



FOOD NETWORK

THE IÑAKI EFFECT

On the 10th anniversary of its opening in Paris, the renowned restaurant Le Chateaubriand—led by the pioneering chef Iñaki Aizpitarte—remains in a category all its own.

BY TARAJIA MORRELL

43, of Le Chateaubriand, which opened in April 2006 in a modest space that had housed a bistro of the same name for a century. At the beginning, Aizpitarte offered a menu (appetizer, entrée, dessert) for the equivalent of \$18 at lunch and \$46 at dinner. (Now the restaurant serves eight courses, which change daily, for about \$77.) While tourists were busy trying to secure reservations at Paris’s starred staples, such as Tour d’Argent, L’Atelier de Joël Robuchon and Le Grand Véfour, savvy diners could sample Le Chateaubriand’s inventive, vegetable-centric dishes for a fraction of the price in a convivial dining room. Preeminent French chef Alain Ducasse, who has 23 restaurants and 19 Michelin stars, puts it this way: “Going to a restaurant should be more than

East Side, where chefs Jeremiah Stone and Fabian von Hauske serve an ambitious and ever-changing six-course prix fixe menu for \$67, with Wildair, their more informal restaurant and wine bar, two doors down.

As he’s led the *new new wave* of French dining, Aizpitarte’s individuality as a chef has endured and earned him a special status in the culinary world. “There’s nowhere quite like Le Chateaubriand,” says chef Stone of Contra. “On any given night, you never know what’s going to happen next.” This capriciousness is indisputably Le Chateaubriand’s trademark and greatest charm. It’s also what makes the restaurant difficult to categorize. Though Michelin has yet to award it a star, in 2010 Le Chateaubriand landed at No. 11 on S. Pellegrino’s list of the World’s 50 Best Restaurants (voted on by a panel of chefs, restaurateurs, journalists and gourmets), ranking above any other French restaurant—signaling shifting tides in French gastronomy and infuriating some traditionalists along the way. “Michelin will never give Le Chateaubriand a star,” says François-Régis Gaudry, French food expert and critic for *L’Express*, “because it’s too unpredictable; its essence and its chef are too wild.”

This inherent wildness is apparent in Aizpitarte’s unlikely start. Born the youngest of five to Basque parents living in the south of France, Aizpitarte grew up listening to punk and rock music and struggled to find professional direction. He was curious about oenology but repelled by the formality of the field’s traditional course of study. A foray in garden design also left him ambivalent. Aizpitarte always fantasized about a career in the kitchen, but without the funds for one of France’s top culinary schools, he didn’t see how it could become a reality. When he was 27, Aizpitarte traveled to Tel Aviv in the hopes that he might find kitchen work and landed a job as a dishwasher at a kosher restaurant. Soon he was working the line. “I had wanted to cook for a long time,” Aizpitarte recalls. “From the first day I realized it was the right path for me.”

After learning the basics and poring over borrowed cookbooks from the local Alliance Française, Aizpitarte returned to Paris, determined to find

just good food; it should be an experience, and Iñaki delivers an experience. He is the creator of the ‘neo-bistro’—the contemporary restaurant of Paris.”

Now, 10 years later, it’s impossible not to notice the effect Le Chateaubriand and its maker have had on Parisian dining, where beloved restaurants such as Septime and Saturne (both of which have garnered Michelin recognition)—as well as Au Passage, Spring, Le Servan and Frenchie—grew up in the path Le Chateaubriand carved out. In 2010, Aizpitarte opened Le Dauphin, a mirrored and marbled Rem Koolhaas-designed space next door to accommodate Le Chateaubriand’s overflow. There he serves natural wines and à la carte tapas-style dishes that speak to his Basque roots. One door down, he also opened Le Cave, a natural wine shop. The restaurateurs behind Saturne and Septime followed suit by opening Clown Bar and Clamato, more-casual neighboring spinoffs of their own. Aizpitarte’s influence is also evident state-side in restaurants like Contra on New York’s Lower

A DECADE AGO, a burgeoning group of Parisian foodies eagerly awaited the opening of Le Chateaubriand, chef Iñaki Aizpitarte’s neo-bistro in the 11th arrondissement. This *nouvelle garde* of diners had come of age as the “bistronomy” movement took hold—when chefs such as Yves Camdeborde at La Régalade and Stéphane Jégo at L’Ami Jean abandoned the more formal restaurant model in favor of a relaxed atmosphere and affordable prices. It was one of the greatest shifts in French gastronomy since haute cuisine codified coursing and service in the early 20th century. These diners, led by French journalists, were abuzz with anticipation about what Aizpitarte, the scruffy, punk music-devoted Basque chef, would do at his first restaurant. Excitement stemmed not only from Le Chateaubriand’s launching in an area then bereft of dining options, but also from Aizpitarte’s unorthodox training and accessible food.

“It was never a concept restaurant,” says Aizpitarte,



work cooking. He eventually found footholds in several Parisian restaurants, most notably Le Café des Délices under Michelin-starred chef Gilles Choukroun, where he stayed for two years as a *chef de partie* before traveling again—this time to Mexico, Brazil and Spain.

When he returned to Paris in the early 2000s, he felt ready to helm a kitchen. “I found two young guys—one was in advertising and one was an actor,” Aizpitarte says. “They didn’t know anything about restaurant or food service, but I liked that.” Patrick and Yannig Samot were cousins who needed a chef for their first restaurant project, which they envisioned as a place with great food that they’d actually enjoy hanging out in—an elusive concept in Paris at this time. With Aizpitarte, in 2003, they opened La Famille, an unpretentious and avant-garde restaurant in Montmartre, where they served what Aizpitarte describes as “a different proposition of Parisian *paysage* food,” or a new take on the city’s

cuisine. When Aizpitarte was given the freedom and stage on which to experiment, diners and journalists began to take note of his uninhibited talent. “He has an artist’s spirit,” says co-owner Patrick Samot. “Nothing was impossible; there were no limits. Iñaki’s food was brutal, intense, perhaps not always something we liked. But a taste of his dishes was a genuine experience.”

Two years at La Famille gave Aizpitarte the confidence and connections to open his own place and to build the momentum necessary to make Le Chateaubriand an instant success. It was during this time that he met Fred Peneau, with whom he’d open the restaurant. “I didn’t think about creative food, about *cuisine d’auteur*,” Aizpitarte says. “I was always in love with old restaurants in Paris, and I always dreamt of one day opening a restaurant in a Parisian bistro.” But Aizpitarte’s culinary vision of ever-evolving experimentation with ingredients and techniques didn’t—and doesn’t—fit the bistro mold of

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Above: Seasonal ingredients served by Iñaki Aizpitarte at his Paris restaurant, Le Chateaubriand, which celebrates its 10th anniversary this month. Opposite: Chef Aizpitarte.

French home-style cooking. Rather, his food has that rare trait of being familiar and entirely original.

On a recent evening, Aizpitarte serves what he describes as “carbonara of the sea”: a warm slice of John Dory with mussel *jus* mounted with butter, pickled shallots, lemon thyme and strands of al dente potato that are his hint at spaghetti. This is Aizpitarte’s signature: his playfulness, self-assurance and unwillingness to pander to expectations of what French cuisine should be.

In February, when the 2016 Michelin stars were announced, Saturne, led by chef Sven Chartier, received its first. Aizpitarte’s reaction was characteristically laconic and untroubled: “*C’est normal*,” he says. “I think there is space for everyone.” ●

DAMIEN LA FARGUE (PORTRAIT AND FOOD)