

Meet Marie Robert, Switzerland's top female chef

Young, sassy and sophisticated, Marie Robert, has risen through the ranks to become a big name in Switzerland, famed for her seasonal, playful cooking. Friday, 2 August 2019



Top chef Marie Robert alongside one of her dishes

PHOTO BY CAFE SUISSE

Switzerland's best female chef insists she's feminine, not feminist. In fact, when she has the kitchen re-done at Café Suisse later this year, to help her turn out the fine dining that won her a Michelin star in 2019, she's determined one of the walls should be pink.

The self-taught entrepreneur, who a decade ago opened Café Suisse in a mountain town near Lake Geneva, says she wants to bring femininity back to male-dominated fine dining. “You can definitely tell when something has been cooked by a woman,” she argues. “How? Female intuition! Feminine cooking comes from the heart; it’s playful. A lot of haute cuisine chefs, for example, number their menus. Mine are organised by colour, and next year they’ll be based on different emotions. Becoming a chef doesn’t mean becoming a fat man with a moustache.”

If that’s what people expected, they were in for a surprise. Even in chef’s wear, Marie Robert is all glam; sparkly eyed with long red hair. In the portraits she commissioned to accompany her menus, she pops from a black background, bedecked with vegetables instead of jewellery. It’s a riff on what she does with classical French cooking, accessorising dishes with a kaleidoscope of petals and purees.

“Feminine cooking comes from the heart — becoming a chef doesn’t mean becoming a fat man with a moustache”

BY MARIE ROBERT

Duck foie gras is rolled in a ruby-red strip of cherry gel; dessert is a garden of chocolate lollipops emblazoned with pop art self-portraits. These playful twists have proved wildly popular. As well as winning the prestigious Gault Millau award in 2019, earning her the title of Female Chef of the Year, Robert — aged just 30 — won her first Michelin star. “It felt like the world was falling on me,” she admits. “For two weeks after I was named best female chef, it felt like my whole life had changed. I thought: the most important thing is to keep my integrity.”

Marie apprenticed in Lausanne, but since then has been largely self-taught. She and her business partner opened Café Suisse in Bex, a 40-minute train journey from the city, because the rent there was cheaper. It took three coats of paint to cover the nicotine stains on the walls of the restaurant, but today it's part chic, part fairytale; a wood-panelled interior is dominated by dozens of green and white lights, while baubles hang from the ceiling.

The opening menu, Marie says, was equally unrecognisable. “It looks like it was created by a different person,” she laughs. “Now I get really excited about styling the plates, and every menu has a ‘trompe-l’oeil’, a ‘trick of the eye’ that looks like something it’s not. At the moment we have a sweet that looks like a broken egg in a bird’s nest, but it’s actually an apricot dessert in chocolate.”



Cafe Suisse, Lake Geneva

“I’m part of a new generation of Swiss chefs who have access to things like powders and algae that previous generations didn’t, so it’s important to learn to use those things, while also preserving tradition,” she explains. “I don’t like to use ingredients no one has heard of, for example, and I don’t want anything on the menu that takes three sentences to describe; I want people to understand what they’re eating.” She works hard to champion local producers and ingredients, which on the green slopes of Lake Geneva means asparagus, apricots, cheese and alpine herbs. “I don’t collect them myself, though,” she says. “I’m a bit more ‘Louis Vuitton’ than ‘gardener!’”

The past year’s critical acclaim has brought more pressure, Marie admits, and the restaurant frequently books out weeks in advance. Still, she says: “My ethic is to treat everyone the same, whether they’re the President of the United States or someone who saved for a year to eat here.” She’s also fighting to keep her sense of playful spontaneity. “I’m still a bit like Peter Pan,” she admits. “But I’m getting wiser.”

Essentials

Cafe Suisse is located in Bex. Trains from Lausanne take 40 minutes and cost £9. The chef’s menu starts at 136 CHF / £108 per head with wine.