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THE NEW TABLEKEEPING TRADITION ALIVE

A French CLASSIC

Other restaurants may be changing with the times, but in Hastings, the owners of Buffet de la Gare are preparing to pass the torch

Elizabeth Johnson The Journal News

Annie Goulet, the owner of Buffet de la Gare, is about to break the news to three customers browsing the menu. Her husband, Gwenaël Goulet, the chef, stops her. "No – don't," he says. He'd rather let them enjoy their meal before telling them something they won't want to hear.

The Goulets – who have brought warmth, charm and excellent French food to this little place in Hastings for more than 25 years – are selling the restaurant.

As new restaurants abandon traditional dining in favor of sleek menus, small plates and simple decor, French spots like Buffet, quiet havens that harken back to familiar times, are getting harder to find.

There are very formal restaurants, such as La Panetière in Rye and La Crémaillère in Banksville, and bistros, such as Jackie's in Eastchester and Encore in Larchmont, but few combine traditional food with elegance the way Buffet de la Gare does.

"It's one of the few French restaurants that really is a French restaurant," says Ruth Choplinski, who lives in Sparkill and counts Buffet de la Gare among her favorites. "You feel comfortable, and yet it's high–end. It's high–end and low–key."

"I would hate to see it go," says Lidia Fouto, who lives in Yonkers.

Don't worry, as Annie likes to say. The Goulets will help with the transition. They'll be there through the holidays, then they will gradually give up the restaurant over the next six months. They even chose their successor, Luc Dimnet, a Frenchman from Alsace who was most recently the chef at Brasserie, and his wife, Nicole. The Dimnets don't plan to change much: not the tin ceiling, not the mahogany bar, not even the name. And the dishes will remain classic French, just updated.

But loyal customers are nervous. After 25 years of Annie's double–kiss greetings, after birthday and

anniversary celebrations, after countless cassoulets and tarte Tatins, they are hoping they won't see another favorite old place fade away.

"I hope it doesn't turn to an Americanized fast-food French place," says Fuoto. Though the Dimnets and the Goulets promise that won't happen, there are precedents for Fuoto's concern.

"Dining habits have definitely changed in the last five to 10 years," says Jean Le Bris, the owner of Vox in North Salem – formerly known as Auberge Maxime. "Psychologically, having a French name was having the dressed-up, special-occasion-type place. And that's good for Mother's Day and anniversaries, but what do you do the 360 other days of the year?"

Although Annie and Gwenaël prefer you don't wear jeans, theirs has never truly been a dressed-up, special-occasion-type place. They serve honest, rustic food like duck confit and roast chicken, and they make sure you're comfortable while you eat it.

"It's warm, it's cozy, the food is always excellent, and it's consistent," says Marj Grecco, a regular who lives in Briarcliff.

"We ... feel like we've gone to Paris for a couple of hours," Fuoto says. "It's lovely."

But it's time for the Goulets to retire.

"There's no way I can continue to work as I used to," says Gwenaël. He was diagnosed with colon cancer in July; it's his third bout with the disease. He had colon cancer before, in 2001, and liver cancer in 2003. He also had surgery for diverticulitis, a colon infection, in 1996. This time around, an emergency operation saved his life. He's undergoing chemotherapy now.

"He's so drawn and exhausted," says Annie. "I say, 'When are we going to enjoy?'"

"I feel really happy for them because it's been a wonderful place for 25 years and for the last five or so it's been really tough," says Laura Midgley, who lives in Irvington and lent a lucky Superman robe to Gwenaël for his recent surgery.

It seems the Goulets, who came from Brittany in 1979 and bought the restaurant in 1980, have had superheroes helping them along their path since before they arrived. Maxime Ribera, a fellow Breton who formerly owned several Westchester restaurants, sponsored their green cards. The people from whom the Goulets bought their home – they don't even remember their names now – lent them the money for a down payment. Bernard Le Bris, Gwenaël's good friend from his hometown, gave him the collateral to buy the restaurant.

Their first menu was simple: burgers, onion soup and quenelles, little dumplings that were very fashionable at the time.

But Gwenaël hoped one day the food would be more upscale.

"It was my dream to one day serve shrimp," he laughs. He did that, and more. Now the menu includes dishes like vol-au-vent with chunks of lobster, and a decidedly formal foie gras.

As they were striving to make their food more formal, they were also working to make their restaurant more homey, with touches like fresh flowers, a lamp from their home, a framed collection of old documents they

found while renovating.

That's just the style of restaurant that Dimnet, the new owner, hopes it will remain.

"A French restaurant usually means high-class and expensive," he says. "But I'd like to make [customers] understand not to be afraid to sit at the bar by themselves, order a dozen oysters and a glass of riesling and a couple of appetizers and feel comfortable."

Dimnet, who grew up in Alsace, knows about French cooking. He worked at the three-star Michelin restaurants Le Crocodile and Le Buerehiesel in Strasbourg, France, before becoming chef de cuisine at Les Celebrities at the Essex House in Manhattan with chef Christian Delouvrier. He's planning on cooking the classics (including the Alsatian specialty choucroute) but with his own touches. Think goat cheese tartin. Tomato tempura. Duck with Asian spices.

It will be French cooking – just not Gwenaël's French cooking.

"I cannot copy him – what if I messed up the recipe?" Dimnet laughs.

It's likely he'd hear about it from Gwen. The couple will still live in Hastings, and you never know – you might see them laughing and dining at their favorite table, the little two-seater next to the bar. And you can count them among the people who'd rather dine there than share small plates at a new spot with a bustling scene.

"I hope that we never lose the idea of ... a classic French bistro that serves a wonderful cassoulet or duck confit," says Peter X. Kelly, the chef and owner of Xaviars at Piermont, and a good friend of the Goulets. "I hope that never goes away."

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The long road to retirement

After 25 years of owning Buffet de la Gare, Annie and Gwenaël Goulet are handing over the restaurant to a young couple.

Luc Dimnet, the former chef at Brasserie in Manhattan, is already in the kitchen. His wife and partner, Nicole, is training to step in for Annie.

"I have a good feeling about it," says Gwenaël. "It's a very similar situation."

To his own, he means. Like the Dimnets, Gwen and Annie were a young couple when they started at the restaurant (Annie was pregnant during the first year). And someone had handed the restaurant over to them.

Maxime Ribera was from Concarneau, Brittany, just like the Goulets, and owned several Westchester restaurants, including Auberge Argenteuil in Hartsdale, Auberge Maxime in North Salem and Maxime's in Granite Springs. Ribera sponsored the Goulets' immigration and put Gwen to work at Buffet de la Gare three months after he'd arrived in America. (At the time, Mark Filippo, who is the chef at Cafe Meze in Hartsdale, was running the kitchen.) By October 1980, the Goulets owned the restaurant – thanks to another friend and fellow Breton, Bernard Le Bris, who put up the collateral.

Annie and Gwen met in Concarneau, Brittany, on the last night of Gwen's three-week vacation from his job

as a maître d'hôtel at Le Petit Montmorency in Paris. Annie was working at an insurance company with Gwen's sister. They spent weekends visiting each other until Gwen decided to pursue his dream of becoming a chef. They married in 1974.

He trained at the Centre de Promotion de l'Hôtellerie et de la Restauration in Vannes. When he finished, he combined both his skills for a job at Le Galion in Concarneau.

"I was a dishwasher during the week and a maître d' on the weekends," he says.

The experience prepared him for the job of a restaurant owner – who does everything from planning a menu to fixing the plumbing. And now he is passing on his knowledge to the next generation.

– Elizabeth Johnson