

Cats and Caron visit Laguiole, the famous 'knife town' in the centre of the Aubrac, below Clermont Ferrant. They will be having dinner with Michel Bras, the top chef who has literally brought nature into his kitchen. Somewhere between the whisk and the dirty dishes stands a huge stainless steel fridge with big doors. Open both simultaneously and you will not believe your eyes. It is filled with edible flowers.

Michel Bras

Has Spoken With God

...Cats is at the Turkish barbershop to get a shaved. His cheeks and neck are covered under a thick layer of shaving cream. It is still early. The barber and the client hear a motorbike outside, humming back and forth, like a bee. Then silence. Moments later the door swings open with a loud bang.

Caron: "Ah, there you are."

Cats: "Humpfff?"

Caron: "I have something very important."

Cats: "Humpff, humpff."

Caron: "What the hell are you doing, anyway?"

Barber: "I'm shaving, sir."

Caron: "Right. Listen, Cats. I read an article in the paper. Somewhere in the Aubrac, in France, some kind of spaceship supposedly crashed into a mountain. Nobody knows what's going on. Let's ask our editor if we can go there right away. Maybe we can take his private jet. He's kind enough for it." Cats looks at Caron, brings out his right arm from under his apron to wipe the shaving cream from his mouth and growls: "Don't think for a minute that I will go all the way to the Aubrac with you just because some idiot landed his plane in a mountain."



After leaving Laguiole, the knife capital of France, they follow the Route d'Aubrac. In the hazy distance, big rocks cut through the green landscape. A few turns later a forest path appears on the left side of the road, cordoned off by police tape. A fat, short-legged police officer stands guard. Behind him thick ribbons of smoke swirl up from the pine forest. Cats and Caron stop the car and get out. The man ignores their greetings. He cleans the nails of his butcher's fingers with his Laguiole knife. He has the head of a town crier with a greyish beard and chubby cheeks. The two men don't pay any attention to him and follow the path up into the forest. A man in a white suit comes up to them. He looks a bit like a high priest. "Welcome, gentlemen, welcome", he says softly. Caron groans...

Cats slaps Caron viciously on the nose.

"Wake up. We're here."

"Humpff?"

"We're here. That's Michel Bras' restaurant. My god, it's so beautiful here. And you're just snoring away. You work too hard," Cats says, while he carefully turns his car onto the parking lot of the beautifully situated restaurant. It looks like a space ship that has crashed into a rock. The walls are made of glass and steel, and part of the restaurant sticks out high above the ground, firmly anchored in the Aubrac rocks. A rock path meanders through a sea of flowers and shrubs towards a glass revolving door that automatically starts to turn. Once inside, the men gasp at the breathtaking panorama. From the lounge, the view must be at least 140 degrees. From here you can look out over the Plateau Central as far as 20 kilometres.

"Finally, there you are. I expected you a lot sooner." Michel Bras greets his guests with a modest handshake. They follow him into the kitchen where they discuss the schedule for the day. First they will have lunch, then they will take some culinary pictures, followed by the interview, and then they will have dinner in Bras' kitchen, the kitchen of well-being. When life is a bed of roses...

C&C seat themselves in the lounge for the amuses. White wine with ginseng and a glass of iced tea with mint and verveine from the garden stimulate the mind. An egg filled with melted cheese, accompanied by a crouton with some cheese and sprinkled with powdered garlic flowers, and a small chicken-and-mushrooms pie awaken the taste buds. It is 12:30 on a Sunday afternoon. Over fifty à la carte guests and a group of thirty are seated in comfortable armchairs. Their faces full of anticipation. Not surprisingly, for they have just entered heaven. The staff is as friendly as can be. At the entrance stand two elegant, frail young ladies in bronze, with a gracious, almost mysterious smile. They are statues by Jean-Philippe Richard. They blend in well in this environment, where everything is light and clear. Light-grey granite, plain wood, glass, marble and metal are the materials used here. Cracks in the marble built-in cupboards are carried through in the glass. The



wood-panelled fireplace hangs, as it were, in the large lounge. The view is breathtaking. You can watch it for hours on end, especially now, with a thunderstorm in the air and the sun piercing its rays through the dark clouds. Could this be the most beautiful restaurant on earth?

Is this still earth?

C&C are led into the restaurant. A small stream runs between the wall and the corridor. Little bridges take you into the salle à manger. Guests sit at large round tables separated by thin walls that resemble the sails of fishing boats. Nothing is heavy. The tables stand on four metal legs, the cognac trolley stands on fragile supports. Everything matches the chef's strict modesty. As if he wants to say 'No, it wasn't me, it's my head that came up with this, I can't help it.' His wife Ginette, son Sebastian, daughter-in-law Véronique and his sommelier Sergio Calderon assist him in his daily challenge of preparing the finest food in Europe. Even his mother of 85 helps out now and then. She prepares the exquisite aligot. Their business operates six days a week, seven months a year, for 110 guests a day on average. In winter the region is covered in snow. It's no use going up for an exclusive meal during this period.

Lunch consists of a long sequence of delights. Bras, to quote his own menu, attempts to 'hand his guests the thread of their memory'. Back to the time when promising aromas from the kitchen filled the house. The smells, the tastes, the beautifully decorated table, the flowers, mother's delicacies, father's stern interrogations, the kids joking around amongst themselves. "Stop zapping for a

minute”, he says. “Experience everything to the fullest, at the market, on the way home and in the kitchen.”

C&C get the full treatment. The gargouillou of young carrots, cabbage, corn, zucchini, beetroot salad, violets, poppy, spinach, cucumber, broccoli, sorrel and a little bacon are overwhelmingly and heart-warmingly delicious. The turbot, fried in olive oil and cooked to perfection, served with baked tomatoes, cherry tomatoes, sorrel and smothered garlic cloves is flawless, but it’s notable for not being very surprising.

The incomparable foie gras alone, with a baked apricot, fresh almonds, young garlic, chives flowers, basil and a dash of lemon, is worth the trip. The truffle & truffo, truffle ice cream under a potato cone with potato spaghetti placed on top, is pure heaven. The roast lamb, cooked to the bone, knocks your socks off. Especially because of the crispy salt crystals and covered in a divine bacon saddle, served with roasted eggplant, yoghurt spiced with coriander, some orange salt and a lovely raita sauce. Afterwards some delicious cheeses of the region. And to finish it off, a compôte of cherries with oregano and yoghurt ice cream under a croûte of black olives, and two mud pies, one filled with liquid chocolate, the other one filled with running crème de paprika with red fruit, mainly strawberries. And let’s not forget grandma Bras’ aligot, a dish of potato and cheese whisked into an emulsion. It’s like having a piece of cloth in your mouth. It chews like chewing gum, but slowly melts in your mouth. Simply divine.

The tastes of Bras, a man of sixty, possess the brightness of the outdoors. It is like he has spoken to God, from the way he has accented the different tastes, unmistakable in their banality and simplicity.

It ought to be mandatory for all chefs-in-training to have dinner at Michel Bras’. He is a cuisinier détailleur. It is a made-up term, but it indicates that no detail escapes his eye. Everything had been touched, tasted, tested, turned over and added after some deliberation. Should the French president soon be struck by a moment of clarity, the kitchen, the restaurant and the Bras family’s very tasteful hotel are ready to be nominated as monuments. From above, Eric Raffi’s design looks like a wall anchor lodged in the rocks. The hotel rooms have been placed in wings differing in height so all the guests can enjoy an unimpeded and spectacular view.

The interview takes place in the kitchen. Meanwhile, 16 cooks continue their work, almost in complete silence. Remarkably enough, no one is yelling or cursing. This is a smoothly running machine, with respect for the talents of each individual. C&C have seen this before with Dutch top chef Jonnie Boer of De Librije in Zwolle, but here everything is brighter and therefore more impressive.

Bras comes into action later, when he has to cut the meat. It is almost an emotional experience to witness this. He is a motherly man, the way he is standing there with the kitchen towel tucked under his belt. The rôtiisseur brings the beef or lamb. Bras pinches the meat and then puts it in a meat pan, allowing it to rest. Now and then

he checks to see if the meat is already relaxed. Then he sticks a long needle in it and quickly holds it to his lips; the old-fashioned way of checking the inside temperature. Then, twenty times on an average evening, he cuts the meat from the bone into portions. It quickly goes under the Salamander for the right serving temperature and then it’s on to the next plate. Like a dancer he graciously pirouettes from the cutting board to the waste bin, then jumps back to the cutting board and the Salamander.

Michel Bras is a self-taught man. He was still in high school when he had to take charge at home. Both his parents were ill and they had to keep the small hotel running. The eldest of three children, Bras took control of the kitchen and it didn’t take long before he developed a talent for cooking. “Even though I dreamed of doing something with chemistry or physics. There lies my true passion”, he adds modestly. A superfluous adjective, since this man is the personification of modesty. He talks fast, but often he answers a question by shrugging his shoulders or with a mere ‘who knows’. Whereas his beloved Ginette embraces you with her warmth, Michel usually watches from the background sympathetically. Bras’ professional vision is based on photography (he is also a great photographer), on architecture, gastronomy and biology; he considers himself an all-round performer. He loves to go for walks in the Aubrac, he goes bike riding in Morocco with his son, and plays grandfather for his four-year-old granddaughter Floranne and his two-year-old grandson Alban, who can often be found in the kitchen helping out with the gargouillou, sitting at their own little table with their own little Laguiole knives.

Bras is someone who always follows his instincts. When he encounters new things, like in Tokyo, where he opened a restaurant in 2002, he examines and tastes everything he sees. The landscapes, the buildings, the harmony, the suppliers and their products. With every dish he tells a story about his feelings and he shows you how to bring things back to their essence. That’s what makes his cuisine so lively and innovative. It is the cuisine of his life, the cuisine that tells more about the art of passion than about the art of cooking.

He values the relationship with his suppliers. “It is all based on trust. I have known most of them for over 25 years. For me, the products are more important than the cooking technique. The man and his product make up the history of mankind. In the kitchen I’m a man of details. I have everything under control. You have to be willing to go to extremes. This should be your aim. Ultimately, the emphasis should be more on taste than on technique. Every single day I try to improve myself. I like to reflect on all sorts of things and I always try to figure out the meaning of things. I take it with me, in everything I do. It makes me happy; it is my life. I’ve been doing this for 40 years and for 40 years I’ve lived a happy life with my wife and with the business. My family is very important to me. Artists like Van Gogh are usually very lonely; their unhappiness is what makes them crazy. Staying happy and healthy is important to a man who is responsible for so many people.

When things go wrong, which can happen to all of us, I keep at it until I get to the heart of the matter. It requires a lot of effort and a lot of love. I am a rather timid person, but I won't allow people to unnerve me. That's characteristic for people from the Aubrac. They will dance, but with reserve. I see a worthy successor in my son Sebastian. He can work independently, for months on end if necessary. This gives me a secure feeling. I can now start doing other things with Ginette. I am sure that Sebastian and Véronique will do a great job in replacing us. The others want to stay too. Many in my staff have been working here for 15 years or so."

Later that evening Cats and Caron sit at the chef's table, right in front of the passe. They fall silent, after seeing Bras' techniques and the serenity in the kitchen. Silently they eat their tomato steak with nine different flowers and a variety of herbs; risotto with candied ginger and fennel, blanched and fried; côte de boeuf from the Aubrac (as tender as could be, but rosé to the crust) with tomato relish and haricots, and finally millefeuille of low-fat cacao, with cacao butter, some double cream and liquorice, followed by picoti picota and some exquisite little ice cream balls. Around midnight the two men roll back to their hotels, utterly satisfied.

