



La Colombe d'Or:

the St-Paul-de-Vence restaurant that spawned a legend



Photo: Marie Roux

The epitome of a fairytale *village perché* (hilltop village), a visit to St-Paul-de-Vence is a right of passage for visitors to the French Riviera. Art galleries and sleek boutiques line its maze of cobbled walkways. Smooth ramparts loop the pedestrian-only town centre, flanked by jaw-dropping vistas over rolling valleys that stretch all the way to the Med. Pick a summer's afternoon to ramble through St-Paul's atmospheric alleys and you'll overhear shouts of boisterous Italian, English banter and a German murmur or two, as well-heeled French park up their zippy wheels outside the town's rampart gates.

But St-Paul didn't always have such cosmopolitan appeal. Less than a century ago, it was just another hilltop town, fortified against coastal invaders and unchanged for centuries. Then Paul Roux sloped on the scene, opening a little café-restaurant in 1920 that would change this town's destiny forever

A mother and son joint venture, the tiny eatery originally coined 'À Robinson' started life as a handful of tables abutting their neighbour's artichoke patch. Mama Marie cooked Niçois specialities including *pissaladière* (onion-topped pizza) and stuffed courgette flowers, plus a thyme-infused roast chicken that pulled in the punters. Paul acted as front of house, welcoming



diners, organising live music and wooing the local ladies, including Titine, who would soon become his wife.

Over the following decade, À Robinson's success swelled. So much so that Marie, Paul and Titine struggled to keep up with the constant stream of visitors. In 1931, after a short closure, the building's expansion and installation of a petite dining terrace in the artichoke patch, the revitalised venue reopened as part restaurant, part guesthouse, boasting a brand-new name: La Colombe d'Or.

From the day it flung open its doors, the little inn's three rooms were consistently booked. Paul, who was a passionate collector of art, cultivated friendships with many of the patrons, including Raoul Dufy, Paul Signac and Chaime Soutine. These hungry artists were happy to swap their artworks for a home-cooked meal, a bed for the night or a jug of local wine.

Word spread. Matisse pitched up from Nice. Established artists Georges Braque, Fernand Léger and Joan Miró came knocking. Picasso quickly followed, eventually prodding Paul to try his own hand at painting. The restaurant kept its original features – bouquets of wild flowers, cool stone tiles, handmade furniture – but its walls were slowly covered by a growing collection of artworks.



La Colombe d'Or's fame spiralled wildly. Paul, Titine and their son Francis brought in stones from a ruined chateau in Aix-en-Provence, enhancing the structure's more austere surfaces and spilling over into the 18th-century house next door. International royalty and celebrities were smitten with the restaurant: the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VIII) became a frequent visitor; the King of Sweden dropped by; David Niven, Orson Welles, Cary Grant, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir were regulars. Parisian art dealers Aimé and Marguerite Maeght became fast friends, going on to build their world-class museum, Fondation Maeght (see box), just down the road. Cannes Film Festival stars – Marlene Dietrich, Sophia Loren, Brigitte Bardot and Charlie Chaplin included – lingered here during their sojourns in the South of France. Photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson floated through the background, capturing it all on film.

But life wasn't all sunshine and roses. On April 1st 1960, thieves sneaked into La Colombe d'Or and stole twenty cherished paintings, including Matisse's Portrait of a Woman. Although all of the artworks were successfully recovered less than a year later, the crime served to underline the importance of the collection. After decades of maintaining an open-door policy, the Rouxs were forced to install a heavy wooden gate at the



Photo: Kathryn Tomasetti

establishment's entrance. To gaze at the glorious paintings that grace the dining room walls, or revel in the sculptures dotted among the fig trees on the terrace, visitors now need to reserve a room or a table.

Today, Paul's grandson, François Roux, and his wife Daniëlle continue to run La Colombe d'Or. Much has remained the same since the café's inception, including the house hors d'oeuvres (crudités and *anchoïade*, an anchovy dip), and Marie's crispy roast chicken. A mix of celebrities, artists and locals continue to frequent the restaurant and it's still as effortlessly unpretentious and carefree. Yet La Colombe d'Or can bask in pride knowing that its very existence transformed St-Paul into the art centre and international star that it is today.

La Colombe d'Or sits at the entrance to St-Paul-de-Vence village, tel. 04.93.32.80.02, www.la-columbe-dor.com.

Open daily lunch and dinner, closed late October-mid December.

Average meal €50 per person without wine.

Book dinner 1-2 months in advance, lunch 2 weeks in advance.

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The Fondation Maeght

623 chemin des Gardettes
St-Paul-de-Vence, Tel. 04.93.32.81.63
www.fondation-maeght.com.

Open daily July-September 10am-7pm (last entry 6.30pm), Oct-Jun 10am-6pm (last entry 5.30pm).
Entry €14, 10-17 years €9, under 10s free. Additional €5 photography fee.

By the early 1960s, after decades of selling, swapping and buying, Parisian art dealers Aimé and Marguerite Maeght had amassed nearly 9,000 works of art. Sunny days spent with the Roux family at La Colombe d'Or convinced them that the South of France was an idyllic spot to exhibit their collection: in 1964, the Fondation Maeght was built in the Aleppo pine woodlands a kilometre north of St-Paul.

Catalan architect Josep Lluís Sert, a protégé of Swiss master Le Corbusier, designed the exhibition space, and at the Maeghts' behest, ensured it sat in harmony with the surrounding greenery. Rainwater, trapped and funnelled from the 'sails' on the museum's curved roof, feeds the fountains. The museum's floor plan follows the natural curvature of the ground below. Sert's collaboration with some of the 20th century's biggest artists means that the Fondation's grounds are dotted with Joan Miró's ceramic-studded labyrinth, super-skinny sculptures by Alberto Giacometti and Alexander Calder's colourful, slow-spinning mobiles.

Indoors, displays of the Fondation's massive permanent collection – which include works by Bonnard, Braque, Chagall and Léger, among many others – are rotated annually. Come summertime, there's also a huge yearly exhibition. Renowned recent shows have been dedicated to Hans Hartung, Yan Pei-Ming and the Avant-garde in Russia.

The Fondation Maeght is a ten-minute, well-signposted walk from St-Paul-de-Vence's town centre. Alternatively, the museum offers ample parking just outside its entrance.