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Travel

Into the courtyard of La Grande Maison in Bordeaux, through tall iron gates, the cars are arriving for lunch. A Rolls-Royce Phantom belonging to Bernard Magrez, the hotel's owner, is already parked, and looks down its polished bonnet as a succession of automotive wealth is delivered into the valets' hands. The fine white stone of the hotel's façade shines in the wintry sun, just enough to warm the courtyard's ancient olive tree, which has been uprooted and imported from Andalusia.

Inside, more wheels. The hotel's restaurant is championing a return to "la grande tradition aux chariots" – the tableside trolley service that was once a common feature of French fine dining but has largely been abandoned along with coat-tailed waiters. The hotel's backers hope the trolleys will help earn it three Michelin stars, correcting what they see as an anomaly: that Bordeaux, despite being such a prestigious centre for the wine industry, France's "ville de grands vins", has no three-star restaurant.

Black and gold, lacquered and polished to the shine of the Phantom outside, the trolleys circulate around the tables delivering not just dessert but patisseries, breads, meats, cheeses and *mignardises*.

The bread trolley alone promises a banquet, trundling along with a conical tower of butter sitting under a giant bell jar and ears of corn spread like peacock feathers behind an array of mouthwatering *ficelles* and flavoured brioches. Patiently pushing the *chariots* are the young waiting staff, dressed in business-like navy costumes, as if not to detract from the trolleys' thunder.

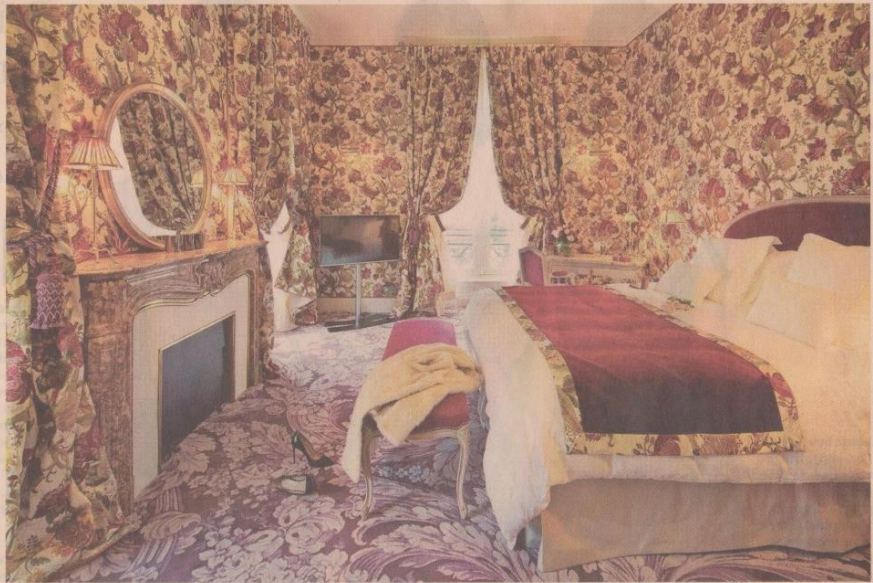
The return to such a formal, traditional, theatrical form of service is perhaps unsurprising, given that the hotel is the creation of two grandees of the French gastronomic scene. Magrez is a multimillionaire wine magnate who owns a number of grands crus vineyards in the region (Paris Match once called him "l'homme aux 40 châteaux"). His partner on the project is Joël Robuchon, named chef of the century by the Gault & Millau guide in 1989 and who has since amassed more Michelin stars than any other chef (the current total stands at 25, spread between a dozen restaurants worldwide).

Situated in a quiet left-bank quarter opposite the Institut Culturel Bernard Magrez (an art centre Magrez opened in 2011), La Grande Maison was formerly a lawyer's private residence, sold by his family after his death. It opened as a hotel late last year following a careful refurbishment by Cécile Daquin, Magrez's daughter and the hotel's director. Robuchon, a friend of Magrez's, suggested the restaurant idea; Daquin says it had been "un choix de cœur" for the Paris-based chef, whose own daughter lives nearby.

As a place to stay, despite having only six bedrooms, it feels less boutique hotel, more baronial home. There are original black-and-white tiles in the lobby, a chic curving stone staircase, and suffusions of flowers and scent everywhere. The lounge is awash with swagged curtains and purple velvet chairs; bathrooms feature Carrara marble and grey travertine, with his-and-hers Hermès soaps.



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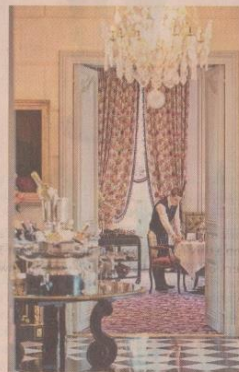


## Chariots of flair

Hotel Insider | A wine magnate and the world's most Michelin-starred chef have come together to create a tiny temple to gastronomy in Bordeaux. By Natalie Whittle



From top: a room at La Grande Maison; one of chef Joël Robuchon's signature dishes featuring caviar Oscièrte d'Aquitaine; a waiter in the dining room – the hotel is championing a return to traditional tableside trolley service; the exterior of the six-bedroom hotel



Perhaps the most obvious false note is the naming of the rooms – Lumière, Contemplation, Harmonie, and so on – affixed in shiny rococo frames to the bedroom doors, a design touch at odds with the rich, old-fashioned interiors. Indeed, sleeping in these bedrooms is like being rolled up in a tapestry: French textiles cover everything – floors, walls, windows – with beautiful filigree silk patterns of exotic birds and plants twining up all surfaces bar the ceilings. At night, it is dark, cocooning and charming, though a shame that one cannot light the room's fireplaces, as the lawyer surely would have done.

Some of his leather-bound books remain on the shelves of the former library-bureau, now the dining room. Here is the hushed but wonderful heart of the hotel, a space that allows for 42 covers, with many tables set for private tête-à-têtes – and, of course, room for the trolleys.

This is, in Daquin words, "un projet trois étoiles", with all the concomitant

attention to dining room details such as the chandeliers, crockery and glassware. The "show plates" (those laid on the table when guests arrive but never used) were made in Picasso's old kiln in Saint-Paul-de-Vence. Yet over lunch it becomes clear Robuchon is not a man who equates Michelin stars with prissiness and stunted appetites. There are some gold leaf smatterings where none were needed, but even the amuse-bouches speak of unguilty pleasure: crisp little langoustine *gaufrettes* (potato waffles) with a seasoning of *piment d'Espelette*. Sea bass with peppery spinach and potatoes, an à la carte lunch main course, is hearty and filling (though for €78, you might expect it to be).

The dessert trolley arrives like a mobile glutton's altar: crisp seasonal pastry tarts, *flottante*, golden caramelised pineapple, jugs of cream, and fruit salad for the non-believer.

In the evening the dining room fills with yet more glamorous customers,

whose meticulous taste seems to have been anticipated by the presence, next to the dining tables, of discreet grey footstools. Not for toy dogs or small children, they are, it transpires, for luxury handbags, the kind that are apparently too good to rest on carpet.

Bordeaux's winemakers are represented in an exactly long list, including 259 grands crus. On the dinner menu, Robuchon is out again to indulge, with his executive chef Tomonori Danzaki and 15-strong kitchen brigade delivering precise execution, from truffle-topped panini to velouté of parmesan and foie gras, and from langoustine and truffle ravioli (the truffle's stock here is high), to buttery scallops and, yes, a truffy cheese soufflé. Turbot with chestnut, prune and *vin jaune* had a beautiful texture.

All this before the main course, signalled by a trolley bearing a platter of Chateaubriand rolled and roasted with foie gras, an immensely rich confection sliced at the table, and dressed with puréed potato and delicious vegetables and gravy.

The chariot laden with cheese elicits an audible reaction from the man sitting next to me – "prometteur [promising]," he sighs – and is predictably excellent. By the time a Valentine-themed chariot of *mignardises* arrives (little chocolates, macarons, *pastilles* and lurid red-chocolate lips) I begin to doubt myself. Was it wise to eat so much? Probably not, but the beauty of La Grande Maison is that your bed, as at home, is just a minute up the stairs.

Natalie Whittle is the FT's food and drink editor

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Natalie Whittle was a guest of La Grande Maison (lagrandemaison-bordeaux.com). Doubles cost from €395; prix-fixe menus cost €160 to €210