

FRENCH MAGIC: SUSAN STEGGALL

Two years without being able to travel to my 'other' home – an old chalet in the French Alps – I visit it often in my memory. I remember...

Before heading to life in the mountains, John and I decided on a meal at a swanky Parisian restaurant: *Le Relais de Louis XIII*, housed in an ancient convent.

Inside we discovered we were the only lunchtime diners. An army of waiters ushered us to a table set with an alarming array of implements. The menu resembled a medium-sized advertising hoarding and in the dim old-gold lighting we could barely read the elaborate descriptions of the culinary masterpieces, much less understand what there was to eat.

There was a waiter for the order, one for *la serviette*, one for wineglasses, one for the bread. We conversed in whispers, trying to look dignified but were too timid to ask about troubling aspects of our choices. The Breton oysters were served on a bed of what looked suspiciously like seaweed. Did we eat it? No familiar slice of lemon or tomato wedge here! The honeyed pheasant arrived, borne aloft on a silver platter by a waiter who presented it for our approval and then proceeded to carve delicate slivers and arrange them artistically on large plates, leaving the best bits on the bones, on the platter, which he whisked out of sight. The pheasant was tender and delicious, swimming in honey, fragrant with thyme. Dilemma...how to get back the rest of what we considered rightfully ours? I wanted to ask the waiter for it - politely, in my best French - but with only two months' living in *his* country, he quite intimidated me. We could at least mop up the delicious sauce with chunks of baguette – Gallic fashion.

Several courses later and well into our second bottle of ridiculously expensive wine we started practising our French on any waiter too slow to escape. Eventually we rolled out into the *grisaille* of a wintry afternoon, convinced that we had had an 'experience'.

But the day was not yet over. Near the Seine a film crew was set up in front of a famous bar. Ignoring the creeping afternoon chill, we stood, transfixed, on the pavement with other *cinéphiles*, watching stars Romy Schneider and Yves Montand in action.