



A lot of bottle: H el ne Darroze is the Veuve Clicquot Best Female Chef

Hel's kitchen



Words/Laura Price

Two restaurants, two cities and a total of three Michelin stars: Restaurant catches up with a very busy Hélène Darroze, the newly crowned World's Best Female Chef

If the beginning of the film *Ratatouille* is anything to go by, Hélène Darroze is strict, shouty and firm in the kitchen. But watch until the end of the film and you'll see the character Colette transform into the warm-hearted, balanced chef on whom she was based: the chef-patron of two Michelin-starred restaurants in two cities - in London and in Paris.

It's not often that cooks are immortalised as Pixar Animation characters, but Darroze has captured hearts and minds across the restaurant industry both here and in her native France. This is perhaps one of the reasons her peers voted her the Veuve Clicquot World's Best Female Chef 2015, succeeding Helena Rizzo of Mani in São Paulo. But while she is proud of her achievements and loves her portrayal in the movie, she is clear on the fact that her success is down to nothing but hard work, talent and family heritage. Being a woman has never held her back: she was simply born to cook.

"I was born in the kitchen and cooking is in my DNA," she says. "From the beginning, I faced the kitchen world, the suppliers, the producers, the way of cooking, the kitchen environment. All the strong values I have, I got from my family."

A fourth-generation chef, Darroze credits her family for her success, even after a solid training with Alain Ducasse at his Louis XV restaurant in Monaco in her twenties. She grew up in Villeneuve-de-Marsan in Landes, south-west France - not far from where Ducasse himself hails - and learned to cook at home with her father and grandparents, owners of Chez Darroze restaurant.

Her earliest kitchen experiences are too early even for her to remember. "My mother, a chemist, recalls holding me in her arms as a baby while she was cooking a special sauce. She saw me going into the saucer with my finger to taste it, and she was surprised to see me with that instinctive gesture, tasting the sauce."

It wasn't long before she cooked her first apple pie ("I was five or six - I don't even remember it") and soon she was filling in as pastry chef at her parents' dinner parties. "I was about 12 and I used to make a variety of desserts. I was famous for my lemon tart," she recalls. Next came a degree from l'Ecole Supérieure de Commerce de Bordeaux, then a thorough training at the family restaurant in Villeneuve-de-Marsan and finally, in 1999, her own eponymous restaurant on the Paris Left Bank.

It was all supposed to stop there. "I only ever had aspirations for one restaurant, never any more," says Darroze. But then she was offered the restaurant at the Connaught hotel, which had been Angela Hartnett at the Connaught, part of Gordon Ramsay Holdings, from 2002 to 2007. After some thorough persuasion - "they chased me and chased me," she says - she agreed to take over.

"At the beginning, I said no, because I thought it was too big and too difficult," she recalls. "But only fools don't change their minds. When I said

Darroze operates a 'speak with your eyes' policy and doesn't like people to talk or shout for no reason

no, I thought 'my goodness, what did you do? You're making a big mistake'."

Seven years on and she describes her partnership with the Maybourne Group-owned hotel as "the perfect marriage". Hélène Darroze at the Connaught now has two Michelin stars, while her Paris restaurant currently has one. The chef divides her time equally between the two, travelling for two days at a time to each city.

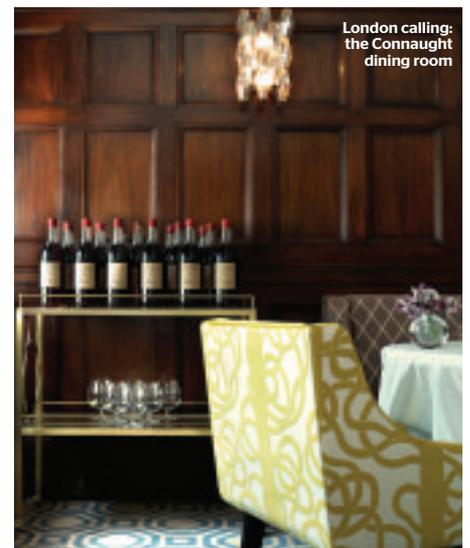
"It's challenging at times, but I have amazing teams everywhere," she says. "The main challenge is that when I'm in London, it's very difficult for me to think about Paris and vice versa. It's a good thing for the place where I am, but it's not so good for the place where I'm not."

Dreams of New York

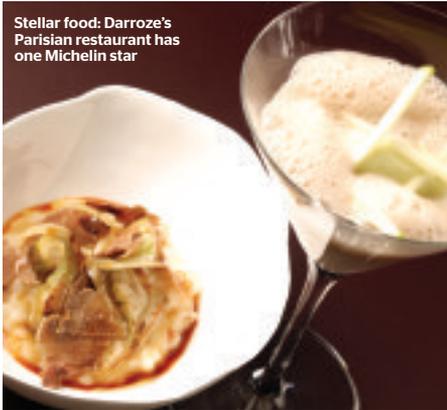
After seven years straddling both restaurants, does she fancy a third? The answer, it would appear, is yes.

"For the moment, I have two dreams," she says. "I would love to do something more casual in London, to give my interpretation of bistro, and secondly - something I've wanted forever - to open a place in New York."

Both dreams are very much at the initial stages, but Darroze says she's taking steps to develop them. "I just came back from New York and it's incredible to see what's happening around French cuisine there at the moment. There are so many places opening in New York based on the French bistros and brasserie styles. Even the ones



London calling: the Connaught dining room



Stellar food: Darroze's Parisian restaurant has one Michelin star



Solitaire: the inventive menu at the Connaught

that open with an American twist are completely inspired by French bistro or brasseries.”

Despite the clear French basis of all her cooking, Darroze is inspired by chefs and restaurants around her in London, and by the eclectic, international scene, which she believes is in contrast with Paris’ pure focus on French cooking.

“There are so many things happening in London at the moment on the gastronomic scene. Paris is so focused on high-level French cuisine and that’s inspiring too, but London is so eclectic, so, of course, my cuisine is influenced by that.”

Fera, The Clove Club and The Ledbury are all among her personal favourites. “I’m a big fan of Isaac McHale. With The Clove Club, I like the idea of choosing one product and being creative

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with it in such a simple way. I also like the approach to service, which is so casual.”

The Connaught in Mayfair is far from casual, but Darroze’s approach to food is similarly simple and ingredient-led, focusing on getting the best flavours out of the best products - a similar philosophy to that of Ducasse. When she first started at the Mayfair hotel, she brought all her ingredients from France, but over the years she’s adopted British produce.

Darroze is emphatic about French food and the role of French chefs as ‘mentors’ for global cuisine, but she is equally unequivocal about London’s impact and influence on her cooking.

“London has opened my eyes more than Paris,” she says. “Paris is focused on French cuisine. If you compare the best Japanese restaurants in Paris with the best Japanese



Hotel dining: Darroze took over the Connaught restaurant in 2007



Convert: Darroze uses some UK produce on her menu in Paris

restaurants in London, the gap is incredible. Zuma is everywhere in the world but it's not in Paris - there's a reason why that is; because Paris is very closed off to other food cultures. French food is at an amazing level but it's very, very French."

Still, among her inspirations are Michel Guérard ("I grew up with him, our families were very close") and Michel Bras, with whom she was very close 10 to 15 years ago. Thomas Keller is another chef and restaurateur she admires ("I worked with him on a pop-up and loved it") and Elena Arzak, a fellow winner of the World's Best Female Chef title in 2012, whom she describes as family. "We started together at the same time so we shared a lot. I love the relationship she has with her father, Juan Mari. He used to say I'm the third girl of the family."

A woman in the kitchen

So far, so few female inspirations. Is it really that hard for women chefs to reach the top? Darroze insists that being a woman has never set her back in any way, nor is she any different as a cook because of her sex. She does concede, however, that never getting married and not having children in her 20s or 30s are part of the reason she managed to get to this stage in her career.

Unlike many of the female chefs who work for her, Darroze didn't take her foot off the pedal to have kids when she was younger - not through choice but simply because she never met the right man. Instead, she kept going and finally adopted two girls in Vietnam in her early forties. The move bought her time to achieve career success and to sidestep that tricky motherhood vs work ultimatum, but she is under no illusions that it would have been harder if she'd gone

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down the traditional family route.

"There's one day in this job when you have to choose between being a wife and mother, and being a chef," she admits. "The two things are very, very difficult to combine and most of the really talented young women in my kitchen stopped because they wanted to be mums and didn't think it was compatible. I was 40 when I became a mum so, of course, I made some choices. But if I had been in love and had a baby in my thirties, I probably wouldn't be where I am today."

Being a full-time, single mum to two girls at the same time as running two kitchens in two countries is no easy feat though. After lunch service on the day of this interview, Darroze is due to attend her two daughters' Easter parade. She has somehow found time in her schedule to help them make Easter bonnets, but now it's pouring with rain on a miserable, cold day and she's worried the hats will be ruined - she certainly shares the worries of any other working mum.

Darroze's two girls, Charlotte (8) and Quiterie (6), take after their mother in their discerning tastes and passion for food. Both like to help out in the kitchen and both are fans of Japanese food, but we're not talking Wagamama - they are quite the food critics, turning their noses up at anything short of the best.

"They were born in Vietnam so I don't know if there's something in their blood but they love Japanese food, rice and sushi - but OK, only the good sushi. They don't like the big chains. Their favourite is Roka - they're two of their most regular customers."

It's too early to say whether either daughter will follow in her footsteps, but Darroze says she'll lay down the facts before either of them becomes a cook.

"I wouldn't stop them being chefs but I would explain how difficult it is, because it is difficult - that's a fact. My passion is my work but sometimes it's tough, I have to admit that."

The girls help provide inspiration for dishes, such as the 'Retour d'Hanoi' shellfish consommé, sparked by a trip to Vietnam. Other ideas come from her childhood, her education and her emotions, and she says creating new dishes is the only thing she doesn't know how to delegate.

Delegating other work is straightforward though - Darroze has two head chefs and then sous chefs at both restaurants, and two corporate chefs with whom she often travels. Many of her staff have been with her since the beginning at the Connaught, and she completely trusts them and gives them full credit for helping her win the Best Female title.

The day before this interview, Darroze ate dinner at her own restaurant with a guest, something she does rarely. Were her team nervous? "No, because they are confident," she says, quickly. "We've built a really good team spirit here during the past seven years."

Her staff are clearly comfortable around her, but that's not to say she's a light touch in the kitchen - Darroze operates a 'speak with your eyes' policy and doesn't like people to talk or shout for no reason. "To work, I need a lot of concentration. I don't want people to speak for nothing. If there is a problem, try to resolve it as soon as possible and then, after the service, you can talk about it."

"It's about respect and communication. Anyone who comes into my kitchen with a different spirit will not stay for long."

There you have it - Darroze takes no prisoners, but nor is she a pan-bashing matriarch. The *Ratatouille* portrayal sums her up quite nicely, she says. "To be honest, at the beginning of the film I was really surprised because Colette is very strict and tough and shouts a bit, and that's not me at all. But by the end of the film I could see she has a big heart and a huge generosity, and that part is completely me. It was a great experience and I'm proud of that." 



French connection: the opulent Paris dining room