



DESIGN PARIS

First family of eclectic chic

Meet the Costes, the reticent clan who made French café society fabulous, writes **Stephen Todd**.

For most of last century, the Paris café scene buzzed along uninterrupted. The waiters were old and grumpy, the coffee burnt and watery, the decor merrily nondescript – at best. Then, in 1984, a style bomb dropped, the fallout of which was felt around the world. It was called Café Costes.

Devised by a then little-known designer named Philippe Starck, the Café Costes was a temple to high postmodernism, its vast, faux sky-lit interior anchored by a vertiginous staircase crowned with an oversized, opalescent clock. The designer's now covetable tripod tub chairs were scattered all about, instant icons. At the time, Starck said this new epicentre of Parisian chic was modelled on a "Budapest railway station third-class waiting room circa 1956".

For the Costes brothers, Jean-Louis and Gilbert, the Café Costes was the founding stone of an unpremeditated empire, one that holds sway on the French psyche to this day.

"Nothing prepared either my father or my uncle for the phenomenal success of the Café Costes," admits Thierry Costes, son of Gilbert and part of the family business since 2000, the year he ushered the Georges restaurant, atop the Centre Pompidou, into existence.

"Picture it. These two timid guys from the country who'd moved to Paris and been working as waiters are all of a sudden shot to global fame. Journalists kept calling, but they would say, 'We don't know how to speak to journalists. We're not taking any interviews!' It was never about snobbism or elitism; it was completely the inverse. They were scared!"

It's safe to say that, today, despite their deep roots in the rustic Aveyron region, the brothers Costes are no longer scared – although they still keep to themselves.

Spend any time at the café Matignon off the Champs Elysées, the Café Beaubourg next to the Pompidou Centre, Le Café Marly at the Louvre or the Café Français opposite the Opéra Bastille and you're bound to sense the presence of a real *éminence grise*. That'll be ruffe-haired Gilbert Costes quietly doing his



From left: the 1980s Café Costes; Thierry Costes lunching at the edgy Etienne Marcel (below). PHOTO ABOVE: STEPHEN TODD



There's no point making a place that is simply polite.
Thierry Costes

daily rounds, cleverly disguised as a slightly crumpled professor absorbed in his newspaper.

Meanwhile, Jean-Louis can be found at the Hôtel Costes, which is uniquely his domain. (In 2011 the brothers split their interests, Gilbert and his son Thierry founding the Beaumaryl group, which incorporates some 40 establishments across Paris, including the Hôtel Amour, Hôtel Grand Amour and Hôtel Thoumieux. Jean-Louis is focused on expanding the Hôtel Costes into a mega-luxury brand fit to rival the Ritz.)

The Costes clan's influence on the Parisian landscape cannot be overstated. Showing a



well-known Australian designer and friend around the city's most striking venues last month, I found myself saying "Oh, that's a Costes" everywhere we went. Till eventually he asked in exasperation: "What's a Costes?" Later, I caught up with Thierry Costes for lunch at the Etienne Marcel, near the bustling market quarter of Montorgueil in the 2nd arrondissement. Established 15 years ago as Thierry's second venture, this corner café embodies all that is unique about his approach to hospitality design. A collaboration between edgy French artists Philippe Parreno and Pierre Huyghe, and graphic designers Mathias Augustyniak and Michael Amzalag – who under the banner of M/M (paris) have designed advertising campaigns for Balenciaga, Givenchy and Calvin Klein and cover art for the likes of Madonna and Björk – the interior of the Etienne Marcel is of no defined era or stylistic provenance.

Instead, it floats in a space of its own making, loosely evoking a slightly sci-fi mash-up of materials and mood. The one-off, sinuously globular lighting system links the multitude of disparate rooms. It's unashamedly alien.

"In some ways I wonder if I was too young when I did this place," Thierry ponders, looking around. "At 26 I'm not sure I had what it took to stand up to four of the most stubborn creative talents in town. We're going to renovate, but using the same team to ensure a coherence, continuity. For me, venues are like human beings – if a little bit of cosmetic surgery is possible, why not?"

One of Beaumaryl's most recent watering holes, the Café Français on the Place de la Bastille went under the knife in 2013. Designed by uber chic interior designer India Mahdavi – once again in collaboration with the lads of M/M (paris) – the once anonymous, cavernous space has been transformed into an opulent den, its looming arches, gilt and mirror finishing lending it a redux 1940s vibe.

Mahdavi had previously worked with Thierry on the Hôtel Thoumieux and its spin-off gourmet patisserie in the 7th arrondissement, but the Café Français, she says, "was unquestionably the most challenging site we have worked on, given its layout and its location in a kind of non-neighbourhood – not quite the Marais, not quite the Bastille. We had to create a strong presence to stand up to the vast urban void that is the Place de la Bastille."

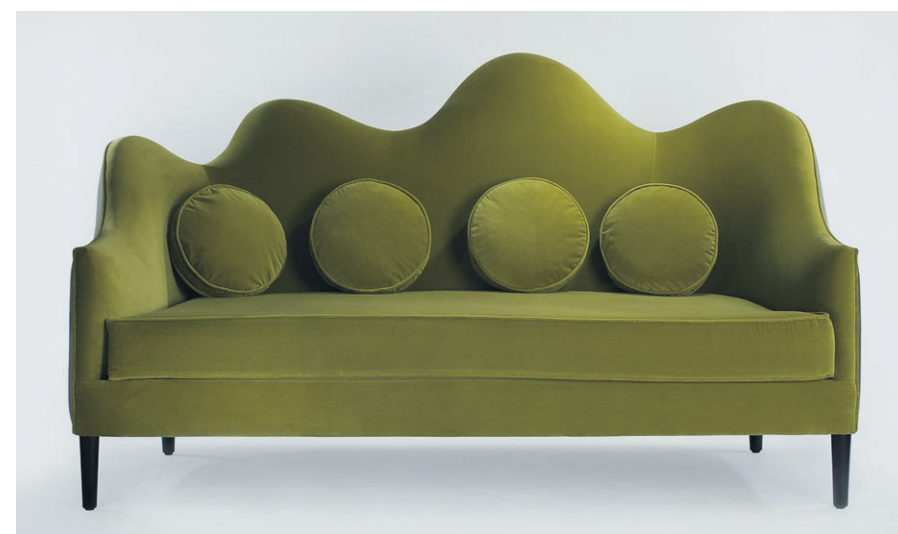
Beyond the stoic rigour of the interior, that sense of presence is guaranteed by a bespoke graphic identity devised by Augustyniak and Amzalag, variously articulated across customised carpets, bathroom tiling, table tops and light fittings. Mahdavi designed the plush red and blue Eva Gabriella leather and velvet club chairs (named after Thierry's



second child) especially for the Café Français. In fact, following the success of Starck's Costes chair (originals of which fetch about \$1500 whenever they turn up at auction), every Beaumaryl venue has spawned a seat appropriate to its narrative.

When he designed the Café Beaubourg in 1987, Pritzker prize winning architect Christian de Portzamparc also devised the mock Gothic wood and leather armchair to sit

Above from far left: Café Ruc; Xavier Veilhan's *Sophie* sculpture at Germain; Café Français. From left: Olivier Gagnère's Bridge chair; interior architect India Mahdavi; her New Wave sofa, right.



underneath the café's flying buttress bridge. Jacques Garcia designed the asymmetric velvet boudoir chair to kit out the Café Ruc; Olivier Gagnère, the jaunty Bridge chair for the Café Marly with its erotic ring piercing at the back (more than \$2500 for an original on 1stdibs.com). Jakob + MacFarlane's rigid, low-back foam chair for the Georges is produced by Cappellini.

As for the massive plastic tub chairs we're

seated on at the Etienne Marcel, "we stumbled across them at the Pompidou Centre", explains Augustyniak. "They were no longer under trademark so we had them reproduced." Chubby to the point of cumbersome, they appeal to the more design savvy among Beaumaryl clientele.

"We like to build venues that take a stance," says Thierry. "And if you want to build that kind of place you need to conceive and

construct them with attitude. There's no point making a place that is simply polite."

French journalist and cultural critic Yan Cécé says: "The Costes have always been in the avant-garde when it comes to sophisticated style. Each venue has its own identity, spins in its own orbit, but each is characterised by an extreme refinement of vision. They occupy their spaces with incredible self-assurance and, in a sense, they function as embassies of a slightly eclectic Parisian chic."

While Thierry readily admits to the Costes family owning "a lot of places that people don't know about – dingy neighbourhood bars and so forth", these fly quietly under the radar. "They're mostly traditional places, some charming, some not. I enjoy studying them, seeing how they function, or don't," he says.

The Beaumaryl ventures, however, are all on premium, mostly Right Bank sites and in direct dialogue with a significant cultural destination. Le Ruc is across from the Comédie Française, Le Café Marly is in the Richelieu wing of the Louvre overlooking I.M. Pei's glass pyramid.

L'Avenue occupies a prime site on the avenue Montaigne in the "golden triangle" shopping district right opposite the haute couture HQ of Christian Dior.

On the Left Bank, the Germain café is sited just off the boulevard of the same name in the

Continued p10

Discover the benefits of Corporate Bonds

Earn over 5% p.a. - double the return of cash

Speak to a FIIG fixed income expert on 1300 125 266

FIIG Securities Limited ABN 68 085 661 632 AFS Licence No. 224659. FIIG provides general financial advice only. For a copy of our disclaimer visit fiig.com.au/disclaimer. For a copy of our FSG visit fiig.com.au/FSG. A corporate bond is not a bank deposit. Corporate bonds have a greater risk of loss of some or all an investor's capital compared to bank deposits. Unless specified otherwise, the figures provided are as at 17/3/2017 and are subject to change without notice and before fees. Please see our FSG for any applicable fees.

FIIG The fixed income experts

