

TOWN & COUNTRY WEDDINGS

FALL/WINTER 2011

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CITY
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ELEGANT
IDEAS
FROM
CAKES TO
INVITATIONS

BEST-KEPT
BRIDESMAID
SECRET



A GRAND RETURN

WHEN A WIFE TREATS HERSELF TO
A 20TH-ANNIVERSARY PRESENT—GOING BACK TO
THE LEGENDARY PARIS RESTAURANT
THAT HOSTED NAPOLEON AND JOSEPHINE, SARTRE
AND DE BEAUVOIR, AND HER OWN WEDDING PARTY—
SHE REDISCOVERS THE RECIPE
FOR A STRONG MARRIAGE.

By Marcia DeSanctis

Since 1784, Le Grand Véfour has occupied the northwest corner of the Jardins du Palais-Royal in Paris. The restaurant seems forever paired with the words “venerable institution” due to the roster of French luminaries—from Napoleon to Victor Hugo to Jean-Paul Sartre—who have warmed its velvet banquettes over the years. And then there’s me. One September afternoon 20 years ago, I had my wedding dinner there. Just a few weeks later, a young Savoyard chef named Guy Martin was plucked from the Hotel Château de Divonne in the small Lake Geneva spa town of Divonne-les-Bains to lead Le Grand Véfour into the 21st century.

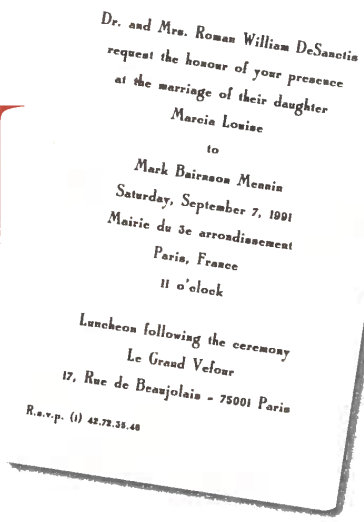
I had never met Guy Martin. But this year, at the two-decade mark for both of us, I wondered if there might be parallels between the life of a restaurant and the course of a marriage. So I returned to Le Grand Véfour to raise a glass to history—France’s, the restaurant’s, and my own.

I first ate at Le Grand Véfour in the summer of 1983 with a sporty count named Nicolas who squired me around Paris in a Fiat Spider. When the bill came, he was a couple hundred francs short. It hardly

mattered. Champagne was coursing through our veins, and the restaurant’s gilded opulence gave us the sensation of being nestled in a box of fine chocolates. Despite its age, Le Grand Véfour had the order and polish of something new and, for me, uncharted. Glass panels with portraits of fleshy, bare-breasted goddesses bearing peaches or colored ices lined the dining room. They were 200 years old, but with hues and sentiments as fresh as that July morning. There was both the thrill of seduction and the tranquillity of permanence. The scent of tarragon drifted up from my lamb chops, and cassis ice cream added another layer of sensual delight. The bubbly and a warm summer night: Le Grand Véfour was promise itself, and the pure essence of Paris. I never forgot it.

In 1991 I was a journalist living and working in Paris, traveling for stories to Eastern Europe and the Middle East. When I got engaged to Mark, an American sculptor, there seemed no question that we would forgo a big do stateside and get married in the city we now called home. He had bought my engagement ring, a gorgeous and well-worn platinum, diamond, and sapphire band, at an upscale pawnshop on the Rue de Turenne for 1,200 francs, about \$200 at the time. Our rented apartment had a fancy Marais address, but I had spent the better part of the previous year steaming off the stained brown wallpaper that covered every inch of the place, replacing the bare lightbulbs with fixtures from the market at Clignancourt, and hiding the prewar lino under carpets I bought at souks from Istanbul to Fez.

In France no one cared where we had gone to college or what our fathers did back home. We worked hard, scraped by, consorted





MARCIA DESANCTIS AND MARK MENNIN OUTSIDE LE GRAND VEFOUR ON THEIR WEDDING DAY, SEPTEMBER 7, 1991.

with journalists and artists, and were not on any regular family dole that propped up our lifestyle. Still, I was the youngest of four daughters and only the second to tie the knot. (My sister's marriage had ended early.) So my parents were eager to foot the bill for whatever I chose to do for the 50 or so people we planned to invite: family, a few good friends from the States, and, mostly, those who comprised our life in France.

I had already lived in Paris long enough to dress the part, but some things remained difficult for a young American woman. Like finding a wedding venue. I aimed high, but Paris was shutting me out. I had inquired at L'Ambroisie, Taillevent, and Maison Blanche. At every restaurant the gatekeeper shook his head, topped it off with a puckered expression of Gallic scorn, and sent me packing.

I had not dared approach Le Grand Véfour, which was considered a sanctum, impenetrable and holy, despite a perceived decline since the death of its celebrated chef of 36 years, Raymond Oliver, in 1990. But one day, while getting a haircut at a salon in the Galerie Vivienne, I realized I was a stone's throw from the restaurant.

"Your hair looks very sad," my coiffeuse, Monique, told me flatly, referring to my brunette locks.

"Really?" I asked. Two hours later I walked out a blonde, and not a classy-looking one.

Maybe it was the hair, because my Stephane Kélian slingbacks marched right over to Le Grand Véfour. I stopped to read the placard in memory of Colette, who had lived a few doors over and who, at the end of her life, was carried down each day for lunch at her sumptuous personal canteen. I turned the corner on the Rue de Beaujolais and walked inside, where I was met by an imposing woman with Yves Saint Laurent ruffles at her neck.

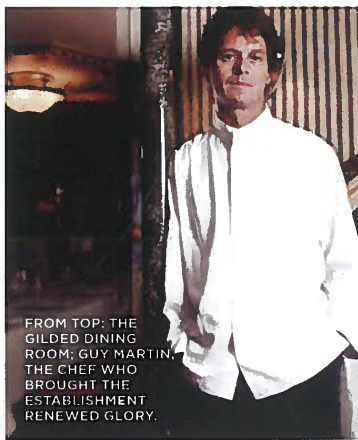
"Hello," I said. "I'm getting married on September 7 at the *mairie* of the 3rd Arrondissement, and afterward I would like to have my dinner here."

To my surprise, her face lit up.

"I'm Madame Ruggieri," she said. "Congratulations. We would be delighted to host your celebration."

And so they did.

When our wedding party arrived at Le Grand Véfour on September 7, 1991, waiters greeted us beneath the colonnade with flutes of champagne on silver trays. At the time, the wine giant Taittinger owned the restaurant. It was slated to open the



following day after its monthlong summer hiatus, during which it had been spruced up and buffed. With the sun pouring in and reflecting off its many mirrors, the room shimmered. We had hired a lone cellist, and he played a Bach suite as we trickled inside.

Above the tables in Le Grand Véfour are small plaques in memory of those who occupied them. Mark and I sat side by side on Napoleon and Josephine's banquette. Our lamb medallions were drizzled with basil sauce this time, and our wedding cake was topped with pulled sugar roses. Madame Ruggieri and I had chosen some simple freesia and lilies for the tables; they were almost unnecessary and surely upstaged by the room. Above the white curtains that covered the lower half of the windows, all that was visible was the sky, the green tops of the linden trees, and the limestone columns that have framed the Palais-Royal gardens since the Duc d'Orléans built them in 1781. We were amply toasted by our guests, all of whom seemed dazzled by the beauty and surprising intimacy of Le Grand Véfour.

Two weeks later, in Boston, my parents would host another reception, at the Ritz-Carlton. About that time Guy Martin accepted Jean Taittinger's offer to come to Paris to cook at Le Grand Véfour. On November 3, 1991, he served his first dinner as chef de cuisine and remains there to this day. In 2010 he bought Le Grand Véfour outright.

When I planned to return recently to mark our 20th anniversary, I was uncertain what awaited me. It was not my preference, but I had to dine alone. Mark was stuck at home with a pressing deadline, and none of my Paris friends—those who still lived there—were able to join me. Two were in the hospital, one with metastatic cancer.

I wanted to recall the promise of my wedding day, to experience anew the sumptuous room and to peer back at my less-tested self with eyes that were two decades older. It was a sensation I sought—an assurance that longevity, whether in a restaurant or a marriage, does not have to equal decrepitude. I wondered whether my married life had measured up to the place where it began. I looked forward to a superb meal, of course, but that was almost besides the point. In 2000 Martin earned a much-coveted third Michelin star, but in 2008 he lost it again. It was front page news in France, but Le Grand Véfour did not appear to lose its pole position as one of the world's greatest restaurants.

The day before my reservation, I retraced the path I had taken on my wedding day. I visited the palatial *mairie* off the Rue de Bretagne, where, after the ceremony, the mayor of the 3rd Arrondissement had handed us our official *livret de famille*, with blank pages for up to eight children. I had not realized there was a playground in the park across the street. Before I had my two children (now 13 and 16), a sandbox and jungle gym were all but invisible to me. I also found I had no memory of how Mark and I had traveled the distance from the *mairie* to Le Grand Véfour. Had a car taken us? How had my friends gotten there? I don't recall being a jittery bride, but I was surprised to have erased this detail. This time I took the Métro to Bourse and walked to the courtyard of the Palais-Royal. It was an April day, and the gardens erupted with color and heat.

I then took the long ride back to my old neighborhood near Père-Lachaise, where I was staying in a hotel. At the front desk I felt the ions shift in a blast of sensory memory. To my disbelief, there stood beside me one of my husband's dear friends, a witness at our wedding. He's Australian and he lives in Arles, and, it turned out, he made the paintings in the hotel. I had not seen him in eight years; his wife had recently passed away. We hugged, caught up on all of our children, had a drink, and wondered where the time had gone.

The following day, upstairs at Le Grand Véfour, I told Martin about the strange coincidence and how pleased I was that my friend would be joining me for lunch. "This is a magical place in a magical setting," he told me. "There's nowhere else in the world like it. When you do an important celebration here—no matter what happens down the line—it will always lead to exceptional things."

Despite his modest demeanor, Martin's good looks have helped make him a TV star, a significant culinary entrepreneur in France, and the subject of a well-received documentary called *Portrait of a Grand Chef*. His two decades at the restaurant have turned him, at 54, into something of a historical figure. I asked him how he manages to stay faithful to tradition and yet keep vital—the same question long-married couples face. "What keeps it modern is

what I put on the plates," he said. "I'm changing and growing every day. I don't dress like I did 20 years ago. We don't drive the same cars. The same goes for cooking. It's not a static thing. It is always in perpetual motion."

The restaurant, I found, still envelops you with a force that makes you feel of great consequence. There are subtle nods to the present day: Hidden LED fixtures illuminate the paintings, and the curtains that ran along the perimeter have been replaced by etched glass. But the soul of Le Grand Véfour remains in the decor and in the traditional recipes that Martin constantly reinterprets and updates. A commitment to history, I realized, can propel you forward rather than weighing you down.

Over the course of 20 years, Martin has been high and low, in favor and out with France's gastronomic elite. As guardian of Le Grand Véfour's culinary

legacy, he believes that nothing—no spice or sauce—should mask the flavor of the food. This post-nouvelle spin means scouring France for the best basic ingredients—say, langoustines or turbot—and transporting them with a splash of Japanese yuzu or Mediterranean sumac. Behind it all is commitment, hard work, flexibility, creativity, a sense of adventure, and, of course, love.

In marriage and in food, two decades is no small achievement.

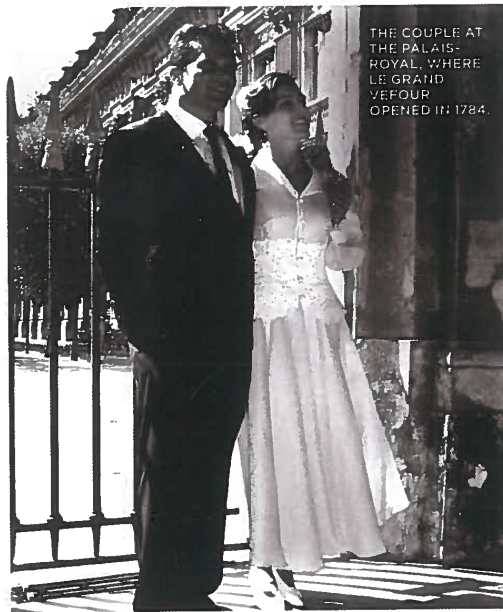
This time I sat in Jean Cocteau's chair with my old friend who had been there with my husband and me 20 years before. It was a strange thrill to now feel my own history in that room and on the fine Limoges plates. The sole was delicate, and Martin's turn on Le Grand Véfour's classic ravioli, now prepared with

the finest foie gras in the land, was a revelation. The Taittinger Cuvée Prestige Rosé was perfectly chilled, and the humble *gâteau de Savoie*—a recipe handed down from Martin's grandmother—was a comforting end to a feast of nostalgia.

But I missed Mark.

I knew that just outside in the gardens, lovers kissed, babies tumbled, and a work crew trimmed the lawn, leaving the smell of cut grass. I could see none of it above the newly etched windows, just the sky over Paris—eternal, faithful, delicious. •

I WONDERED WHETHER MY MARRIED LIFE HAD MEASURED UP TO THE PLACE WHERE IT BEGAN.



THE COUPLE AT THE PALAIS-ROYAL, WHERE LE GRAND VEFOUR OPENED IN 1784.