

THE CULINARY

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ASTRANCE

Chef Chantel Dartnall of Restaurant Mosaic at The Orient spent a month eating at some of Europe and the UK's finest restaurants. The most innovative chef she met on her culinary journey was Pascal Barbot at the three Michelin star, Astrance in Paris...

Written by Chantel Dartnall | Photographs by Richard Haughton



Venison, Chili Pepper, Jujube

Some gastronomes claim that getting a table at Astrance in Paris is the most unobtainable reservation in France. This is hardly surprising since this hidden gem in the 16th Arrondissement, across the river from the Eiffel Tower, seats 25 people and is only open four days a week.

It's the brainchild of two l'Arpège alumni - Pascal Barbot, former sous chef and Christophe Rohat, maître d'hôtel. Since its opening in 2000 it has been at the top of wish lists of many people who want to dine at one of the world's finest restaurants.

Its list of accolades is impressive. The restaurant, which earned its first Michelin star within five months of opening, is ranked by San Pellegrino as one of the 50 best restaurants in the world and received its third Michelin star in 2007, which it still holds today.

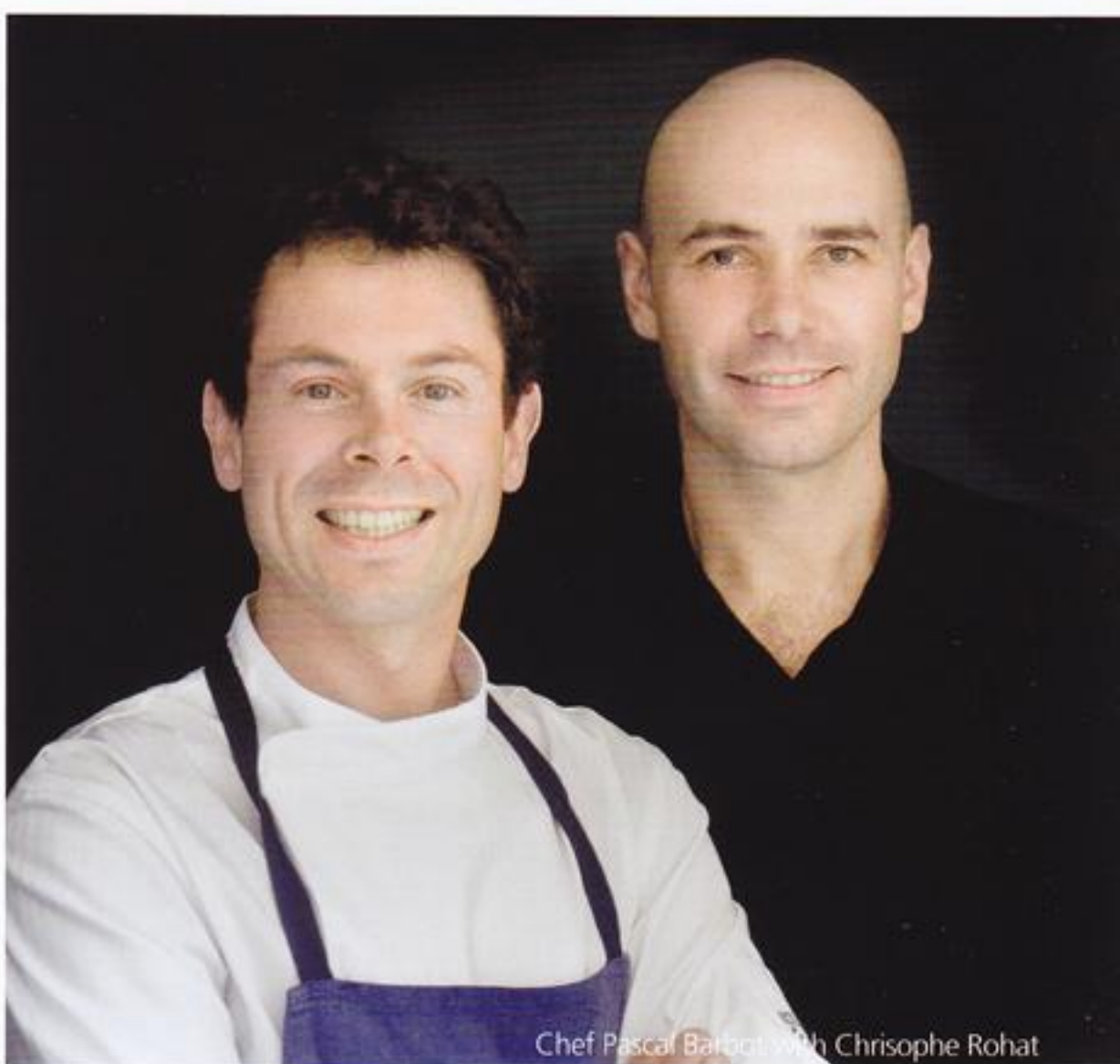
Chef Pascal Barbot earned the prestigious Best Cook in France award in 2005. He has been called "the future of French cooking" by his contemporaries and is lauded for his innovative menu.

He has pushed the boundaries of fine dining tradition, with diners not knowing what each course will be until it is brought to their tables.

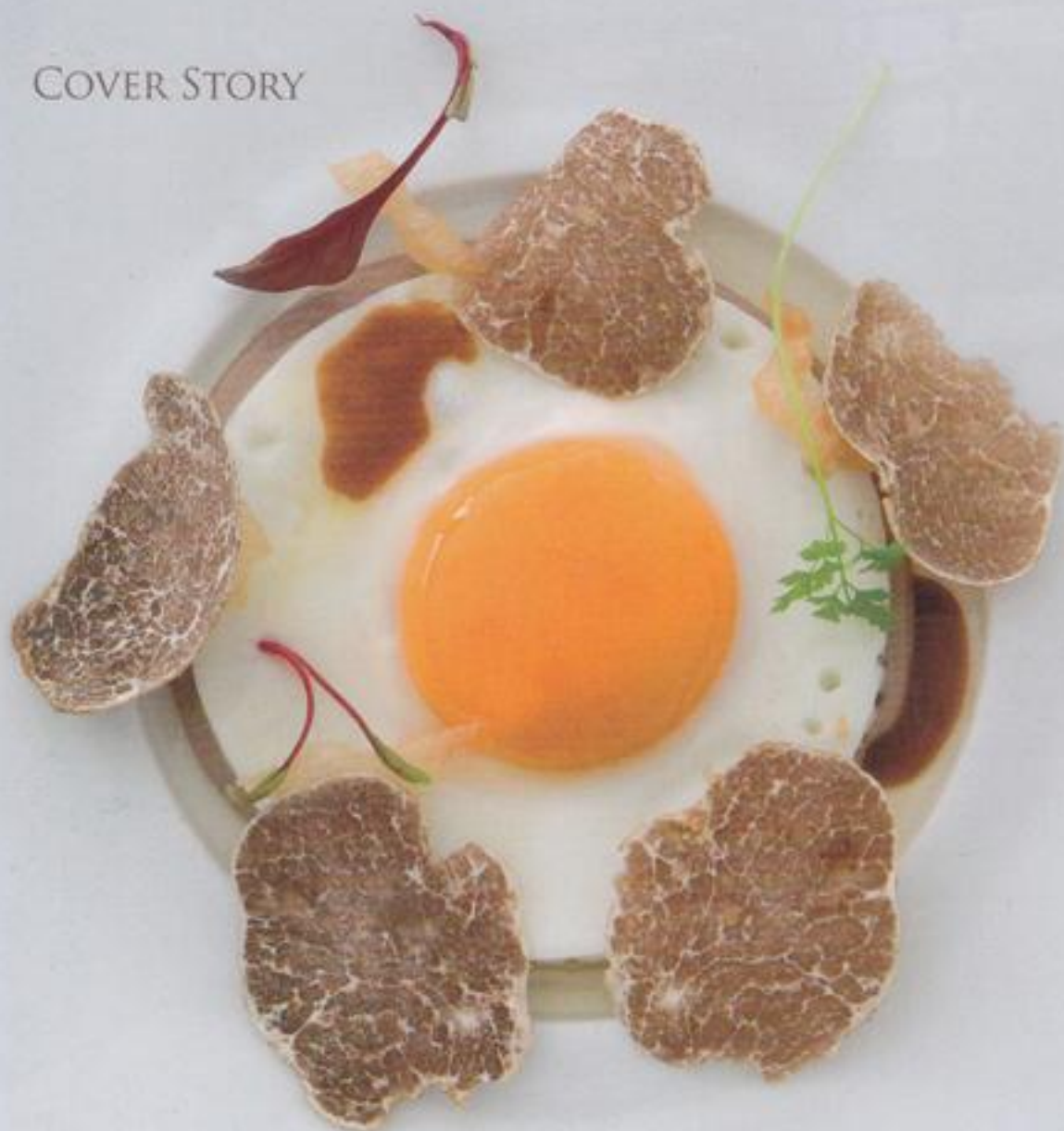
Astrance, named after a wildflower indigenous to Barbot's native Auvergne, is regarded as accessible and informal by haute French standards and not filled with snobbery and elitism. It is, he says, more like a small bistro than a grand restaurant.

Ask the maître' d to tell you a bit more about the menu you are about to be served and he replies: "Dining at Astrance is like going to a friend's house. You don't call beforehand to find out what is on the menu!"

Barbot's food has also clearly been influenced by the time he has spent cooking around the world, including Australia, Mexico and the South Pacific, with many dishes infused with subtle Asian flavours such as miso, lemongrass and coriander.



Chef Pascal Barbot with Christophe Rohat



Three of his signature dishes are a layered galette of raw mushrooms, foie gras with hazelnut oil and lemon confit (this dish is absolutely sublime); a tender langoustine tail on a Balinese Satay sauce and eggshell cups filled with the most delicately scented shots of jasmine-infused eggnog.

Our journey started with a caramelised pastry base topped with raw slices of foie gras, mushrooms and crisp green apple. In its natural state, the liver had a rich mouth feel. On the side was an intense bitter-sweet and zingy lemon confit purée and concentrated hazelnut oil. This was one of those dishes where you wish your plate would never empty as you just want one more bite.

Next a small portion of tuna was served with a brunoise of liquorice in a delicate consommé that had the scent of a tom yum soup. Steamed turbot came with melon leaves, cumin, a spinach tapenade, braised fennel and rectangular piece of tangerine peel. It had definite understated North African flavours.

Free range chicken breast was accompanied by chanterelles, apricots and raw almonds. Then came the duck breast



Left: Oyster, Camembert, Red Beet.
Top left: White Truffle, Egg, Hazelnut Oil.
Above: Walnut, Citrus Confit, Foie Gras.
Above right: Cucumber Flower, Basil, Tomato.
Right: Chef Pascal Barbot with Chef Chantel Dartnall.



that was paired beautifully with a bean and black olive tapenade, cumin, fennel and aubergine topped with smoky Spanish pimento pepper. The duck leg confit on duck liver was served in a separate bowl.

One of the highlights of the meal was the spectacular cheese course of courgette flowers lightly poached in saffron water filled with Gorgonzola, red fruits and light rose foam.

The sommelier's wine and food pairings were incredibly innovative and sometimes surprising as it perfectly complemented each dish. We even had a bit of fun guessing what some of the wines were, as with the menu, the wine pairing was also a complete surprise.

Chef Barbot lists world renowned Chef Alain Passard from 'Arpège as one of his greatest inspirations: "He taught me to respect the product. Cooking something as simple as a carrot is so important. Where preparation is concerned, there is no difference between that and cooking an expensive product."

However, it's his world travels that makes him the chef he is today.

Pascal spent two years in the French military doing his national service and during this period spent time in New Caledonia and all over the South Pacific with the French Navy as head chef of the Admiral of the Fleet.

"I began to use entirely new products such as mango, coconuts, and palm sugar," he explains.

He also worked as head chef at Ampersand in Sydney, Australia, a move which he credits for changing his life. "It taught me how to look at ingredients without any inhibitions or complexes. In Australia, you don't care where someone comes from or where the ingredients are from. If you wanted to use Greek yoghurt on a French dish, that was fine as there were no rules or complexes about what you did. It was very liberating for me.

If I had a piece of pork and wanted to use ricotta or cabbage, it was up to me. It was the same if I wanted to use chilli in a Chinese way – it didn't matter that I was not Chinese. The only thing that mattered was being innovative and I still live by that rule today".



Chantel Dartnall has become renowned, not only in South Africa, but in culinary circles around the world, for her innovative and meticulous approach to modern fine dining. She is the Chef at Restaurant Mosaic, located in The Orient Private Hotel in the Francolin Conservation Area, Elandsfontein, Crocodile River Valley, Pretoria, Gauteng.