

CLOES ENCOUNTERS

EVENTS & ATTRACTIONS ON THE GASTRONOMIC CONFERENCE CIRCUIT, PARIS STEPS UP TO THE PLATE. STEPHANIE CURTIS REPORTS. ILLUSTRATION BY SUSAN LEOPOLD.

France is famous for its festivals—festivals devoted to a spectrum of passions including jazz, open-air theater, concert piano, and cartoons, not to mention the mother of all of these, Cannes' famous film festival. But, until recently, there was one glaring omission in this landscape of thematic celebrations: Here in the home of haute cuisine there was no festival dedicated to gastronomy. Of course, there are myriad local fêtes dedicated to the greater glory of French food products, such as Bresse poultry, Périgourdine truffles, or the glorious *vin jaune* of the Jura. What was missing was an interactive forum uniting food professionals from around the world, along the lines of conferences organized by Raymond Blanc in England, by Madrid Fusión in Spain, or by The Culinary Institute of America at the academy's annual World of Flavors congress staged at its Greystone campus in Napa Valley.

Last summer this void was filled by the birth of a new French festival. Gastronomy by the Seine, unique for its annual appreciation of a non-European Union cuisine, had French haute cuisine hosting new American cuisine and kicked off appropriately on July 4, 2008. The inaugural event started with a sunset cruise on the Seine river aboard a magnificent 85 meter (279 feet) dinner liner and welcomed a galaxy of guests and speakers, chefs, foodservice executives, authors and journalists, government ministers, and scientists.

The three day professional forum, interweaving panel discussions, workshops, cooking demonstrations, and competitions, was the prototype for what the festival organizer hopes to build into a series of annual events, not only in Paris but in three other pivotal points on the planet, the United States, China, and India.

The quiet force behind this initiative is neither a Frenchman nor a chef but a Belgian lawyer with a life-long love for cuisine and a talent for organization. Like others before him (i.e., Tim and Nina Zagat), international lawyer Michel Cloes swapped legalese

for gastronomy, in his case a self-styled career as a gastronomic impresario and festival organizer.

Founder of CCN-World (Chef Culinary Network), a multi-faceted company specializing in consulting and recruitment for the restaurant-hospitality industry, Cloes foresees one of his key activities as representing the interests of professional chefs. "Our role is to act as a chef's agent, in the same way that other agents represent professional athletes." His company also gathers and publishes economic data on the industry, such as his soon-to-be-released "International Gastronomy Salary Survey 2009."

The series of festivals was originally conceived as a vehicle for communicating about CCN. "When

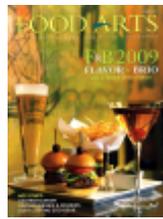
I started CCN-World, I had the choice of making the rounds, renting a booth at all the world's food shows, or of organizing my own show," says Cloes. His festivals, conceived to be small, elite, trend-oriented, and professionally driven, are also a means of filling what he perceives as a gap in the industry. "This is not a profession that lends itself that easily to true global networking," says Cloes. "Not everyone has the luxury of the corporate staffs that Alain Ducasse and Daniel Boulud have."

Cloes' global ambitions seem only natural for a man who was born in the Congo, raised in Belgium, and educated in Southern California. He practiced corporate law in Los Angeles before moving to Paris as European counsel for large American groups.

"More and more, my work with multinationals involved consulting for delocalizations and other actions that seemed to me to be more destructive than value-building." After over 15 years of achievement in law, Cloes sought to put his skills to use in a way he perceived as more positive and creative.

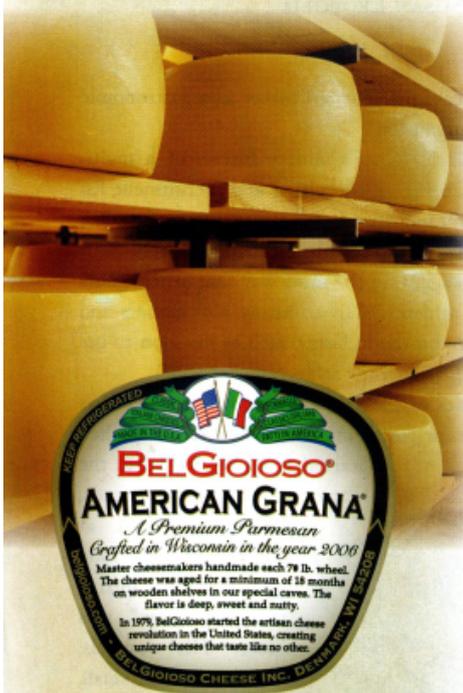
Shortly after Cloes moved to Paris, a chance encounter with Vincent Noce, newspaper restaurant critic for the French daily *Libération*, turned out to be prophetic. Their ensuing friendship





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—ROBERT SCOTT, SENIOR VICE
PRESIDENT OF STARWOOD HOTELS

led Cloes to frequently accompany the journalist on his investigations of establishments such as **Marc Meneau's L'Espérance** in Burgundy, **Marc Veyrat** in Annecy, and the **Relais Bernard Loiseau** in Saulieu. Cloes quickly developed a fascination for the industry and understanding of the problems facing it. This, combined with his legal background, a talent for organizing conferences gleaned from spearheading comparative law forums in the United States and Europe, and a profound respect and appreciation for cuisine and the men and women who make it, led to the founding of CCN-World in 2006.

The seeds of Cloes' festival concept began in New York City in January 2007 when he brought a group of nine top French food journalists to the Big Apple to take the temperature of cuisine in America. It took a little negotiating, admits Cloes, to convince the French critics to add American addresses to their exclusively French itinerary of restaurants. Four days and 17 restaurants later, the group had discovered and appreciated **Megu, Momofuku Ko, Porter House, Del Posto, Craft, and Country**, among other American highlights. As New York City food critic Gael Greene, one of the participants in this American food "binge," reported, the result "was almost a total meltdown of the smug Gallic superiority."

A Gallic sense of superiority is something that Cloes, diplomat by profession and, he adds, by nationality ("in Belgium, compromise and diplomacy are a matter of survival"), dismisses as understandable. "Countries with strong personalities, like France, come with a certain baggage in politics and other areas, and when you add the superior image of the French in the field of food, it's a double whammy." But Cloes' New York venture convinced those still unaware of it that the United States had become a world player in gastronomy.

In the fall of 2007, he repeated the format with an exchange between French gastronomic journalists and West Coast culinary professionals in San Francisco, with similar results. Dubbed "Gastronomy by the Bay," the conference was the precursor to last July's first Paris-based festival, when Cloes animated debates on a wide range of subjects from what tomorrow's flavors will be to France's controversial move toward having its cuisine declared a World Intangible Heritage treasure by UNESCO. "Judging from the success of the Paris event, this meeting is perfectly positioned to become the Davos of the world of gastronomy," commented **Robert Scott**, senior vice president of **Starwood Hotels**, one of the event speakers.

This year, the second annual Gastronomy by the Seine conference is scheduled for June 4 to 6, with multiple themes in tune with the challenges of a bumpy and staggering economy, including roundtables dedicated to business, technology, products, finance, and design. Women in the profession will be a subtheme, to be addressed by participants such as **Dominique Loiseau**, CEO of the Bernard Loiseau legacy, and chef/restaurateur **Léa Linster**, the only woman to have won the prestigious Bocuse d'Or competition. Other participating chefs include **Eric Ripert (Le Bernardin, New York City)**, **Jacques Pourcel (Jardin des Sens, Montpellier)**, and **Guillaume Gomez** (chef of France's presidential palace, the Elysées).

Meanwhile, Cloes isn't wasting any time expanding what he refers to as his "World Series of Gastronomic Festivals." The latest destination is Beijing, where he introduced a one day "Gastronomy by the Wall" conference in March, and in 2010 he plans to unveil his first subcontinental meeting in Mumbai, India. "What I enjoy most is connecting people who are apt to understand and to complement one another in a field where the human side is essential and where strong personalities confront other strong personalities." ■