

FT Magazine Restaurants**Domaine du Météore, Cabrerolles: 'The scene was breathtaking' — restaurant review**

Situated in a crater, this French restaurant offers stunning views, food and wine



Domaine du Météore restaurant

Nicholas Lander AUGUST 13 2020

At the end of July, I enjoyed my first meal in a crater. Ten thousand years ago a meteorite crashed into a place now known as Domaine du Météore in the foothills of the Cévennes and left one of the largest craters on earth. Syrah vines have subsequently been planted in this bowl lined with holm oaks and arbutus.

The wine estate was bought 18 months ago by two English doctors, Paul Jenkins and Paul Jarman. Last summer they built a kitchen down in the crater, with a generator able to power a couple of fridges, a small induction hob and lighting for the outdoor tables, the kitchen and an eco-lavatory. In March, the French chef Nicolas Delorme and his Australian partner Jaclyn Sunley arrived in the Haut-Languedoc.

My wife and I met this talented couple (Sunley has a number of roles, including waitress, sommelier and guide down to the restaurant) in the winery's tasting room, where we chatted over a glass of rosé and some seriously accomplished snacks, including squid-ink crackers with wasabi cream and cured anchovy, and a small bowl of spiced red pepper cream with octopus and crisp ham fragments. Then I helped Delorme and Sunley shoo their chickens into a coop for the night — another first for me.

Delorme drove his van down to the crater and we followed on foot. The rough track took us through the vegetable garden that they had recently planted, past a well they had discovered and through the vines. After about 10 minutes, we heard the hum of a generator.

We emerged from the undergrowth into the crater to find an outdoor restaurant. Four tables, each of which could seat four customers, stood beside a kitchen in a wooden shed with smoke from old vine cuttings billowing out. The tables were attractively decorated with leaves, candles and shards of the schist for which this region is renowned.

The scene was breathtaking. As the sun was setting just before 8pm, the moon rose to the south-east. It felt like being in Australia — rugged nature, the vines, scrubland and, quite soon, some extremely good food and wine.

Delorme is a classically trained French chef who has travelled and cooked widely. He knows what he has to do: find the best produce and transform it as intelligently and sensitively as he can. He seems to see the limitations of his kitchen as an extra challenge — and it's one that he rises to.

Our first dish was a couple of oysters from Maison Tarbouriech in Marseillan on the nearby Mediterranean, where an ecosystem of freshwater and seawater adds extra flavour. These came topped with thin slices of cured cucumber and a plum cleverly preserved in Marseillan's vermouth, Noilly Prat.



Tomato, basil and pine nut salad

It was followed by, perhaps, the evening's most creative dish. The written description — “this season's tomatoes, basil and pine nuts” — scarcely did it justice. Half a dozen varieties of tomato — expertly peeled and confited — arrived in a colourful dish with three different basil leaves, red, green and small, hot Thai basil, over which Delorme poured a transparent tomato essence. Best of all were the pine nuts, which he had cleverly mixed with buckwheat, seasoned and baked and then broken into three small pieces to accompany the dish. On their own, these would have made an excellent cocktail snack.

Three contrasting subsequent dishes displayed Delorme's fascination with Asia. A slow-cooked egg with grilled sweet leeks was topped with top-quality miso, which he buys online. A loin of wild boar alongside multicoloured young carrots had been marinated in sake. And finally, thin slices of yellow peaches, with perfect meringue wafers, sat on top of a mousse flavoured by a Japanese long peppercorn. As well as having a nose for the ingredients that constitute an excellent dish, Delorme has a good eye for colours and textures.

By 9pm our meal was over. The sun had disappeared and the moon was bright. Delorme and Sunley did a quick tidy before driving us back to the winery where I paid my bill of €100 for two.

Before leaving I asked Sunley the obvious question: what happens if it rains? “Well,” came her response, “I keep a close eye on the forecast. And, since we opened in May, there has been only one night when we had to cancel our bookings because of the forecast. And then, of course, it didn’t rain.”

Domaine du Météore

9 Route d'Aigues Vives, Cabrerolles 34480, France; domainedumeteore.com

Dinner Wednesday to Saturday until the end of September

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