



La Couronne

Rouen, France

By Deirdre Michaelski

*While so many restaurants come and go,
La Couronne has been
an institution in Rouen
since 1345*

The historic city of Rouen, France—best-known for its 4th-century Gothic La Cathédrale de Rouen—is home to one of the oldest restaurants in all of Europe, [La Couronne](#) (the crown). The restaurant was established in 1345 as an *auberge* (inn or tavern) that provided food and drink to weary travelers and locals alike. It evolved to a classic fine-dining restaurant.

My friend and local French chef [Pascal Olhats](#), encouraged me to visit Rouen. Pascal, who has been here in Orange County, California, for many years and knows that we explore the oldest restaurants as we travel the globe. He grew up in Rouen and worked at La Couronne as a chef, so he was enthusiastic for our visit to his old stomping grounds.

The Adventure Begins

Rouen is an easy day-trip from Paris by train. It took just over an hour, and after we arrived, we strolled past flower shops, boutiques, and French-inspired storefronts on our short walk to the restaurant. We walked under the archway of the famous Great Clock, the belfry of which houses the city bells and one of the oldest clock mechanisms in Europe. It was in operation nonstop from the 14th century until 1928.

This opened onto the Place du Vieux Marche (*town square*). On one side of the town square was a row of timbered three-story buildings and on the other side is the Church of Saint Joan of Arc, commemorating the place she met her fate. On the far side of the church was a daily farmers market filled with fresh fruits, vegetables, breads, cheeses, and fresh seafood and meats.



La Couronne on Market Square (Top); The Great Clock Tower (Bottom)



Photos clockwise from top left: Fresh seafood at the market; Vegetables at the market; Rouen street; The author entering La Couronne

We Enter The Past

La Couronne sits on the market square and is a charming place to enjoy authentic French cuisine. We entered into a small alcove on the main floor. Escorted by the stunning and attentive owner, Madame Darwin Cauvin, we descended five short steps and were awestruck by the elegant beauty as we entered the dining room. Large windows, original timber beams above, drapery, pink tablecloths, and rugs all reflected the restaurant's glory. It was reminiscent of being on a large, over-stuffed wooden ship. The wine cellar was in the basement and the kitchen was toward the back of the building. A steep set of stairs and wood railing led to the second floor, where we found private rooms. Offices and dry storage were on the third floor.

I'll Have What She's Having

La Couronne also happened to be the first restaurant Julia Child visited when she and her husband moved to France in 1948 for an assignment with the United States Information Agency. The meal truly transformed her, and to this day, La

Couronne celebrates Julia's first meal in France with a prix-fixe menu in her honor. All of the dishes on this special menu are precisely what Child ordered, including oysters on the half-shell, Sole Meunière (doused in a butter and parsley sauce prepared tableside) and a fresh green salad. She also sipped a Pouilly Fumé, a crisp white wine from the Loire Valley. She later recounted this epic experience in her book, *My Life In France*.

Although dining on the patio can be tempting, Pascal encouraged us to dine in the main dining room. Table #4 is a favorite as diners can enjoy an expansive view of the entire room. The owner is always in a lovely suit or dress, with her broad smile and sweeping blonde hair framing her face. Her perch is an elegant wood-carved table tucked in the corner from which she conducts business and keeps a close eye on all the goings-on and the pitter-patter of the staff. Some guests sit on small couches side-by-side while others enter with their beloved dog in tow. The dogs are well-behaved, and the owners quietly slide their dog under the table.



Photos clockwise from top: La Couronne dining room; Smoked salmon; Foie gras; Chef Pascal and Owner Madame Darwin Cauvin

A Classic French Lunch

As we settled in, we ordered an Apéritif d Marque Compari and a Cosmopolitan to toast our celebratory lunch. We ordered our *premier cours* (first course) to begin. The Escalope de Foie Gras was unlike anything we would find at home and was incredible. The *Saumon fume aux bois de betre* (smoked salmon) was full of flavor. It was a lovely start, indeed. We could not decide on entrées, so we selected two for sharing. Served with grilled zucchini and a rich sauce, the Mixed Grill de Poissons Fins featured grilled shrimp and was so tender, flavorful, and colorful that it danced on the plate. The special of the day was a Pascal favorite, the *Saumon and Coeur de Filet de boeuf* (salmon and beef filet) with a cabernet reduction, and it was just perfectly prepared. We were so excited when they arrived on the elegant plates that we forgot to even take a picture! I gasped when I realized that, however I always say that this gives me another reason to return.

A special treat for me was to see the *Chariot de Fromage* (cheese cart) roll up to our table. Overflowing with a plethora of delicious French cheeses, it was a highlight to any fine-dining experience I have while in France. And although the Grand Marnier Souffle de Normandie was tempting, we declined as we had to catch a train back to Paris. *Se ruer...se ruer* (rush, rush)!

La Couronne is a very special place filled with a rich history that pays homage to the delightful cuisine of the ages. Many thanks to Pascal for introducing us to this proud legacy.

