and US Army recruits doing the same thing.

Best thing about travelling It has given me a better understanding of how diverse we are. One of the best things about working across the Asia-Pacific is the diversity of thought. We have the most varied group of people across the region, and I find it amazing that I can connect and work with them.

Top travel gripe People talking on their phones on speaker and FaceTime as though there is no one else in the room. Obviously connecting with loved ones is very important, but please put in a pair of earphones and turn it down a little.

lifeandleisure@afr.com