

THE DURABLE ARISTOCRAT

Daniel de La Falaise
(Cooking with Roots and Buds)



by Arthur Dreyfus

• His aunt Loulou was Yves Saint Laurent's muse; his English grandmother, Maxime de La Falaise, was a celebrated model/actress/fashion designer/food critic, and his great-uncle Mark Birley founded two legendary London venues, Annabel's nightclub and Harry's Bar. Everyone in the family is good-looking, polyglot and elegant, not to mention aristocratic. So much for the roots and the family tree everyone notices and talks about when it comes to Daniel.

But let's take a look at what's in bud: the talents opening up in the present; the flowers of the future. Speaking of talents, Daniel has them aplenty. He was an athlete in his younger days (a 100 meters champion), an actor at London and New York's best theaters and a model photographed by Arthur Elgort and Richard Avedon. It was much later, juggling saucepans in the kitchen of Harry's Bar, that he changed direction and undertook the most noble of missions: making people happy. These days Daniel preps, chops, cooks and assembles the finest produce for friends, family and a few lucky clients around the world. His specialty is private cooking. Unsurprisingly, the fashion world makes up the biggest chunk of his clientele. And so, after the couture dresses

have been modeled on the catwalk, an equally unique and ephemeral array of veggies and flowers goes front stage on the plate.

I'm meeting him in Paris, at Claus: a brunch café dishing up exquisite salads and seasonal soups on one side of the street, a carefully curated *épicerie* on the other. Products from the "de La Falaise larder"—honey, olive oil, floral waters and a rare apple juice—are exclusively sold at the latter (don't tell anyone!), but it's at the brunch end that I spot Daniel, sipping a glass of apple juice as if it were fine wine. Placing his midnight blue hat on the bench, the chef turns to me and invites me to sit down. I'm given a new yuzu juice to drink—but we can't talk, he says, "without a few nibbles." Something simple and good: three soft-boiled eggs, as it happens, complete with soldiers and Bordier butter. Each egg is topped by a tiny woolen hat. Daniel's runny eggs with childlike delight. "Isn't this terribly civilized?" he says. I agree, and he adds: "You'd get the same joy out of this dish if you were seven or 90." Once again, I agree—and think to myself: "I'd get the same joy hearing this man talk about his passion and his life."

It's funny isn't it, Daniel ...
[Crunching a bread stick] What?

Food's like couture. With couture, some cuts and fabric colors will be all the rage for a couple of seasons. With food, some unknown product will suddenly become the latest fad. Like the yuzu—or more recently, kale.

Yes. The yuzu is a kind of tangerine: a lemon that grows wild in the mountains of China.

Then there's the citron.

Yes; in fact I have a friend who's a distiller, and he makes citron liqueur—and he's been trying to cultivate yuzu for a few years now. Cheers!

I take a sip of my yuzu juice and find it refreshing—but also, of course, Daniel's own apple juice, which he hands me in another glass. My mind is quickly made up.

This juice is delicious: absolutely delicious!
It's ordinary apple juice. But it's supposed to make you feel like you're eating the apple, as it were.

What are your favorite apple varieties?
I like Cox's Orange Pippin, an old English variety.

juicy, with quite a sharp, acidic flavor. I ought to tell you I'm not a great fan of sugar. The sweetest food I can handle is honey.

Never any sugar?

My sister and I weren't permitted sugar when we were kids. We weren't allowed to eat candy. It's something I really have to thank my parents for—at the end of the day, I prefer anchovies!

Anchovies in oil can be fattening, though.

Oooh, anchovies in olive oil, with a smidgen of parsley and fresh garlic ... delicious. There's nothing to beat anchovies on toast in the morning.

Is your upbringing the only reason you eschew sugar?

Not the only reason, no. I think it's a sensory preference. This is going to sound bizarre, but I actually find that sugar is degrading. I can enjoy eating a good bitter chocolate ice cream, but afterward I feel almost violated, invaded.

Do you occasionally allow yourself to eat junk food?
Hamburgers, you mean? Not McDonald's, obviously—never. The worst thing I allow myself is fish and chips.

Pastry making and cooking are two very different trades. In big restaurants, they're done in separate areas.

Yes, two very different trades. Things get very emotional on the savory side of the kitchen: constant movement, simmering, browning, crackling, shouting...

Great pastry can also make me emotional!

OK, but pastry making is a quiet business: it's like walking into a small side chapel inside a big church.

I see: more delicate, more poised, more precise.

I can get a lot of pleasure out of it. At Harry's Bar in London, I spent nearly a year working with Aldo, a fantastic Italian pastry chef who had started out at the Savoy in the 1950s. I have good memories of making ice cream, sorbet and granita. But still, it was really hard for me to taste pastry cream at seven in the morning. You see, I'm really not cut out for specializing in sweets!

When profiles of you appear in the press, they always talk about your grandmother Maxime de La Falaise, your great-uncle Mark Birley and your aunt Loulou de La Falaise, but they rarely mention your parents. Who were they?

First off, they were a couple who loved each other very much. My dad was a furniture designer. He was also an excellent cook; he made incredibly good roasts. He was able to cook any kind of meat to perfection.

Sadly, he died young. Do you remember what he was like?

Very calm, very hardworking and amazingly nice. He was the most generous man you could imagine. I never met anyone who didn't like my dad.

What about your mother, Louise?

She's a very good mother, but her most striking quality is that she's green-fingered. You know, the kind of person who'll take a cutting from a

flowering plant or bush she likes when she's out walking, slip it into her pocket and plant it somewhere when she gets back home. Several years later we'll find a magnificent plant growing in the garden, as if it came out of nowhere. Mother still gardens a lot.

You're the perfect mix of your parents: a green-fingered cook.

Exactly: a proper medley of the two of them.

What was your childhood like?

My parents fell in love with a farm in Wales. It was the only surviving building in a valley that stretched for miles. My childhood was spent in that vast landscape, until the age of 12 or 13. I could run around or cycle for hours on end without meeting anyone at all.

How do you explain the total contrast between Loulou—absolute fashion icon, party girl and wild child—and your father, who you describe to me as calm, down-to-earth, family-oriented and fond of cooking?

The Loulou we knew in the family wasn't different from that description of my father. As soon as she set foot in the country, Loulou would garden and cook. It was just that in Paris, she did her shtick; she knew how to adapt to the ambiance of the fashion milieu.

You still have very close family ties.

Absolutely. They all departed too soon. Fortunately, the clan is renewing itself: I'm expecting a son in a month's time.

What will you call him?

Louis de La Falaise, like my great-grandfather, who was a soldier, fencing champion and a remarkably skilled horseman.

What sort of career would you want for him?

One that will make him happy. I'd like him to discover the world around him first.

How did you meet his mother, Molly?

Totally by accident. She was sitting at the table next to mine at a midsummer's night party one June 21st. And we soon realized we already knew each other.

What does she do?

Interior design. She has a feel for cooking, but she's very widely read, obsessed with culture: she studied anthropology. Molly's very intelligent. She's a magical person.

Your grandmother Maxime wrote a food column for Vogue, and she was reputed to be extremely funny. Do you think there's room for humor in haute cuisine?

Yes—you shouldn't take yourself too seriously.

Is there a touch of humor in your cooking?

Always. The greatest luxury is being able to change your mind. It all depends on the ingredients you have at hand and what you can do with them. It is through the sensory aspects of each ingredient that you can exalt natural interactions.

That sounds very serious to me!

No, it's a joyful idea. It has to be done with an inquiring mind and with joy.

That reminds me of the capon recipe Maxime once published, which makes you laugh: it requires you to hang the bird for 10 days before you can even start!
Maxime was brilliant at melding inventiveness and originality. "Maxime, you're exaggerating!" we would say, and she'd reply: "Of course I'm exaggerating, but otherwise it's not a story!" That said, she really could go too far sometimes. When she was around, we ate some pretty terrifying things. She would gobble up fish eyes just to scare people: I've never been able to bring myself to do that. The capon recipe is from the book *Seven Centuries of English Cooking*. The title speaks for itself! [Laughs]

What was the first recipe you cooked on your own?

I think I started out by making bread when I was seven.

Flour, water and salt.

That's it. And then cakes. I wasn't allowed to go near fire, so I used the oven. But well before I turned seven, I'd seen animals being put to death and cut up on the farm. I was my dad's helper: helping to assassinate the contents of the meat safe. So the first cookery technique I learned was how to prepare a joint of meat, from field to oven, and then to the table. And I remember that when we had a fish, I'd let it swim in the sink for a while, and then we'd fillet it.

These days we tend to dissociate a cut of meat from the animal it comes from.

Absolutely, and I'm against this. I find it very strange: why would you eat something if you don't know what it is? The idea of swallowing something without knowing where it has come from or who cut it and in what conditions—what's the point of that?

Apart from the fish in the sink, what's your most joyful childhood memory?

I started riding a motorbike at nine in the Welsh hills. I would go off on my own. I wanted to drive tractors, but I was too young, so I'd brokered a compromise: I could ride a small bike in the country as long as I never rode one on the road once I became an adult. I kept to that deal.

It's crazy to think of you tearing along bike trails at that young age.

Yes. I enjoyed an incredible amount of freedom. One of my school friends was the Welsh motocross champion, and each year he would lend me one of the previous season's bikes. I would open the throttle on slopes. Thinking back, all those adrenaline rushes set me free. I needed to use up my energy.

Motorcycling isn't risk free, but childhood has a taste of eternity. Now that you're past 40, are you more aware of your own mortality?

Totally. That's why I try to savor every moment of life. And cooking is a machine for creating moments: you have to get involved.

True, and—to my mind—that's the connection between cooking and fashion: the moment. These two fields belong neither to the past nor the future. A catwalk show is in the here and now and so is a meal.

Exactly, and both fields require a big dose of intuition. I'm intuitive and curious, like a couturier

always on the lookout for new fabrics or new ways to combine them. Finally, as in fashion, I work very hard.

But you don't see your work as a burden.
No, because I do the same thing at work as I do at home to relax. Which is convenient.

There are a lot of beautiful people in your family. How do you see yourself? Do you think you're good-looking?

I'm OK with my looks. Let's say I'm very familiar with my own physique. I've made peace with myself. In my opinion, beauty is a quality of the energy one gives off. I'm very aware of the monster inside me and of my generosity.

What monster?

Maxime's legacy, probably. She could be nasty as well as charming. We always ended up forgiving her. I'm not nasty, but sometimes I lose my temper and bang my fist on the table!

Which also has to do with energy.

Yes. If you can't control your energy because you're stressed out or tired, it erupts in a negative way. That's why it's important to discipline yourself.

I'd like to know why exactly you left modeling—and the theater—to take up cooking. You once said: "The kitchen would allow me much more autonomy in terms of how to communicate."

It's true I'd went to drama school when I was very young, and I actually went on stage in big theaters in London. I was lucky enough to act alongside a great British actor, Michael Gambon.

So why did you suddenly change direction?

Well, I really enjoyed being a stage actor, but what I didn't like was being unable to either control or anticipate future acting jobs, the instability of the whole thing. Besides, I'd started wondering quite early on what kind of acting career I really wanted, and I couldn't find the ideal example. Meanwhile I'd got into cooking, so the decision to commit to this other passion came quite naturally.

What was the "ideal example" for Daniel the chef?

I didn't need one: the role is obvious. People eat every day: cooking enables you to project yourself into the future, to plan, to control things, whether you're cooking for a prince or for the farmer next door. And I'm in awe of the land, the way people work it. I know this really is my field.

What was the first "real" recipe you learned to make?

Maxime's risotto, I'd say. I spent 10 days with her one summer, and she taught me to make risotto alla milanese. It was fascinating to watch how, little by little, the starch and the stock emulsified before the addition of the fat—either olive oil or butter—not to mention the seasoning.

You use few fats in your cooking.
Practically none.

But there's parmesan cheese in risotto.

Depends which risotto. I put barely any in my risotto alla milanese. People tend to use parmesan with butter. I'm against that. I use only salty mineral water, with a bay leaf or two, to obtain a very light stock.

Italian cuisine is famous worldwide. But people tend to make fun of British cooking. Why is that?
Because it isn't good! To tell the truth, I don't feel British at all. I left Britain when I was very young to come and live in France, where I fell in love with food markets and the quality of life.

I've had some good meals in Britain.

It's true that there are some good products—Scottish seafood, some meat—but in general, British cooking isn't to my taste. I feel more like an Italian—my taste buds are southern.

What are the differences between France and Britain in terms of eating habits?

French people go to food markets a lot and decide how to fill their shopping basket on a day-to-day basis. They'll say: "These runner beans look healthier, but they're a bit more expensive; doesn't matter, I'll buy them anyway." British people will go buy any old runner beans, bring them home only to realize they'd already bought some the previous day, cook the older ones first and put the new ones in the fridge. Which means they're not eating fresh produce. It's a reflex that dates back to rationing after the war. It's often said the French, the Spanish and the Italians are like flowers—joyful—and the British are like root vegetables—potatoes or turnips. There's some truth to that.

What about roast beef?

Roast beef's excellent, but it depends on the animal it comes from. If we're comparing, I'd say beef and veal from the Limousin are far better.

Well, crumble, then!

Now you're talking. Crumble can be delicious if it's made with good quality fruit. There's a very talented fellow in Britain called Fergus Henderson, who set up St. John restaurant. He does what he calls "nose-to-tail" cooking, using every single part of a vegetable, animal or fruit. He's a brilliant guy.

Are you a client of his restaurant?

I'm a regular. Henderson is the British chef as far as I'm concerned.

And that famous restaurant near London, The Fat Duck: is it any good?

It does what's known as molecular gastronomy. When they serve you an oyster, there'll be waves on one side of the plate and bird droppings on the other. I don't find it all that interesting. They do a lot of cooking sous-vide: emotionless cooking. The technique is incredible, that's for sure, but I'm not swayed by it. There's very little transformation in my kitchen. I don't like anything too fussy.

You often deride Michelin-starred chefs.

I don't deride them! But it's true there are tourists who'll travel tens of thousands of miles to dine in reputed restaurants with designer interiors. There's a lack of sensuality to it, in my view. You'll dine very well on magnificent dishes—but once all those transformations have taken place, once that verticality has been geometrically put on show, where's the conviviality?

But you do admire some Michelin-starred chefs?
Yes! Pierre Gagnaire is a genius. Robuchon, too. And when I was working at Harry's Bar in

London, I was lucky enough to rub shoulders with a great chef, Alberico Penati. He's just opened a restaurant in Paris called Penati al Baretto. It's an absolute marvel.

There's a book that has made a lasting impression on you: The True Cost of Cheap Meat. It's an indictment of intensive farming, chemical fertilizers, industrial fish farming, etc. Speaking of which, I'd like to ask an awkward question. People are very well intentioned about organic food, local producers, being responsible consumers, etc., and I think the solutions you propose are not only good, they're excellent—but I get the impression they're only for people who can afford to eat locally and responsibly. Is healthy eating the preserve of the elite?

The whole point of my new book is to prove the contrary. I was conditioned by a family in which people loved cooking and gardening. I'm trying to communicate the sensory ethos I grew up with. The first tip is to use independent producers. In France, there's always a food market taking place at least once a week not far from where you live.

What do you do if you're an immigrant family living in a low-income housing project in a poor Paris suburb? You eat things you see advertisements for on TV, you shop at the corner supermarket, and you don't have the time to go to a food market. Can eating habits really change for everyone?

What I'm attempting to do is educate people about the sensory qualities of food. I think it's all a question of education. For example, tasting a wonderful peach will put you off buying any more tasteless peaches. People quickly understand that. And if you do the math, you'll find it doesn't necessarily cost you more to eat less but better quality meat.

And you have to have time to cook.

"I don't have the time": that's the usual refrain, but does everyone really not have enough time? Since the '50s, we've been hearing: you don't have time to cook; free yourself from the chore of cooking; use just-add-water instant meals, etc. Sorry, but it doesn't take a huge amount of time to cook a meal. And since you mentioned the suburbs: if you go to working-class areas of London with a high West Indian and African-Caribbean population, you'll find they cooperate among themselves and buy fresh food. They eat very simply—vegetables, potatoes—but they spend time cooking, and they can recognize rocket that has just the right peppery flavor.

Will you one day follow in the footsteps of Alain Passard, who has taken meat and fish off the menu?
I use very little fish and meat as it is. And what I do use is always sourced directly from the producers. But there's one thing I could never do without, and that's fresh herbs!

What is your favorite herb?

I love parsley. I'm a huge parsley enthusiast. I also like tarragon and bay leaves. As for condiments, I like ginger, garlic and peppers—ones that aren't too hot; I grow my own. I often serve a salad of flowers of fresh herbs on the side.

Which herbs do you use?

Well, right now we could use chives because they're sending up flowers. It doesn't occur to us to use the flowers on fresh herbs. I keep everything

that grows in my vegetable garden. I have baby plants, "teenagers" and mature herbs. Then there are plants that dry up and produce seed, which I use like fresh spices—cilantro, parsley and leek. It's magical to be able to use the full range of flavors of a single plant or even a single vegetable.

In traditional cooking, vegetables often play a second fiddle to meat—as a side dish.

Vegetables aren't secondary—far from it. In my view, veggies should be placed center-stage, even given the lead role. Combining fruit and vegetables can sometimes give an extraordinary result. Right now, I'm doing a salad of white peaches, sweet onions, tomatoes and basil: simply divine! In the fall, I mix pan-fried pears with ginger and chestnuts poached in bay leaf stock. It's a skilful blend of fruits, vegetables and fresh herbs that really makes a dish interesting, in my opinion.

You don't only cook for pleasure. I suppose each your menus is based on the season and the client's wishes, but is there also an element of chance?

Yes. Every season has its forecast production and its surprises. I'm very fortunate when I make up my menu because most of my clients trust me completely. I make suggestions, of course; I ask if there are any ingredients I should avoid, and from then on my imagination runs wild.

What are the ingredients people like least?

People think they're scared of peppers, of anything spicy, anything raw. They're also suspicious of fresh herbs!

And the ones they ask for most often?

In general, everybody likes bread, chicken and veal. Then there's a whole category of foods they request to make an impression: caviar and foie gras are in great demand for important events. Naturally, I try to think up imaginative ways to serve these products, keeping it subtle and chic.

Have you ever cooked brains?

I have. They're good, but you have to cook them like calf sweetbreads: properly washed then lightly poached in stock at the right temperature then fried.

What about pork products and all those pork-based Lyon specialties?

I love all of it. Those are exceptional flavors. The pig farmer near my place and I make absolutely everything. We break it all down in a cauldron.

You catered for Kate Moss's wedding. What dishes did you serve?

My usual reply is that there's a reason it's called "private cooking." Out of respect for my clients, I never reveal what I served or to whom I served it.

Okay, but there were several mentions in the media of you catering that particular wedding. It's common knowledge!

Well, all right. So, it's a strange memory: I drove a van stuffed with produce from southwest France to a remote corner of England. It was July. We had peaches from Monsieur Pigot's orchard; for the meat, I chose some English producers I know. I made slow-cooked veal belly and a nice dessert: a distiller friend and I made a liqueur with Mara des Bois strawberries; then we made a faux yogurt with a strawberry liqueur, put strawberries on top,

and added gold leaf for the finishing touch. It was magnificent and so tasty.

If I were catering your wedding, what dish would you be sure to want?

Right now, a very simple but exquisitely cooked risotto with parsley, bay leaves, peppers and oysters. But if you invited a top Japanese caterer to serve me raw fish, I'd be happy, too.

What, in your view, is special about Japanese cooking?

Minimal transformation. And it's very eye-catching. It's all based on seasonal produce: you really feel transcended by something. There are some good Japanese restaurants in Paris. There's one tiny one I really like on Rue des Ciseaux, called Tsukizi. I often go there on my own for lunch.

My grandfather often tells me the products of a single region and a single season go together perfectly.

He's right. Asparagus and tarragon in early April are a miracle. There's nothing better. You have to keep your eyes open to see all the things you have in front of you.

What's the best season for your favorite produce?

The month of June is magical: peaches are starting, and cherries are ending. And then there's the tail end of asparagus. And besides, there's still plenty of hope because you can pick all kinds of things in July. Then, on August 15, you suddenly get the impression that everything's come to an end.

Some fruit will keep in a cool environment for quite a long time.

Yes, apples keep well. I work with a fabulous producer who has constructed a temperature-controlled building, with two centimeters of water on the ground, to store his fruit—and it's amazing. He has fresh, delicious apples all the way through late-May.

So you can cheat the seasons. I've heard you garden by the phases of the moon.

Yes, its waxing and waning. The moon affects the ocean tides and the way our nails or hair grow, so why wouldn't it influence plants?

But how? What exactly does it mean?

It means that when you plant a seed, you try to get it to put down roots; or, if you've planted something that already has roots, you want it to grow. In the olden days, gardeners always looked at the moon before planting. Its effects are extraordinary. If you mow your lawn in the waxing moon, the grass grows back at incredible speed, whereas in a waning moon it'll take a lot longer.

I'd like to talk about your new book, Nature's Larder: Cooking with the Senses. It's superb. Let me read out an extract from the blurb: "Using residual heat to cook gently, extracting essences with broths and using herbs both in cooking and finishing for a layered effect..." You often use pretty verbs to describe cooking techniques. All these descriptions could almost apply to embroidery, silversmithing or haute couture. You make chopping herbs and other techniques sound so refined.

Cooking is poetic. It's a dance. When I "give" a recipe, I make an effort to provide broad

indications, not orders. It's not a chef's dish you're going to taste; it's a product. And for the product to give the best of itself, you have to get involved. You can't just stand mindlessly in front of the oven and do something else in the meantime.

What's a "narrative style recipe"?

Well, I'm not a big fan of traditional recipes. I find it a bit sad to read instructions like: "Add such-and-such quantity; do this; do that..." You end up shouting: "I followed the recipe, but it doesn't work!" I think you essentially have to explain the reason and the objective of a procedure, as well as what you can obtain by mixing certain products. Of course, you have to accompany readers and give them a path to follow, but a recipe should be much more than merely a combination of ingredients.

The photos—all stunning—are also by you.

I wanted to keep it very simple: photos taken from above, with a source of natural light, and compositions evoking the spirit of my recipes.

Basically, there's no accessorizing.

So, how do you explain your love of hats in real life?

I've worn hats since I was very young. My dad always wore one. And then my grandfather Alan died—I was nearly seven at the time—and I inherited his wonderful collection of 1930s and '40s hats. I now have 50 or 60 of them. I feel dressed wearing a hat, and besides, it keeps off the rain.

I really like something you said some years ago:

"I hate to feel like you're wearing something—that feeling when you're a kid and you're all trussed up to play in the snow. If you're dressed in such a way that you feel naked and free, then that's when you're properly dressed." Would you still say that?

Absolutely. That phrase sums up my linen pants from Laborin, which are my workwear.

Do you wear ties?

I rarely do.

And your shoes?

I'm wearing a nice pair of Westons.

Fashion is a seduction tool. Is it possible to establish a connection between cooking and sex?

As you've seen, I talk about disrobing a peach or a fish. Eating is very sensual. So, I'd say yes.

Have you ever seduced a girl with a good meal?

Of course! Cooking is a sensory field.

If we were to sum up your approach to cooking, it would be: "The most important thing isn't the recipe but the product—and the way you prepare the product."

That's exactly it, not forgetting one key detail: it's also what you feel like eating!

A peach from the orchard of the exceptional Monsieur Pigot, who grows 50 different varieties of peaches, is sliced for us as we watch only a few hours before the launch party for Daniel's new book. These peaches—jewels nestling amid large green leaves—will be served instead of petit fours. For now, they're our dessert. I pause. I take a bite. Sheer ecstasy. The chef was right. This is the best peach I've ever eaten in my whole life. THE END