



STAR POWER

Winning a third Michelin star for her restaurant at The Connaught is just one of the recent achievements of Hélène Darroze

WORDS CHARLOTTE MCCMANUS

Few would dispute that French chef Hélène Darroze is a force of nature. When not overseeing her restaurant at one of London's most prestigious addresses, The Connaught, she's shuttling back and forth to Paris, which is home to her other two other world-class restaurants, fine dining Marsan and newer, conviviality-focused Jòia. What's more, she has penned an impressive array of cookbooks and is involved in no fewer than three charities, with a clutch of promising new projects underway.

For this much lauded chef, 2021 is the most successful year to date. In January, Hélène Darroze at The Connaught was garlanded with its third Michelin star – the highest accolade a restaurant can receive in that rating system, and one very rarely accomplished, even among the most feted of chefs. To put it in context, only 132 restaurants worldwide currently hold three Michelin stars, and only seven of those chefs are women, further underlining Darroze's achievements.

"Winning this star was the most emotional moment of my professional life," says Darroze in her distinctive southwestern French accent. "It felt like a dream, to reach something like that."

However, as both Paris and London were locked down at the time of the announcement, with restaurants shuttered across the board, the celebrations were somewhat muted. They were mostly restricted to congratulatory phone calls and 2021's interminable Zoom meetings.

Darroze says that when she finally arrived back at The Connaught she had tears in her eyes. "It was just incredible. I'm always surprised by my team. I had wanted to tell them that the third star is just the beginning, not the end, that the work they achieved since lockdown proved to me that they had improved by themselves. They reached another level. I was so happy, so proud."

Darroze spent the majority of lockdown at her home in Paris, where she lives with

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Clockwise from left: Hélène Darroze is one of only seven female chefs to head up a three-Michelin-starred restaurant; the entrance to her restaurant Marsan, designed by architect Patrice Gardera

Clockwise from left:
an example of the
spectacular dishes
on offer at Marsan;
the Chef's Table at
Hélène Darroze at
The Connaught



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her two daughters, plus a cat and a dog. “I tried to enjoy the moment and be with my girls, but also look back at the last few years and think about what I want to do going forward,” she says. “Sometimes you have to come back to the essentials.”

This reflective period led to a decision to travel “more for the pleasure of it,” rather than dashing around the world to cook for high flyers or sample ingredients in far-flung countries. “Also, as chefs, we have a real responsibility to use what’s available locally,” she adds. “For instance, I admit that I used to get caviar from China because it tasted the best. It should be a question of quality – taste, you can play with. I have everything here to do what I want. We don’t need Scandinavian crab when there is crab in Scotland. I have to set the example.”

Of course, being Hélène Darroze, her lockdown was anything but idle. As well as her daily check-ins with her teams on either side of the Channel, in November 2020 the chef launched a gourmet burger line. It was devised initially as a home delivery service from Jòia – burgers with foie gras or artisanal sheep’s milk cheese certainly up the ante on fare from Deliveroo – but there are plans to expand in the future.

Darroze also cooked up a storm at home, resulting in the creation of two new books. “One is about vegetables and the gardens of my childhood, illustrated with my own recipes, and the other is about the food I used to cook for the family every day,” she says. “I was lucky that all of my favourite food boutiques stayed open, as it meant

that I could cook very well. Because Paris restaurants were closed, shops had the very best produce.” She explains that home cooking veered between the simple and the sophisticated – no banana bread in sight – ranging from Italian and Japanese food to “very French” dishes and also patisserie.

Despite such a bitterly challenging year for the hospitality industry, Darroze is resolute that London’s restaurant scene will make a full recovery. “I have absolutely no doubt about that. At the moment, it’s all about joy. People want to go to restaurants together and have a real experience – lunch at The Connaught, for example. They are making up for lost time.” She highlights the gung-ho determination of London’s restaurant-goers to resume dining out, in contrast to the somewhat more restrained enthusiasm of her Parisian clientele. “Even if the weather is bad, Londoners are still eating outside with umbrellas.”

What of her thoughts on wider culinary trends, once the pandemic is over?

“It will be increasingly important to put your heart into what you want to cook – less about technique, and more about who you are,” she says. This has always been her way of cooking, she adds, but it will probably become more prevalent among other chefs. “Generosity will be important – not in regard to quantity, but what you give from yourself to the plate. The little story you will tell, the little memory, what you give from what you have inside.”

Darroze’s own personality shines through in her dishes. She was born and bred in the

rural Landes region of France, and southwestern French influences can be seen in her elegant treatment of foods such as duck and fish. But her passion for globetrotting has clearly left its mark. A scallop dish gracing The Connaught’s Taste of Summer menu has notes of tandoori spice, citrus and coriander. It recalls a memorable venture to India. In the spring menu, a culinary jaunt to Mexico was manifested in a clever combination of pigeon and mole.

Another signature is *Retour d’Hanoi*, a fragrant, fish-based consommé reminiscent of Vietnamese pho. It was inspired by a trip to Hanoi some 14 years ago, when Darroze adopted her eldest daughter. “Every night there I ate pho at the same local street food place. I got such pleasure from it. Those were some of the best evenings of my life,” she says simply. She adds that in her interpretation of the dish, “I wanted to distribute the happiness I had from becoming a mum in Vietnam.”

Though Darroze is adept at making it all look effortless, it’s worth remembering that cooking is in her blood. She grew up immersed in the sights, sounds and smells of the restaurant in Villeneuve-de-Marsan that her family owned. “I started to cook at around three, and was always tasting whatever my mum or grandmother were cooking.” After a brief dalliance with the business world, Darroze went to university. She was then introduced to legendary chef and future mentor, Alain Ducasse. “It was when I met Alain that I realised how much I loved food and had the potential to cook.



Clockwise from left: Darroze's personality shines through in her dishes; the dining room at Hélène Darroze at The Connaught is designed to offer a refined yet comforting aesthetic

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He said to me, “Stop working in an office and go and work in a kitchen.” Taking him at his word, the young chef packed her bags and headed to Monaco, where she apprenticed to Ducasse himself, at his three-Michelin star restaurant Le Louis XV. The two are still close. Of all Ducasse’s teachings, she credits “perfection” as the most important. It’s the drive to ask yourself what’s the next step?, she says. “You have to improve while anticipating what will happen.” Darroze has maintained this focus throughout her career, from Le Louis XV to taking over the family business, to the opening of her first restaurant in 1999 (now called Marsan, it has two Michelin stars). Impressed by her achievements across the Channel, in 2008 The Connaught came calling. “I was not expecting it at all,” Darroze says. “I had just become a mum, so I wasn’t thinking about taking on another restaurant at that time. But I was curious.” She came to see The Connaught and “fell in love straightaway.” She credits her years in London for having furnished her with a deep appreciation of the experience of dining out, along with the importance of ambiance. Joia, which opened in 2018, “would never have existed if I hadn’t worked in London,” she remarks.

At home — a five-minute walk from Marsan — Darroze can usually be found experimenting with new recipes or writing the next addition to her stable of books, though she does admit to indulging in a massage twice a week, or, when in London, frequenting the likes of Sabor or The Clove Club. “I also want to go to Brat, I think I’ll love it. I also enjoy visiting Clare Smyth, because she is such a talented friend.” Smyth’s own restaurant was awarded a third Michelin star at the same time as Hélène Darroze at The Connaught. Excitingly, Darroze is set to take on a fourth outpost this summer, with a landmark cross-Channel venture. Bringing Mayfair’s brand of fine dining to the heart of Provence, The Connaught’s team will be in residence at historic chateau Villa La Coste between 29 July and 1 September. All told, this chef certainly has a lot on her plate. Having snagged that coveted third star, does she feel pressure to live up to her own success? Darroze pauses before answering. “The motivation to do better — and to do more — comes from the responsibility I have to the guests,” she says. Eating at a restaurant costs a lot of money, and to some it might be the pivotal meal of their life. The only pressure I have is to give them the best.”

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