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THE FOOD ISSUE



THE NEW NOBLE: CHÂTEAU DU GRAND-LUCÉ

Unapologetically opulent, timeless in her beauty: even among the Loire Valley's loveliest châteaux, Château du Grand-Lucé stands out. If these walls could talk, the tales they'd tell of kings and queens, of Revolution, of the priceless artworks once sequestered beneath its ballroom floorboards. Over the last two and a half centuries, it has been a private palace, served as a stage for the Enlightenment's greatest thinkers, a wartime hospital, wedding venue and even a backdrop to a Louis Vuitton campaign—and for the first time next spring, it will open as a luxury hotel. Ahead of its grand opening, #TeamCoco discovers whether the Château's noble heritage has stood the test of time...



| WORDS: BETH ROBERTS

must have fallen into a fairy-tale, I decide, as wrought-iron gates yawn open to reveal a picture-perfect white stone castle. A doll's house facade flanked by manicured gardens, double-height doors and soaring shuttered windows, so satisfying in its symmetry.

Only, this is no fable. This is Château du Grand-Lucé—one of the finest surviving examples of mid-18th-century architecture not only in the Loire Valley but all of France, and surely, I think as we're swept inside, the most beautiful.

So beautiful, that legend has it Baron de Lucé oversaw the construction (his summer palace back in 1760) and no sooner had he seen it complete he dropped dead on the doorstep, overwhelmed by the sight.



The château was passed to his daughter Louise, who entertained some of the Enlightenment's most influential minds in its great halls. As we climb the vaulted stone staircase, I imagine the likes of Voltaire and Rousseau doing the same.

We're in the heart of provincial France, just under an hour's drive from Tours. Where narrow roads wind through ancient white oak forest, fields of unpicked sunflowers shrug in the last of the summer sun and vine-striped hills harbour the region's famous wine. Turning into the village from which the château takes its name, we pass locals lined up in animated conversation outside the boulangerie, a 15th-century church and an incongruous English pub on the main cobbled square, onto which Château du Grand-Lucé's gates open. The buildings are all made from the same creamy local limestone as the château, a gift from the Lady Louise following a

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devastating fire in 1781 which destroyed most of the village.

While many of France's châteaux were lost to the calls for 'liberté, égalité, fraternité' that rang out during the Revolution (and with them, their master's heads to the guillotine), there were no cries of revolution in these corridors. Remembering this kindness, the villagers rallied to protect the château and her inhabitants.

Which is how, despite a brief stint as a military hospital during WWII, during which some of the Louvre's most priceless artworks were hidden beneath the ballroom to keep from plundering Nazi's, the château remained astoundingly intact.

In 2004, the property was purchased by American interior designer, Timothy Corrigan, who set about bringing the castle back to life. Not an easy task, given that everything down to the exact paint palette had to



be approved by France's strict keepers of castles - Les Architectes des Bâtiments de France. Thankfully, certain elements of the restoration seem to have remained under the radar, including the installation of a circular pool—sorry, fountain, if anyone's asking.

Today, Château du Grand-Lucé is forty-five thousand square foot of sheer 18th-century extravagance, with a staggering 16 suites. I'm lucky enough to spend the next few nights in the *Chambre Aux Chinois*, named for the pretty oriental designs that lace its pastel blue walls. Sunshine spills through floor-to-ceiling windows, a huge canopied bed faces the fireplace and a chandelier completes the princess vibe.

I'm sure I've bagged the best room, but snooping around the castle, I find each as lavish as the last, decorated in their own distinct character. While the renovations have been careful to retain original detailing, Corrigan's touches of California cool make the whole place feel liveable. The *Salon Chinois* might be four times the size of my apartment, but I feel surprisingly at home here. It's grand enough to make you feel like a princess, but cosy enough to snuggle up with a glass of local Sancerre. Quite a feat, when you learn that the walls in this room were hand-painted by Jean-Baptiste Pillement, whose work can only be seen outside of a museum in one other place in the world: The Palace at Versailles. Outside, steps cascade down into formal gardens, manicured French topiaries and tree-lined avenues hung with chandeliers, which give way to some 80 acres of wild meadows and ancient woodland.

Today, the château continues its journey under a second female owner, American entrepreneur Marcy Holthus. Having bought both the château and everything in it, Marcy has taken on the renovations... and there are fierce debates on what stays and what





goes ahead of the re-opening (a pair of parrot statues, for example, beloved by some, bemoaned by others). The bathrooms too will be updated, although as I sink into my roll top bath, I wonder how this could be bettered.

This isn't Marcy's first hotel. She also owns the renowned Washington School House Hotel, a boutique property in Park City, Utah, and what she doesn't know about renovating French hotels, she makes up for with a huge passion for Château du Grand-Lucé and its history. She is currently in the process of speaking with the Louvre to identify exactly which priceless paintings were secreted away under the ballroom, with the hopes of holding an exhibition of those very same paintings.

Since taking on the project, the team have added two newly-restored studio apartments in a more modern Parisian style, plus a gym and spa as well as a modernised ballroom to cater to events and private functions (#weddinggoals). It has even inspired the creation of the newly-launched brand Pilot Hotels, who will specialise in architecturally significant properties.

Our short stay is also a showcase of the region's food. The cuisine is as rich as the noblemen who once resided in its fabulous châteaux, and Château du Grand-Lucé is no exception. Each morning, we wake to the smell of buttery croissants drifting from below, slathered in fresh jam. Lunch is consumed in the garden, a spread of meats, all manner of smelly cheeses and salads sourced directly from the garden, laid out beneath the chandeliers. Dinner is a more decadent affair, with duck cooked in cherries accompanied by local Loire Valley wines and for dessert, an apple, honey and thyme tart that I still think about daily.

Marcy might describe herself as an 'accidental hotelier', but if our few days at Château du Grand-Lucé are anything to go by, the highly anticipated opening next spring could not be in better hands. From one formidable chatelaine to another, the property's treasures continue to stand the test of time. Just as it was in the days of Lady Louise, when the voices of the great thinkers of the Enlightenment echoed loud within its walls, Château du Grand-Lucé will again be filled with people to enjoy its opulent interiors, priceless artwork and exquisite cuisine, to live its history in its new identity as a luxury hotel, every bit as noble as its heritage.

■ Château du Grand-Lucé is set to open in Spring 2019 - www.chateaugrandluce.com