





DEAR FELLOW WATCH CONNOISSEURS

WELCOME TO ISSUE 12

Art de vivre is a core element of Blancpain's DNA. The pleasures of the table and the satisfaction of wearing an exquisite timepiece go hand in hand. For this reason we have always featured one of the world's great restaurants in every Issue of *Lettres du Brassus*. In this Issue we have given a different twist to our customary gastronomic article. Rather than introduce you to a new restaurant, we have revisited three that have been featured before, the Hotel de Ville in Crissier, Switzerland; Lameloise in Chagny, France; and Le Pont de Brent in Montreux, Switzerland. Each of these longtime favorites has seen the retirement of its



chef, so it is time update our readership on what has transpired as the toque has been passed to a new generation. The result is a "triple play" as instead of writing about one restaurant we take you to three.

Our leading watch article in this Issue spotlights an horological world first: the first wrist-watch offering a combination of a traditional Chinese calendar and a classic Gregorian calendar/moon phase. More than five years of intensive development and research were poured into the creation of this groundbreaking complicated timepiece.

I have written before about our partnership with the National Geographic Society and the Pristine Seas Expeditions. I am proud that this issue features a story written by Dr. Enric Sala on the Pitcairn expedition sponsored by Blancpain.

Enjoy Issue 12!

Marc A. Hayek

President and CEO Blancpain



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calendar that keeps in synch with the seasons based on months, not days. Years sometimes with twelve months, other times thirteen, with insertion of leap months occurring irregularly. Months of 29 days, others of 30 days, again determined irregularly. Hours 120 minutes in length. A Gregorian calendar with customary date indications. A moon phase. How do you integrate all of this into a single wristwatch?

More than that. For all other watch complications, whether they be tourbillons, minute repeaters, or perpetual calendars, there are well worn paths from two centuries of watchmaking experience that guide movement designers on what to do and how to do it. Not for a combination Chinese/Gregorian calendar. This was to be a complication that had never been done before; there were no preexisting designs from which to

draw. So the challenge facing Blancpain's movement designers when they began the five year project to create the Villeret Calendrier Chinois Traditionnel was formidable. What they created occupies not only the unique position of the only production wristwatch in the industry combining a traditional Chinese calendar plus Gregorian calendar, it is the first production wristwatch in history to achieve this feat.

If you are a watch movement savant, you have already, no doubt, connected the dots to conclude that this must indeed be an exceedingly complicated movement. A few statistics emphatically make the point; no need for dot connection. The caliber 3638 comprises 469 individual parts. The calendar plate, which was developed from a white sheet of paper and from the ground up, alone, arrays six different levels of components! More than 20 fine linear springs are utilized in the calendar, each hand brushed and anglage finished with a file











THE MYSTICISM OF THE CHINESE CALENDAR REVEALS ITSELF WITH A TOUR OF THE DIAL.

(lesser marques utilize a motorized tool). To put this all in perspective, the calendar far surpasses in complexity that of a perpetual. On the scale of complication, the Villeret Calendrier Chinois Traditionnel falls just short of a minute repeater! When a timepiece reaches this level of complexity not only are the most experienced master watchmakers called upon for its assembly, but, in addition, they are required, by hand, to make delicate adjustments to the individual components to bring the watch to full function. As follows from this, the Calendrier Chinois Traditionnel is assembled in Blancpain's dedicated grand complication workshop in Le Brassus.

The mysticism of the Chinese calendar reveals itself with a tour of the dial. Logically our tour begins with the subdial located at the top of the dial in the 12 o'clock position. This presents the indication of the Chinese hours. A Chinese hour is 120 minutes in length and there are twelve. Thus, at a very simple level this would seem to be nothing more than a standard 24 hour display. That view, however, overlooks a vital

distinction between a classic Gregorian 24 hour display and a Chinese version. The 120 minute hours do not change at 12-2-4 etc. Instead the first hour of the day, the rat, begins at 23:00 and lasts until 00:59. That is followed by the ox which lasts from 01:00 until 02:59. Thereafter, by the tiger and so forth; all the hours bearing the name of an animal. The displays of the numerical hours and animal names are both arrayed around the subdial: numerals on the outside, animals on the inside.

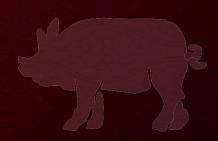
Posed above the Chinese hour subdial is a window for the indication of the Chinese Zodiac. The Chinese Zodiac should not be confused with Western notions of the Zodiac. Although both are divided into a cycle of twelve parts, the Western Zodiac is tied to months; the Chinese linked to years. Moreover, the signs of Chinese Zodiac are completely composed of animals, while the Western Zodiac, although including some animals, also is composed of non-animal signs, such as constellations.

An ancient folk legend recounts the story of how the Chinese Zodiac animals were chosen and their ordering. According to the story, the Jade Emperor issued a decree summoning the animals to appear at 5 am at the gate of his palace. The order in which they appeared would determine the order of the years. Arriving at the palace necessitated fording a difficult stream. At the appointed hour, the rat and the cat determined that the fastest way to cross the stream would be on the back of the ox. Midway across, the rat pushed the cat into the water and, nearing the far shore, leaped off the back of the ox to arrive first. The ox following shortly thereafter secured the spot of the second year. By dint of his enormous strength which allowed him to fight the stream's currents, the tiger arrived third. Cleverly hopping from stone to stone, the rabbit was the fourth to arrive, albeit nearly falling prey to calamity, as he washed into the stream only saving himself by

finding a floating log that allowed him to reach the far shore.

Surprisingly the flying dragon, who in principle, should have come in first, was the fifth at the gate. It seems that he was waylaid performing good deeds, including helping to blow the rabbit's log to the shore. It was the horse next, but with a hidden passenger, the snake. Just before the finish line, the snake slithered off the horse, which frightened at the sight, reared up, allowing the snake to cross before him garnering the sixth place and lowering the horse to seventh. The next three, the goat, monkey and rooster worked as a team to surmount the challenge of the stream. The rooster spotted a raft, while the goat and monkey cleared the weeds to free it. Pleased by the cooperation the three had shown, the Emperor awarded the eighth year to the goat, ninth to the monkey and tenth to the rooster. It was the dog who arrived eleventh, far behind where his abilities should have placed him; his delay came because he decided to play along the way. Last was the pig, whose journey included a stop to eat and a nap thereafter. As for the cat, the Emperor declared the contest finished before its arrival. And so is the folk legend which fixes the twelve animal signs and their order for the Chinese Zodiac.





BLANCPAIN DEVISED A MECHANISM TO DISPLAY THE COMPLEX 60 YEAR CYCLE OF ZODIAC, ELEMENTS, AND YIN/YANG.

The Chinese Zodiac indication is intimately tied to the subdial located at 3 o'clock which contains the Elements and Yin/ Yang indications. At the center of the subdial is the universal symbol of Yin/Yang. According to Taoist doctrine, Yin/Yang are fundamental concepts. They represent opposites that must be in harmonious balance. In the symbol, Yin is the area of white, Yang the area of black. Arrayed vertically, Yin is the sky and Yang the earth. The entirety of the circle represents the universe and the two "teardrops" intimately wound around each other symbolize that in nature opposites are bonded, intertwined and complement each other. The Yin and Yang, in turn, link to five separate Elements that, according to Chinese mythology, comprise the five basic building blocks of all beings in the universe: wood, fire, earth, metal and water. Each of these Elements has both a Yin and a Yang property. The scale showing the symbol of each of the Elements is on the inner diameter of the subdial just outside the Yin/Yang circle and the Yin and Yang properties for each are written on the outer diameter of subdial's circle. The duration of each of the Elements in the calendar is two years; the first year Yang (which possess the positive

polarity), the second Yin (negative polarity). Thus, the first year of wood (Yang) relates to dry wood; the second year (Yin) carries the notion of fresh wood. Similarly, the first year of fire (Yang) symbolizes a blazing fire while the second year (Yin) one which is extinguished. With five Elements and two years for each, the hand for the subdial turns once every ten years.

The yearly changing of the Chinese Zodiac indication shown in the window at 12 o'clock is linked to the Element/ Ying/Yang display. The full cycle of the linked Zodiac/Element/ Yin/Yang spans 60 years. Set out on the chart at right is the most current part of the cycle. Reading the chart, 2013 is the Zodiac year of the snake, with the Element water/Yin. That will be followed in 2014 by the horse (remember the trick that the sent the snake across the line before the horse), with the Element wood/Yang and in 2015 by the goat, Element wood (two years for each element)/Yin. And so forth. The entire 60 year cycle can be directly read on the face of the Villeret Calendrier Chinois Traditionnel using the Zodiac window and the Element/Yin/Yang subdial.



Sexagenary Cycle

Years		Zodiac signs	Elements	Yin/Yang	
2012	2072	Dragon 🥰	Water 7	Yang	
2013	2073	Snake &	Water 7	Yin	养
2014	2074	Horse	Wood 🛧	Yang	中
2015	2075	Goat	wood /	Yin	>
2016	2076	Monkey 📆	Fire 火	Yang	兲
2017	2077	Rooster Y		Yin	\uparrow

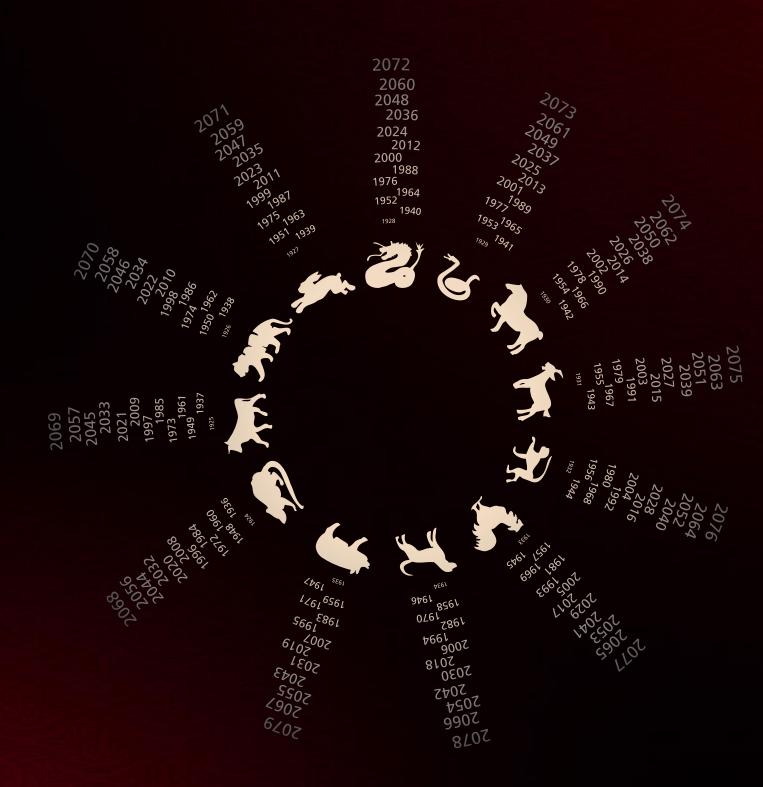


In order to construct a mechanism that could record a 60 year cycle presenting three different elements, Blancpain's movement designers found a solution based upon a combination of gears. As the Zodiac cycle consists of twelve different signs, its principle component is a twelve tooth gear. In turn, each change of Zodiac gear is called upon to command a change of a ten tooth gear which carries the Element/Yin/Yang hand. A full revolution of the Zodiac gear will cause the ten tooth gear to turn two teeth past a full revolution. Since four more revolutions of the twelve tooth gear are needed to bring both the twelve tooth and the ten tooth gears back to the same position as at the start, a full 60 year cycle is implemented. Recall that for a traditional Gregorian perpetual calendar, the cycle is one of but four years. In the classic method of construction that four year cycle can be more easily implemented with but one gear that turns once every four years.

Equally daunting was the development of a method to set the watch on the cycle. A traditional corrector was deemed too cumbersome when perhaps as many as 59 corrections would be required to set the watch for the correct Zodiac/Element/ Yin/Yang. Blancpain, thus, implemented the setting via the crown. The owner can easily spin the crown moving these indications forward rapidly to arrive at the right spot in the cycle.

Next on our tour of the Chinese calendar displays is the subdial at 9 o'clock bearing the Chinese date, month and leap month indications. The inner ring of the subdial is marked with the symbols for the Chinese months; the outer ring with the symbols for the days. In many ways, this subdial is the heart of the Chinese calendar. Scholars term the Chinese calendar system as "lunisolar". An easy way to summarize the concept of a lunisolar calendar is to think of it as one that uses lunar months as the basic calendar unit. By contrast, the Gregorian calendar uses solar days as the basic unit. Both systems share common ground in their object, the accurate calculation of the tropical year. In the case of the Gregorian calendar this is the determination of the equinoxes (the two times of the year





THE CHINESE CALENDAR IS "LUNISOLAR" WITH CORRECTIONS IN THE FORM OF LEAP MONTHS AND ADJUSTMENTS TO THE LENGTH OF MONTHS.

when day and night are of equal length). The Chinese calendar similarly focuses upon a solar phenomenon, the winter solstice. In both the case of Gregorian and Chinese calendars, there are errors which accumulate over time which must be corrected periodically. As each normal Gregorian year is approximately six hours shorter than the solar year (which, of course, determines when the equinoxes will occur), the actual date of the equinoxes moves approximately a quarter of a day later each year. The solution is the insertion of one day every four years (the six hour error multiplied by four), the leap year. In similar fashion, the Chinese calendar, based upon lunar months, is about 11 days too short if not corrected. As the Gregorian calendar adds one day each leap year, the Chinese calendar adds an occasional leap month to bring the calendar in line with the winter solstice. The Chinese calendar is vastly more complicated, however, in that not only is there a periodic addition of a leap month (which as we shall see can occur at any time of

the year), but the length of the months themselves varies over time. Chinese months are termed "synodic" as they are meant to reflect the cycle of the moon. However, the mean synodic month is 29.53 days in length. In order to approximate that lunar cycle, the Chinese calendar is composed of months of 29 and 30 days, split approximately in half, that is to say in a given year there will be roughly an equal number of big months as little ones. Further complicating matters, the lengths of the months are not constant year to year. A given month may be short during some years and long on others following an irregular pattern. Nor is the spacing of long and short months evenly distributed. Since the length of the month is determined by a lunar cycle, it is possible, depending on the year, to have up to four long months in a row or three short months in sequence. Contrast this with the Gregorian system where except for February, the length of every month remains constant without regard to the year.



BLANCPAL

Thus, for the month display, Blancpain had to provide a means for correcting the 29 day months whenever they occur, that is to say, to advance the calendar to the next month after the 29th day. For this Blancpain has fitted the Villeret Calendrier Chinois Traditionnel with a corrector under the lugs dedicated to the Chinese date. Blancpain's exclusive and patented under lug corrector system is ideally suited to an irregularly occurring calendar. This is because it can be actuated with a finger tip. Contrast the ease of finger tip correction with standard caseside correctors which require use of a tool (and which incidentally risks scratching the flanks of the case if the tool slips in the user's hand). There is a second added bonus that comes with Blancpain's under lug correctors, elegant refinement in the sides of the case, unmarred by the presence of corrector dimples. As the name suggests, the under lug correctors are neatly tucked out of sight under the lugs.

The second indication on the 9 o'clock subdial is that of the Chinese months. Here, too, account must be taken for an additional month which occurs irregularly in some years. According to the Chinese calendar system, the additional or "leap month" is added to the calendar by repeating a month. Leap months occur most often after the third, fourth, fifth, sixth or seventh month of the year. On the other side of the coin, only rarely is there is a leap month after the twelfth month of the year. Indeed, according to current calculations, the next time for there to be a leap month after the twelfth month of the year won't roll around until 3358. Even that estimate is somewhat provisional in that calculations of leap months more than 100 years into the future are highly uncertain. There even occurs uncertainty in more current determinations so that scholars have concluded that an error was made in monthly calculations for the year 1651. To account for the occurrence of leap months





THIS VILLERET SPANS EAST-WEST OFFERING A GREGORIAN DATE AND MOON PHASE INDICATIONS.

two features were incorporated into the Villeret's calendar mechanism. First is a dedicated under lug corrector that will cause a month to repeat. However, merely providing a means to command a leap month is, in and of itself, insufficient. Blancpain had to devise a means to indicate on the dial that the displayed month is a leap month. For this, a small window is incorporated within the subdial at the 9 o'clock position. When a leap month occurs and the leap month corrector has been actuated, a red dot appears in the window. At the end of the leap month, when the calendar advances, the red dot disappears. Of course, there is a separate under lug corrector for the initial setting of the month or for resetting when the watch has run down.

There is one respect in which the irregularities of the Chinese calendar, when properly corrected, come together for

one convenient annual automatic change. Provided that corrections during the course of the year have been made for the leap month and short/long months, the change of the last month of the year to the first month will occur under normal running of the watch on the day of the Chinese New Year. The calendar mechanism of the Villeret, will then automatically advance the Zodiac/Element/Yin/Yang displays for the New Year.

The Villeret Calendrier Chinois Traditionnel spans East-West with two traditional Western Calendar indications. The first is Gregorian date. In common with Blancpain's other Villeret moon phase watches, the date is shown by a central hand which reads onto a 31 day scale. Two centuries-old watchmaking tradition is respected in using a serpentine form for the Gregorian date hand. This form was originally developed in order to distinguish the hand for a supplemental indication,



TO FACILITATE CORRECTIONS IN THE TWO CALENDARS, BLANCPAIN HAS INCORPORATED FIVE OF ITS PATENTED UNDER LUG CORRECTORS.

such as a date, from the principal hour and minute hands. To further ease legibility the hand is fashioned in blued steel. The Gregorian date also has a dedicated corrector under the lugs.

The second classic calendar display is that of the moon phase. It, as well, is set initially by an under lug corrector.

If you have been keeping track, counting the Chinese and Gregorian calendar elements set via under lug correctors, the tally at this point has reached five. As there are only four lugs, the fifth under lug corrector is neatly tucked away in the case back in the 9 o'clock position. There is one characteristics that all of these indications and their setting mechanisms have in common; they all can be actuated at any time of the day or night without risk of harming the complex calendar mechanism. Blancpain has been a pioneer in the design of secure movement mechanisms; that is to say movements that can be

manually manipulated by the user without risk of damage. Particularly in the case of calendar mechanisms, the industry norm is to issue instructions to the user warning that there are times of the day when the calendar cannot be adjusted. These injunctions, usually set out in bold print in user manuals, are made necessary because, if an adjustment is made during the forbidden hours, the delicate gears within the movement that have become engaged to initiate a change in an indication are likely to be broken when forced by manual intervention. There are no such risks with Villeret Calendrier Chinois Traditionnel since each of the under lug correctors, when pushed, first disconnects the portion of the movement which would be engaged to advance the indication automatically with the running of the watch removing the possibility that the manual change will conflict with an automatic advance. In this fashion the intricate calendar mechanism is fully secured and protected. There is one final touch which Blancpain has brought to aid in

THE BASE CALIBER INCORPORATES ALL OF BLANCPAIN'S RECENT MOVEMENT ADVANCES.

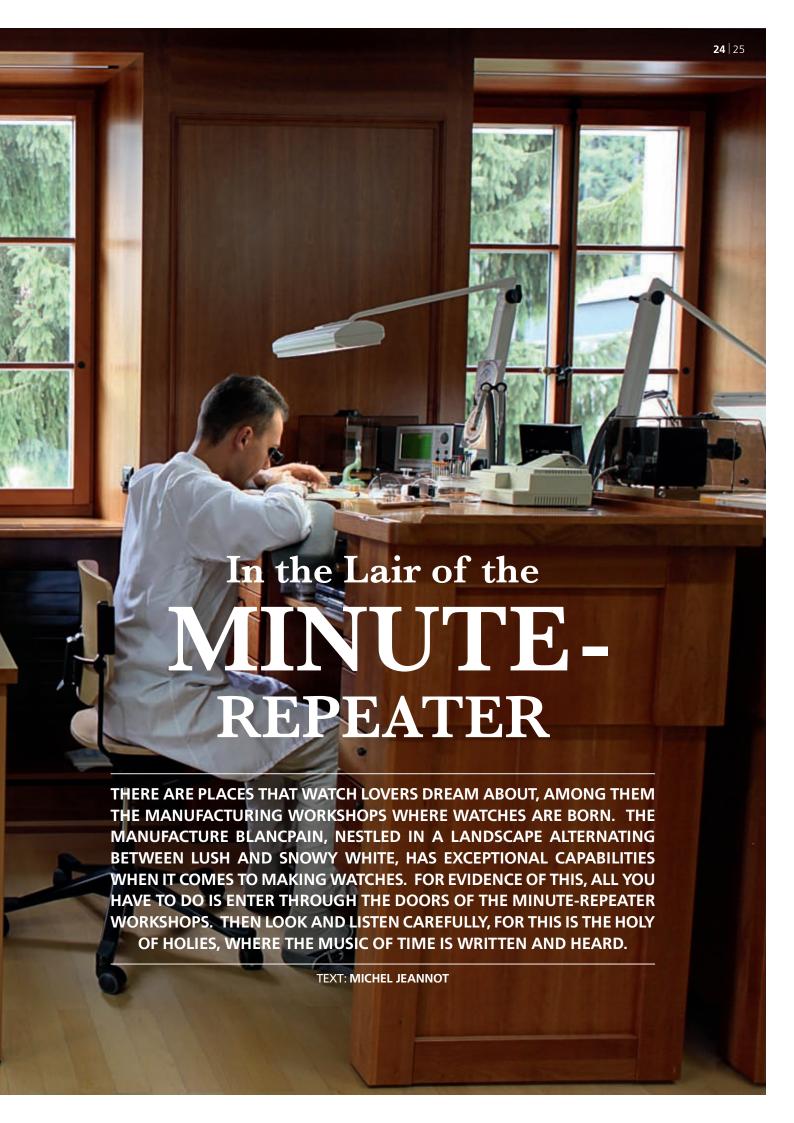
the setting of the calendar: an iPad/iPhone application which daily shows the correct indications eliminating the need to search and consult other sources.

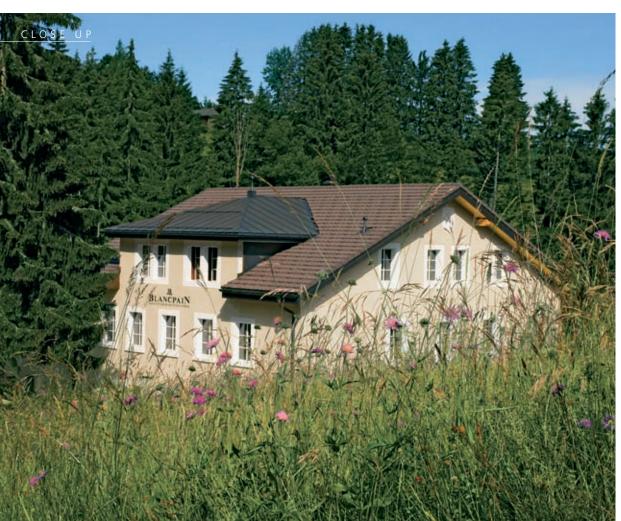
The base caliber of the Villeret Calendrier Chinois Traditionnel incorporates all of Blancpain's recent movement advances: three main spring barrels connected in series, a free sprung titanium balance wheel with gold inertial regulating screws. Together these achieve a full seven day power reserve.

The Villeret Calendrier Chinois Traditionnel is offered in two metals, red gold and platinum. Both versions feature fully fired enamel dials, unique in that they include applied indexes. The platinum versions will be issued in limited series of 20 pieces per year, each marked with the Chinese Zodiac sign for the year in which the watch was produced. The red gold versions are unlimited. •











At a watch manufacturer, the complications workshops are a privileged zone where exceptional skills are brought together. Many watchmakers, even the most junior, dream of working there one day. It would be the high point of their careers. And in the world of complications, beyond the tourbillons, perpetual calendars and equations of time, one workshop reigns in isolation above the rest. It's where they make the minute-repeaters. Enter this sanctuary on tiptoe; hold your breath and you might hear the gentle strike of the hours, quarters and minutes.

Dong! Dong! Dong! Ding-dong! Ding-dong! Ding! Ding! Ding! Ding! Ding! It's an ancient melody from an unelectrified age when the pocket-watch on the bedside table told you the time without you having to light a candle. The fortunate owners of these mechanical and acoustic marvels had only to slide a bolt on the watchcase for the minute-repeater to deliver its message of sound. The format has not changed: the hours are struck in low notes, the minutes are sounded in high notes after double strikes of high and low notes indicating the quarters. You thus have to count the number of hours struck (4), add the two quarters (half an hour) and then the strike of five minutes to arrive at a time of 04:35—rather too early to get up.

Ready in Five to Six Weeks

In Le Brassus, the complications workshops comprise 18 people under the responsibility of Mustapha Ahouani. This Frenchman of Moroccan origin is a complete watchmaker if there ever was one and can carry out practically every watchmaking task. Even the most complicated watches that come into his hands hold no secrets from him. The average age of his team members is 33 to 34 years old, the youngest being 25: "It's a young age to be working in the complications workshops because you need a lot of experience to cope with these kinds of





THE COMPLICATIONS WORKSHOPS ARE A PRIVILEGED ZONE WHERE EXCEPTIONAL SKILLS ARE BROUGHT TOGETHER.

mechanisms. However, it is possible. It all depends on the individual, their abilities, skills and motivation. In any case you have to be enthusiastic. You can take five or six weeks to make the product, sometimes longer. You need a lot of patience and dexterity. And to get this far you also need to have come across the right people throughout your training period."

From the Baseplate up

His deputy, Laurent Salomon, agrees, convinced that he too has made the right contacts at the right time. The people who transmit the virus, take you in their trust, give you the opportunity to develop and make you want to go further, are of the greatest importance because it's all about handing down knowledge and skills. Laurent is in charge of the minute-repeater and he cannot say enough about the subject. How does a watchmaker get to work on the queen of complications? "It's a long process. You start by putting together a simple movement, and you progress carefully to adjusting the watch. Then you tackle the additional plates, for the simple date, the annual calendar and the perpetual calendar. Then you go onto the tourbillon and maybe to the running equation of time. When you get to the repeating mechanisms you've reached the top. Places have to be earned in this specialty because there are few companies in the watch industry that really make repeaters from A to Z. We're fortunate here because we build them from the baseplate up."





EACH CRAFTSMAN HAS HIS KNACK, HIS STYLE AND HIS EAR; THUS EVERY MINUTE-REPEATER IS IN A WAY UNIQUE.

All in all, six watchmakers at Le Brassus are involved with minute-repeaters in different capacities. Four of them—Romain, Félicien, Laurent and Michaël—handle production, while Norbert ensures the after-sales service and the sixth member, Georg, also works in after-sales, but specifically on the supercomplicated 1735 model. Only 30 of these watches were made, but maintaining them understandably takes time, indeed the whole time of an ultra-specialized watchmaker. "Unfortunately, some clients treat them as if they were sports watches, and they are not waterproof," Mustapha Ahouani points out. "They sometimes come back completely rusted inside and they take six months to be restored. We have the same problem with the so-called simple traditional minute-repeaters, where water-resistance was not an objective—except for a few small series—which seems reasonable if you want a better sound quality. We achieve this with our latest caliber, but you have to consider that a sealed case for a repeating watch is much more difficult to realize."

Tightly Knit Team

The team is small and tightly knit. If you go by its rate of production, the nature of its task, the care taken in the slightest detail, not only for its own sake but also for essential functional reasons, you find yourself in a bygone age. That impression is strengthened by the fact each piece is built from scratch, which is today rare among watch manufacturers. The concept is not without interest, and if the advantages are apparent, so are the drawbacks





of working in a time capsule. But the fact remains that if a minute-repeater fashioned entirely by a single watchmaker is a guarantee of its quality, the methods involved are incompatible with the widespread search for productivity.

Each craftsman has his knack, his style and his ear; thus every minute-repeater is in a way unique. Does that mean its creator will recognize it when it returns for a service? The head of the complications workshops answers with a smile: "The watchmaker who assembled it will recognize it for sure. Yet on the whole it won't be any different from another. What we emphasize here is a consistent process, methodology and the handing down of knowledge that sets out and explains what you have to do in each operation from the assembly of subcomponents to the final casing up. The basic work has to be identical. Thereafter you will find the watchmaker's personal touch, in a decoration for example or in the various widths of a chamfer."

Ensuring the Survival of Skills

The purpose of this approach based on dialogue and the exchange of ideas is to ensure the consistent and unfailing quality of all the watches, and to sustain the uniformity of production right to the top of the pyramid. It's also a way of keeping skills alive beyond the product. The mentality in the workshops has changed. In the old days, everyone guarded their little secrets, which they took with them into retirement. Today the secrets are uncloaked and the order of the day is the sharing of knowledge, information, observations and ideas. "There are no longer any secrets," declares the head of complications. "Sharing knowledge in a small team creates trust and a spirit of cohesion and harmony that undoubtedly contribute to the quality of the end product."







After-Sales Service, the True Measure

The production of complicated watches and their after-sales service are closely interwoven in Le Brassus. There are several reasons for this. The after-sales service is the absolute measure of the quality of workmanship delivered. It is a mine of very useful information that enables watchmakers to constantly improve the quality of their pieces, develop a caliber or model and to bring them to life. When a product is sent back, it doesn't necessarily mean an assembly error. It could also indicate a fundamental technical problem in the design itself. Or else it could be the result of wear, which might involve the type of material selected.

The real life of a watch on the wrist over time is the most unforgiving of tests. Analysis and diagnosis by the specialists in the complications workshops provide the information going back all the way upstream and enable the constant improvement of new products.

The production and after-sales service are closely intertwined for another practical reason. The work is organized to this purpose and demands flexibility from the complications watch-maker. The Blancpain production facility in Le Sentier provides him with a kit of all the parts he needs to assemble the caliber in his care from A to Z. The job will take him one or several weeks, depending on the caliber, and five or six weeks for a minute-repeater. He will immerse

WHY IS THE MINUTE-REPEATER SUCH A DIFFICULT COMPLICATION TO DEAL WITH?

himself completely in his task, calmly and steadily going through each stage with the concentration demanded by these high-grade mechanisms. But if there's an emergency he will put his production task aside to meet the more critical demand. "When a recent model that's still under guarantee is returned, then we have to react fast so we can give the client his watch back as soon as possible. Often it's a trivial matter. It could be a technical problem or damage because the watch has been dropped."

The repair times vary of course according to the type of work needed. "Typically, as in the case of a Le Brassus Carrousel Répétition Minutes model that we received today, we estimate that it will take a couple of weeks, including the technical verifications, inspections and checking the power reserve. Paradoxically, for this type of product, the watchmaker will spend far less time working on it—three or four days—than the time subsequently taken to carry out the checks." Service quality comes at this cost, and the verification process is essential. This means that sometimes the clients have to champ at the bit, but if they are true aficionados they will understand what's involved in this service. Nevertheless, the main rule is that the watch must be returned as soon as possible, perfectly repaired with the case cleaned and polished so that the owner once more experiences the same thrill of buying a new watch.

The North Face of the Eiger

Why is the minute-repeater such a difficult complication to deal with? Whether it involves building one or repairing it later, it is always put into the hands of a seasoned and experienced watchmaker. In the end, as in the case of the Le Brassus Carrousel Répétition Minutes, it has to turn out as a well-adjusted instrument of 450 perfectly functioning components. Of course, not everyone can do the job. Every watchmaker knows this and has a deep respect for the professional performance of the specialists in this complication. Similarly, alpinists and mountain guides esteem those who tackle the north face of the Eiger as true connoisseurs.





THE MAIN DIFFICULTY OF THIS GREAT COMPLICATION RESIDES NOT ONLY IN THE NUMBER OF PARTS BUT ALSO IN THEIR NATURE AND SIZE.

Behind each delivered watch has been an adventure that takes over the mind of the craftsman for emotion-packed weeks of deep satisfaction and disappointments. There are so many difficulties to overcome, involving going back a hundred times over the same work, dismantling laboriously constructed mechanisms, building them up again, and readjusting everything. That is the way of the game, but it is not always easy on the mind, as Laurent recalls: "Sometimes I used to get home in the evening in despair and tormented by the problem to be solved. But with experience you realize that you always end up finding the answer, so you put the problem in its context and it becomes easier for those around you. We don't show it, but in our hearts we continue to think about it. I expect that applies to all of us in the workshop. We all dreamed of doing our jobs at this level, we are all committed and perhaps we pay the price—but with no regrets."

The Major Difficulty

The main difficulty of this great complication that combines a watch mechanism with a chime, resides not only in the number of parts but also in their nature and size. The basic challenge is to sustain such intricate and complex machinery within the dimensions of an elegant time-piece that can be worn on the wrist. But how does it work? The basic principle is that when you want to hear what time it is, you push the sliding bolt that you can see on the caseband





of practically every minute-repeater. By doing this, you load a spring that, when released, provides the energy for the chime to play its part and compose its message in sound. It must be remembered that the minute-repeater takes no extra energy from the basic movement, leaving it free to power other, often associated, functions. The movement can be manually wound or selfwinding and feature a display of automatons.

Feeling Right

With your thumb, you have thus provided enough energy for the chiming mechanism, which uses it immediately to activate the hammers that strike the gongs. However, to do this properly and to strike the gongs the right number of times to the minute, the true time has to be found mechanically. This is the role of the feelers, thin levers that drop on the star wheel and snail cams for the hours, quarters and minutes that rotate according to the time. As the specialists at Blancpain's describe it: "A minute-repeater is a matter of angular movements. The feeler has to move through wider or smaller angles according to the time to be struck." This maneuver takes less time than it does to describe, because as soon as the bolt is released the repeater starts striking the hours, quarters and minutes.

This mechanism is extremely tricky to construct because it demands absolute precision and the components are very delicate. The parts in the kit come into contact when they are assembled. "We adjust them together to achieve the minimum amount of play between them." But why can't they be made to the right size in the first place? "That is not possible because at that scale we are at the production tolerances of more or less so many microns. The final adjustment of each part has to be done by removing the right amount of material by hand, piece by piece."





The Gift-Pack of Components

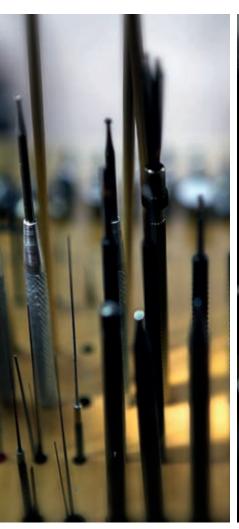
The watchmaker who assembles minute-repeaters has a panoply of files of various fineness as well as a number of specific tools that are not used for ordinary watches. All the components are systematically burnished, a process that hardens the metal so that it doesn't wear out prematurely. "If we didn't burnish the gathering pallets, for example, they would break after ten goes," Laurent Salomon declares before going on to describe the various assembly stages, starting with the gift-pack of parts from Le Sentier. The parts are initially checked, although some of them, like the bridges for example, have already been decorated and will not be altered by the watchmaker. He will nevertheless be responsible for the straight-graining or chamfering of the other parts after having made the three-dimensional adjustments.

The job starts with an assessment of the surfaces of the springs, followed by the assembly of a mechanism such as the governor for the striking rate. The aim is to achieve the minimum amount of play. The watchmaker then goes on to assemble another mechanical complication, followed by another, and so forth. The parts are polished in turn, each with a special paste according to the material it's made of.

Build and Dismantle

Sometimes a sub-assembly has to be rebuilt, for example when it doesn't fit properly in the next stage of assembly. Then you have to dismantle it and start over. The process is carried out with extreme care in successive steps.

Every time a component of a minute-repeater is fitted, it has to be adjusted. "With the gathering pallets for example, the holes are always smaller than the shafts and the watch-





maker has to make them fit. There is always some material to be removed, so that he can adjust the right amount of clearance for the best security. The same goes for the star wheels which are corrected with a very precise reamer to the nearest micron."

It takes almost a week to put together all the sub-assemblies. Then comes the assembly of the movement as a whole, which involves putting together all the pre-assembled components with the winding stem, the pinions, the setting wheels and the adjustment of all the "dry" clearances, for at this stage nothing is yet lubricated.

The next stage involves the balance-wheel fitted on a spring with a Breguet overcoil. After the going train is put into place and oiled, the basic movement can be adjusted, fitted with a date, a tourbillon, whether manually wound or selfwinding. Once the rate of the movement is within the limits in the six conventional timing positions, the watchmaker can at last tackle the most interesting part—the mechanism of the minute-repeater itself.

The World of Sound

Three weeks have already gone by and the assembly continues. The components are now adjusted against each other one by one. This is referred to as assembly "in the gray," fitting all the elements to the correct clearances and amount of play.

Ding! Dong! Between each strike there must be a gap of at least two gong strokes: that's the rule. The pitch of the note depends on the length of the gong. So you can guess that it's a matter of cutting it down to size. "We are not trying to play any particular note," Laurent points out. "We aim for the right gap between them. When we have that we can start tuning the

NOTHING IS SURE UNTIL THE LAST MOMENT, THERE ARE NO SHORT CUTS.

gongs. The gong must be able to vibrate freely for a crystal-clear sound. A tin-pan noise is unacceptable. We also have to give the chime enough volume." To achieve this, the gongs, which are curved steel rods, are filed at the base of the holding blocks to which they are welded. The quality of the weld is crucial; it has to be impeccable. Similarly the gong-holder must fit perfectly against the movement and be absolutely level. The screws must also be without blemish because when it comes to sound, excellence is in the details.

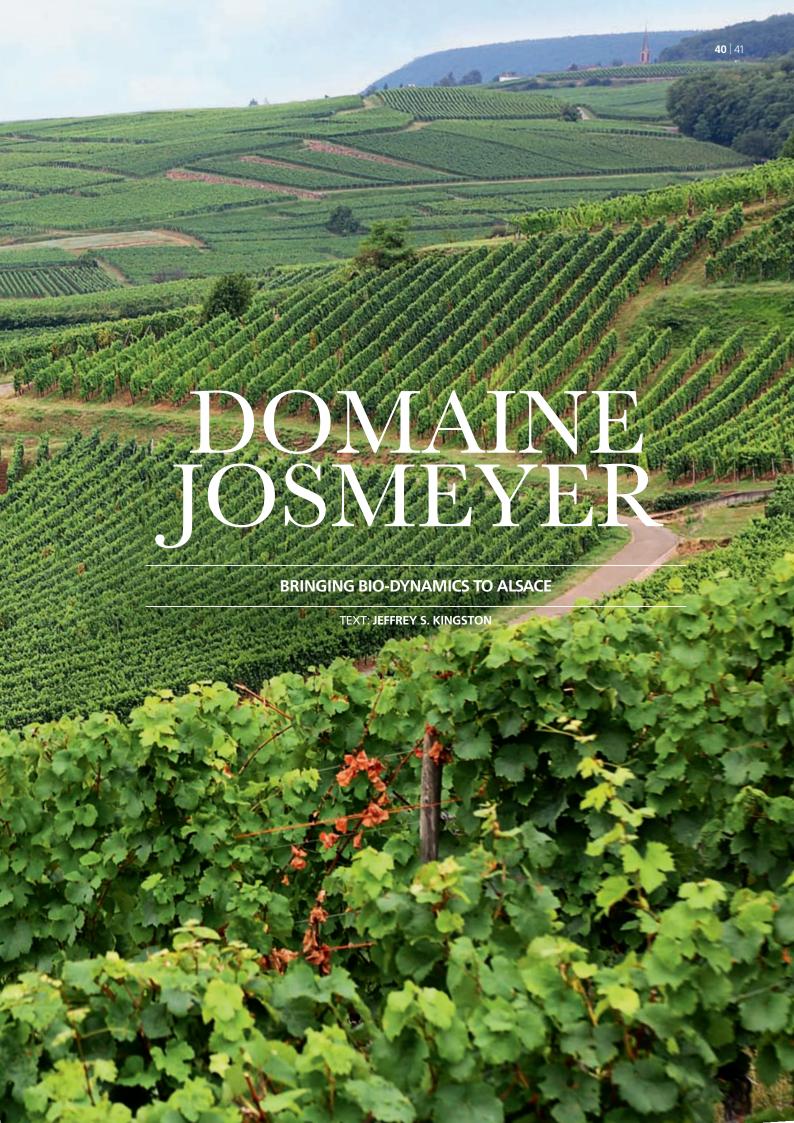
The so-called cathedral gong is distinguished by its length. While ordinary gongs are somewhat short of the circumference of the movement, cathedral gongs go around it one and a half times at least. The result is a much fuller sound. And should the sound be a little dull, the pinning-point of the gong is cut off at an angle.

When all that is done, the movement is fully dismantled, washed, reassembled and oiled. It will be fitted with hands and cased up. Tension runs high. The minute-repeater has been listened to with attentive ears before being cased up. It will be heard again within its case—a completely different environment—and this major step can always bring more surprises. A problem with the hands or a false note means that it has to be done over again.

Nothing is sure until the last moment, there are no short cuts. The watchmakers in the minute-repeater workshops know this from experience. Yet they accept this uncertainty as one of the glories of their craft. •











Striding through his vineyard on the privileged and coveted upper slopes of the Grand Cru Hengst vineyard, which rises up between the Alsatian villages of Wettolsheim and Wintzenheim, Josmeyer wine grower and Managing Director Christophe Ehrhart is multitasking. With only three weeks remaining before the planned commencement of the harvest, he is alternately grabbing fistfuls of the burnt orange colored limestone rich soil to gage its water content after recent rain, assessing the health of now plump Riesling clusters and the leaves shielding them from a few moments of sun before threatened new rain arrives, and rapidly diagnosing the trauma which has befallen one vine. There is nothing escaping his practiced eye.

All the while he is fielding questions peppered upon him about the new, in the time scales of French winemaking, Grand Cru system which has been established in Alsace. There is no shortage of irony sewn into the discussion. Several hundred yards downslope, adjacent to another of Domaine Josmeyer's parcels, this one planted in Auxerrois and featured in a bottling demoninated "H", Ehrhart points out a marker left from the era of Roman winemaking on this hill. The irony is not that Romans made wine here in the fourth century and that fine wine has been made for centuries ever since, it is that





DOMAINE JOSMEYER STARS COME FROM THE PRESTIGIOUS GRAND CRU BRAND AND HENGST VINEYARDS.

the French only got around to classifying this and fifty other Alsatian vineyards as Grand Cru less than 30 years ago.

It seems that the new Grand Cru designations were delayed as a result of an overabundance of democracy. Indeed, the first Grand Cru Commission was established in the region in 1973. Its efforts were for naught as there was no agreement which could be reached on which parcels would be anointed with the prized designation signifying them as better than all the rest. More success came two years later in 1975, but those classifications and the accompanying rules did not come into force until 1983. Plenty of time for the dissidents to come to terms with the new order. Ehrhart who is the current Vice President of the Grand Cru Commission is upbeat about the progress being made. Fifty one areas have been designated as Grand Cru; his Domaine Josmeyer is fortunate that its 26 total hectares of vineyard holdings include large holdings in two of them, Hengst and Brand. Along with

the identification of the 51 Grand Cru areas, rules have been established on the grapes which qualify for bottle labeling as a Grand Cru: Riesling, Gewürztraminer, Pinot Gris and Muscat d'Alsace. Asked to predict whether the present trajectory will take the system further to resemble, for example Burgundy, where not only are Grand Cru vineyards identified, but as well, Premier Cru vineyards as being perhaps a notch below, but still superior in quality, Ehrhart shrugs his shoulders. Similar shrugs on questions about subdividing the relatively large Grand Cru vineyards, into smaller named parcels, again a la Burgundy, so as to allow for there to be more particular expressions of terroir or place.

The ongoing evolution of the Grand Cru system in Alsace aside, Ehrhart's Josmeyer is perfectly positioned. Officially all of the Grand Cru vineyards are equal. Unofficially, three or four have established themselves as the best of the Grand Crus and two of those among the best are Hengst and Brand





LED BY A TRIO: CÉLINE AND ISABELLE MEYER AND CHRISTOPHE EHRHART, HERE TOGETHER WITH JEAN MEYER, THE SISTERS' FATHER.

which are the stars of Josmeyer's range of wines (others of the Grand Crus are working to express more fully their potential). As the crow flies, Josmeyer's Brand and Hengst parcels are separated by a mere 3 or 4 kilometers. But, despite close proximity these two vineyards are vastly different from each other. The difference is not in exposure, as both face the south, but in soil. Brand's soil is dominated by sandy decomposed granite. Its wines tend to be crystalline and brightly defined. Ehrhart prefers the French term "ciselé", which means "carved". The richer Hengst soil imparts a very different character. Its dense limestone make up leads to greater richness and power. Both, however, benefit from a peculiar microclimate. As Ehrhart surveys the valley, cradling Wintzenheim where Josmeyer's cave is located, and looking across the valley towards Brand on the opposite hill, he points out a precipitation anomaly. The shape of the hills leading up valley westward toward Munster functions as a rain blocker. At times when drenching rain may fall in Munster, or toward the





north in Kaysersberg or 30 kilometers to the east in Germany, Brand and Hengst will be dry. Its microclimate experiences one third the rainfall of surrounding areas, which at harvest time can be a savior of quality.

Domaine Josmeyer is very much a family operation which has existed for four generations since its founding in 1854. The Domaine is now led by a triumvirate: two Meyer sisters, Isabelle and Céline, and Ehrhart, who came to the Domaine in 1995 through marriage to Isabelle. Although now divorced from Isabelle, there is perfect harmony among the three in their division of labors and management of Josmeyer. Christophe takes charge of the vineyards and is Managing Director. Isabelle is the winemaker. Céline is President of Josmeyer and tends to finance and administration. Watching the three interact with each other and parade of tourists cruising tasting rooms on a rainy weekend was illuminating in revealing their love of their métier and their shared passion for their wines. Case in point—a young couple from Brazil, who spoke no French entered the tasting room eager to taste the wines. It was plainly evident they had no intention to buy even so much as a single bottle. Nonetheless, they were warmly welcomed, offered a generous selection of wines to sample, and, patiently bridging language gaps, their questions were enthusiastically answered.

A measure of the three's devotion to the Domaine and the quality of their wines is their near religious fervor about their bio-dynamic techniques which have been practiced since 1998. There is a vast gulf which currently divides vineyard practices, not only in France but worldwide. The modernists have embraced technology in all of its glory. Chemical analyses, insecticides, herbicides, anti-fungal chemicals, artificial fertilizers are all central to their management of the vineyard. If a vine looks stressed "give it a pill", not literally of course, but figuratively. Every malady has a chemical cure. Bio-dynamics occupies a completely opposite universe. First principle: no use of chemical products in the vineyards. Period. Not a little bit, not sometimes, never. Vineyard management becomes somewhat akin to organic farming. Ehrhart, indeed, is a confectioner of his own compost fertilizer. His brew is a mix of six different herbs and bark plus the left over lees and stems which he believes provide ideal nutrition for the vines. Camomile, oak bark, stinging nettle etc. compost together for a year before being broadcast into the vineyards.

Josmeyer takes things, however, even one step further from the modernists. This is the bio-dynamics script which is nearly mystical in its prescriptions. Bio-dynamics call for a series of practices, the description of which on the surface might be taken as fanciful. The steps are numbered from 500 to



509. Take, for example, bio-dynamics step 500. It calls for taking a hollow cow's horn, stuffing it with a manure mixture and burying the horn in the vineyard in the late fall. Thereafter, in the spring, the stuffed horn is to be exhumed and the stuffing used, diluted of course, as a spray on the soil of the vineyard. Many an eyebrow arches as this and other of the bio-dynamics rituals are recited. However, there is some science which backs up the practice. The cow's horn provides an ideal environment for the growth of a diverse flora of pro-biotic bacteria. Analysis of the mixture resulting from the stuffing and burial shows an unusually rich concentration of such bacteria. Do these rules produce a measurably better quantity and quality of helpful bacteria than say for example breeding in petri dishes at a pharmaceutical house? No one knows. Fertile ground, one might argue for scientific study. But Josmeyer and other disciples, such as the renowned Domaine Leflaive in Puligny Montrachet (whose wines are among the most sought after in the world) are strident in their conviction that the methods not only work but are vital to the quality of their wines.

Definitive peer reviewed scientific studies or no, there is one argument which Ehrhart advances which possesses logical gravitas. Overuse of chemicals in the vineyard, with vignerons resorting to chemicals like a hypochondriac let loose in THE BIO-DYNAMIC SCRIPT IS NEARLY MYSTICAL IN ITS IMPERITIVES.



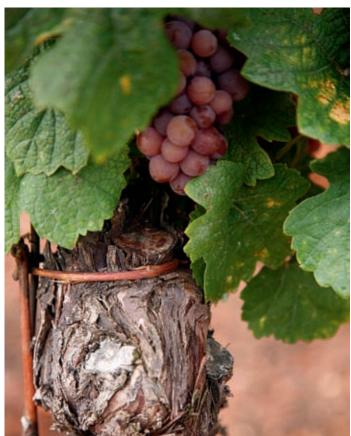
a pharmacy is fraught with peril. Successive application of a multitude of products obscures the cause of any malady. Ehrhart points to one stressed vine in the Hengst vineyard. Examining closely he can see the signs of a mushroom invasion which has penetrated the stalk and is progressing downward toward the roots. There is compelling logic to his argument that had he been treating this vine with a variety of products he would have no idea of the cause. Too much of a product? Too little? If so which one?

The devotion to natural techniques extends from the vine-yards to the Josmeyer cave. All of the fruit is harvested by hand and upon arrival and placement in the cuves given a long and gentle pressing, as much as 12 hours, depending on the vintage. From there after fermentation, all the wines, and Josmeyer production includes Riesling, Gewürztraminer, Pinot Gris, Auxerrois, and late harvest Riesling, are transferred to large old oak vats for nine months. Josmeyer records the moon phase when wines are placed in the cuves, and transfers to bottles according the lunar phase. There are minor exceptions such as a small quantity of Pinot Noir which is transferred to traditional, for pinot, oak barrels. Departing ever so slightly from the 100% non-intervention school, Josmeyer does add very small amounts of sulfur to help preserve the wine. Ehrhart holds that it would be foolhardy to eschew sul-

fur completely for wines that are transported outside of Alsace. While a small amount of sulfur may be added, he no longer adds any sugar, a method known as chapitalization, to raise the level of alcohol in the wines. Ehrhart abandoned that practice in 1996.

In common with many top domaines in Alsace, Josmeyer's wines divide into a complex matrix of varietals, vineyards, and cuvees. From the Hengst vineyard come a Grand Cru Riesling, a late harvest Grand Cru Riesling, a Grand Cru Gewürztraminer, a Grand Cru Pinot Gris, and an Auxerrois, which because it is not one of the approved grapes under the Grand Cru rules is labeled as "H". At the top of the Hengst pyramid is the Grand Cru Riesling "Samain", spelled out in Greek letters. The Samain cuvee blinks the rules against specific labeling of a particular parcel within a Grand Cru designated area. Devotees of Burgundy, of course, revel in the specification of particular vineyards such as the difference between Chevalier Montrachet and Batard Montrachet, both Grand Cru vineyards in Puligny. But as the system has not evolved to that stage yet in Alsace, "Samain" is a specification of the harvest time; it just so happens that all of the Samain grapes come from the prized upper slope of Hengst. A similar range of varietals are made from Brand, except that Gewürztraminer is not currently in the mix. At the lower end, Josmeyer offers





THERE IS DEVOTION TO NATURAL TECHNIQUES IN BOTH THE VINEYARDS AND THE CELLARS.





IN A WINE WORLD OF UPWARDLY SPIRALING PRICES, ALSACE OFFERS HAND CRAFTED NOBLE WINES AT A FRACTION OF THE TARIFFS OF OTHER FRENCH APPELLATIONS.

Riesling, Gewürztraminer, Pinot Gris, Muscat, Pinot Noir, Pinot Blanc, and even a Sylvaner from non-Grand Cru parcels.

There is one unifying theme which applies not only to the wide range of Josmeyer wines, but to Alsace in general and it is cause for wine consumers to rejoice. If you have become accustomed to the price folly which now rules Bordeaux, Burgundy and the Rhone, Alsace wine lists will seem as a relic transported from the past. The clock is turned back thirty years offering quality hand crafted noble wines for a fraction of the tariffs in force elsewhere today. Savvy oenophiles take note. •



TASTING NOTES

PINOT BLANC "MISE DU PRINTEMPS" 2011

This is a blend of Pinot Blanc and Auxerrois, labeled at Pinot Blanc. The rules in Alsace demand that all wines labeled with a grape be composed 100% of that grape, except for Pinot Blanc where the percentage can be as low as 1%. This cuvee has a fresh, accessible, clean personality with hints of pineapple fruit. Easy drinking wine.

"H" 2010

Grown entirely in Hengst, the "H" cuvee is forbidden the use of the Grand Cru designation as it is Auxerrois, not yet officially recognized as a Grand Cru grape. Its character resembles a finely crafted Premier Cru Chablis. There is focus and precision in the fruit, balanced with minerality. The weight on the palate is impressive as is the butter in the finish.

RIESLING "LE KOTTABE" 2010

Impressive concentration with bright acidity and exotic spices.

RIESLING GRAND CRU BRAND 2009

Fabulous precision and bright acidity. Complex offering exotic fruits and grapefruit notes. A wine of breed.

RIESLING GRAND CRU HENGST 2009

More powerful, muscular, and round than the Brand. Lime peel nose gives way to grapefruit and butter on the palate. Excellent length.

RIESLING GRAND CRU HENGST SAMAIN 2008

A blockbuster. Impressive power and concentration. Ripeness balanced with perfect acidity. Pineapple and nectarine notes. Note: Samain is not made every year.





DR. GEORGE DERBALIAN

Dr. George Derbalian is a *Lettres du Brassus* wine expert. Dr. Derbalian is the founder of Atherton Wine Imports, located in northern California. Not only has he become one of the United States' premier importers of fine wines, but he has acquired a well-deserved reputation as one of the leading and most respected wine connoisseurs and expert tasters in the world. Each year, Dr. Derbalian travels the wine circuits of Europe and the United States, meeting with wine producers, owners of the finest domains, chef de chai, and other key figures in the world of wine. Throughout the course of each year, he tastes literally many thousands of current production and vintage wines. In this issue Dr. Derbalian and Auberge de l'Ill sommelier, Serge Dubs, introduce us to the wines of Domaine Josmeyer.

PINOT GRIS "LE FROMENTEAU" 2009

Steers away from the "old" overly cloying and sweet pinot gris style. Smoky and meaty. There is a distinct red wine personality to this white.

PINOT GRIS GRAND CRU BRAND 2005

Powerful with bright acidity and focus. Smoke and hints of meat interwoven with sweet ripe peche de vigne. Fabulous length.

PINOT GRIS GRAND CRU BRAND 2001

Fruitier than the 05. Cantalopes and ripe apricots dominate. Impressive weight and concentration.

GEWÜRZTRAMINER "LES FOLASTRIES" 2010

Very sweet, backed with acid and pronounced spices. Spicy nose. A dancer.

GEWÜRZTRAMINER GRAND CRU HENGST 2007

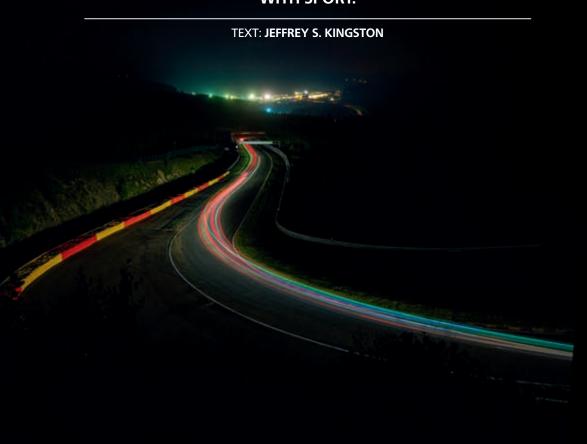
Wave after wave of exotic spices spring from the glass. Impressive ripeness, held in check with brilliant precision and brightness. Extremely long lingering finish of cinnamon.

RIESLING LATE HARVEST GRAND CRU HENGST 2001

Rich deep and ripe with an expressive nose of ripe apricots, pineapples, and exotic spice. Layers of ripe fruit in the mouth elegantly balanced with acid. This late harvest cuvee is not made every year.

L-EVOLUTION R

BLANCPAIN MARRIES ONE OF WATCHMAKING'S MOST DIFFICULT AND DEMANDING COMPLICATIONS WITH SPORT.







"P-E-S-P-E-C-T find out what it means to me". If you follow rock and roll even just a tiny bit, soul music diva Aretha Franklin has certainly seared those lyrics into your brain... all the way up to the final "sock it to me's". She should be hired to cut it loose and belt it out at a watchmakers' convention to, as they say, show a little love on behalf of split second chronograph watchmakers everywhere. Even though these split second constructors labor over one of watchmaking's most exacting, excruciatingly difficult, mind numbingly painstaking to get just right complications, somehow their craft and achievements seem to get short shrift in the grander constellation of complications. Simply not enough respect.

As we are plain spoken on these pages, let's set the record straight. The realization of an *haute horlogerie* split second chronograph (in French watchmaking parlance, a *chronographe à rattrapante*) sits at the apogee of traditional watchmaking's grand complications. Its difficulties and challenges far exceed those of, for example, perpetual calendars or tourbillons which generally provoke far more oohs and aahs from the grand stands.

Enter Blancpain's newest split second chronograph, the L-evolution R. What elevates this new split second complication, and, for that matter, all of Blancpain's split second timepieces to this watchmaking lofty perch? For one thing it begins with the challenges of a finely made chronograph. Axiomatic for watchmakers, and obscure to the public at large, is that constructing a high grade chronograph even before the addition of a split seconds feature is fraught with perils. This is because the chronograph mechanism subjects the running movement to harsh dynamic changes as the chronograph is started and stopped. These operations which occur suddenly and abruptly connect (the chronograph start) and disconnect (at stop) the chronograph componentry to and from the sensitive running train of the watch. At first blush, this can be imagined as simple. When the start operation is commanded, the mechanism of the chronograph itself—the chronograph seconds hand and the counters-is connected to the gear train of the watch, most commonly to the seconds pinion, and when stop is commanded, doing the opposite, namely disconnecting these components. What is fearsomely forbidding is to accomplish these connection and disconnection operations of start/stop (plus of course the third necessity for a chronograph which is the reset to zero) in a way which: 1. Does not disturb the regular time



keeping of the watch (said another way does not produce a significant change in the amplitude of the balance wheel's swing); 2. Provides, every single time without exception, a smooth start and stop to the chronograph hand's motion absent any sudden jumps or jerkiness; 3. Endows the chronograph pushers which are used to command the operations with a silky creamy feel; 4. Permits constant engagement of the chronograph if the owner so desires; 5. Perfectly synchronizes the return to zero of the chronograph seconds hand and the other counters.

That is a tall order that must be satisfied for a chronograph to achieve greatness. Blancpain's column wheel, vertical clutch chronograph, caliber 1185, stands in rarified atmosphere fulfilling all. Connoisseurs of chronographs who have personally tested examples from throughout the price spectrum from the most expensive to the most plebian have experienced this: models from prestigious brands that demonstrate occasional jumps of the seconds hand upon start/stop, suffer from changes in timekeeping with the chronograph running or which forbid constant operation of the chronograph; inexpensive models (and occasionally expensive models that utilize inexpensive movements-a bit of consumer deception in that) that exhibit

SPLIT SECONDS DEMANDS AND DESERVES A SOPHISTICATED CHRONOGRAPH BASE.

harshness when the pushers are actuated and which show changes in timekeeping. As a high complication, split seconds deserves a chronograph base that meets these standards without compromise.

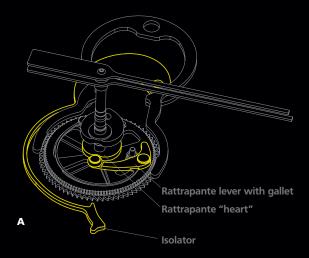
However difficult it is to achieve perfection in the operation of the underlying chronograph, adding the split seconds feature is exponentially more challenging. A description of the split seconds functionality only hints at the magnitude of the step up in difficulty. Instead of one chronograph seconds hand there are two, which must be so perfectly superimposed upon each other so that in normal operation it seems as if there is only one hand. Then when the split is commanded, one of the hands is stopped while the other hand continues to run until a separate stop is commanded. This, of course, allows for the timing of two events. Thereafter, when the split button is pushed again, the formerly stopped hand flies back into position hidden beneath the other hand. This can be done either when the main hand is running or stopped.

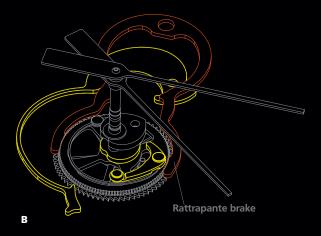
There are two basic systems which lie at the core of implementing the split second function. The first is a means to center the hands together; the second is a braking mechanism that can be applied to one of the hands (the "rattrapante"), leaving

the other (the "trotteuse") free to continue its march around the dial.

Centering the hands. Actually, the centering of the hands together so that they are precisely superimposed one above the other, utilizes a component which for two hundred years has been a mainstay in nearly all chronograph designs. It is known as the heart shaped cam ("Cœur"). No mystery as to its construction as the name fully reveals what it is, a cam shaped not radically differently from a child's drawing of a heart. The details are logarithmically calculated, of course, to optimize the property for which it is prized. If the heart shaped cam is left free to rotate and an arm or lever is pressed against it, the cam will always rotate to a position with the arm or lever nestled precisely at the top of the "heart". Classic chronograph design calls for use of heart shaped cams for the return to zero of the chronograph seconds hand and any chronograph counter hands. When the return to zero is commanded, a hammer is pressed against the heart shaped cams of each chronograph hand and a precise return to zero is assured. In the case of the Blancpain caliber 1185, there is a single arm with two hammers, one for the seconds hand the other for the minute counter that simultaneously contacts the two hearts returning them both to zero at exactly the same instant.







A Split second mechanism in the non-split configuration. The gallet is pressed against the heart positioning the hands together.

B Mechanism with the hands split. The isolator has pulled the gallet away from the heart and the brakes have been applied to the rattrapante hand's wheel.

The same property that is used for the return to zero is employed to keep the two separate seconds hands superimposed upon each other. The *rattrapante* hand has a heart shaped cam attached to its axis. When pressure is applied to it—with Blancpain's design the pressure is applied by an arm with jeweled roller at its tip (referred to as a "gallet")—the *rattrapante* hand is positioned in perfect alignment with the *trotteuse*. As the jeweled roller and its arm are attached to and rotate with the *trotteuse*, the centering is always made relative to the position of the *trotteuse*. If the two hands have been split apart because the *rattrapante* hand has been stopped, re-application of pressure from the jeweled roller will instantly rotate the *rattrapante* back into perfect centered position under the other hand.

The brake. The principle of the brake is simple. Its implementation is complex. A wheel is affixed to the axis of the rattrapante hand. When it is desired to stop that hand, splitting it from the other (which would continue to rotate and count the chronograph seconds) two arms, one on each side, resembling pliers, squeeze onto the wheel stopping it in place. If mechanical design is one of your avocations, this description of the means by which the rattrapante hand is stopped while the other continues running should raise an immediate question: "What about the jeweled arm pressing against the heart

shaped cam? Won't there be abnormal drag created as the cam is forced to rotate away from the position with the roller in the center of the heart's trough?" Those are good questions and spot on in their insights.

Most split second implementations simply make do with this extra drag and tolerate the rotation of the heart against the pressure being applied to it. That, however, adversely effects the timekeeping of the watch as the extra drag will reduce the amplitude of the balance wheel's swing. To counteract that, Blancpain was the first to invent the isolator which it incorporates into the split second mechanism. When the split is commanded and the brakes applied to stop the *rattrapante* hand, the arm bearing the roller which otherwise would press against the heart is pulled away from contact with the heart. Voilà! No extra drag is added by reason of a roller pushing against the cam. This Blancpain innovation has now been copied by others, one historic Geneva brand candidly admitting the "inspiration" which it took from Blancpain's design!

One other component of the split mechanism merits attention, the column wheel. The chronograph itself utilizes a column wheel to control start, stop and return to zero. No chronograph can lay claim to being top grade if it lacks the sophistication of column wheel control, which endows a precision in the se-



quence of functions and a creaminess in the feel of the pushers which cannot be achieved in any other way. The same is true of the split second function; use of a column wheel to control the splitting and re-centering of the hands is vital in the same way to the precision and silky feel of the split mechanism. Thus, two column wheels are used in Blancpain's movment.

One other sophisticated feature has been incorporated into the movement design of the L-evolution R, the flyback. The origins of this function trace back to time/distance calcuations by pilots. Before modern GPS systems removed the need for aviators to actually navigate with their brains (excuse the deliberately edgy commentary from an old school flight instructor), timing the course of a flight from waypoint to waypoint was required. This meant starting a chronograph upon crossing a waypoint, stopping it as the next one was reached, resetting to zero and restarting the timing in anticipation of the following waypoint. Thus, each intermediate waypoint necessitated three chronograph operations: a push of the start/stop button to stop, a push of the return to zero button to reset, and, finally, a push of the start/stop to restart. The flyback feature vastly simplifies this series of operations. A single push of the return to zero button automatically stops the running of the chronograph, resets the chronograph hands to zero, and restarts the chronograph. Thus, three button pushes are reduced to one.

TWO COLUMN WHEELS CONTROL THE FUNCTIONS OF THE L-EVOLUTION R.





Quickly, following its watchmaking debut the flyback function became prized by pilots and this aviation feature has been included in the L-evolution R.

An additional important and useful complication is offered by the L-evolution R, Blancpain's large date module, known internally as the caliber 69. This large date construction distinguishes itself from the mainstream in that its changes occur instantly within a minute or two of midnight. It adds the further convenience of rapid correction via the crown, rather than a pusher on the side of the case.

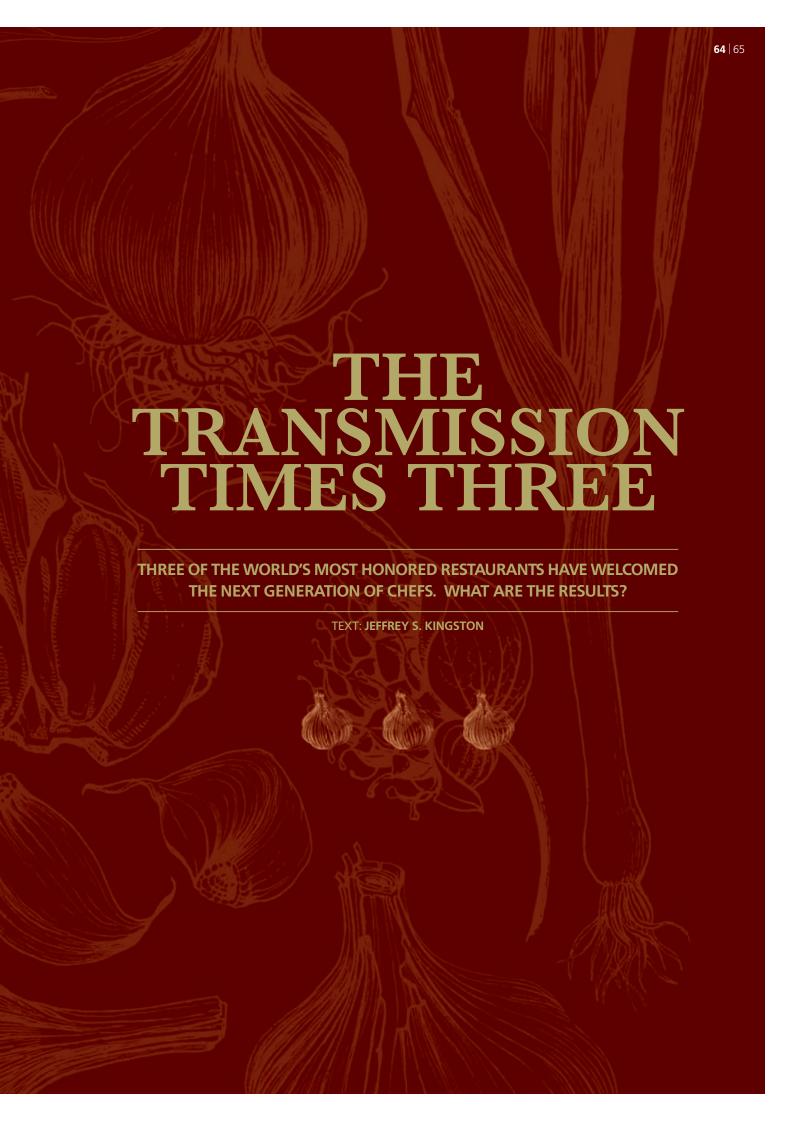
With this level of sophistication in the movement, Blancpain determined to unveil a new style of decoration of the bridges. Eschewing the standard côtes de Genève and perlage style, Blancpain created a new look by combining elements of two other classic watchmaking motifs: champlevé and grenaillage. The bridges are first "sculpted" removing material from the center, leaving a raised border at the edges. This is the traditional first step in champlevé decoration. Instead, however, of thereupon filling in the sculpted out center with another material—classic champlevé calling for enamel—Blancpain turned to the second motif, grenaillage. The inner surfaces are given a subtle graining, resembling a frosting. In the red gold version of the L-evolution R, the surface is gold plated; in the white gold

version it is rhodium plated. In both cases the color palette of the movement resonates with the coloring of the gold elements of the case.

Carbon fiber plays an important role in the appearance of this newest member of the L-evolution Collection. The L-evolution case design allows for mixture of materials as the lugs and case back form an element distinct from other parts of the case. The integration of two separate elements brings with it a design freedom which is not ordinarily available with conventional case designs. With the L-evolution R Blancpain takes advantage of this freedom by fashioning the lugs, case sides and case backs in gold, either red or white, and the bezel out of carbon fiber. Industry mainstream carbon fiber elements, although light in weight, suffer from a degree of coarseness and fragility. Fashioned with a proprietary process, Blancpain's carbon fiber elements avoid these perils as they are both refined and subtle in appearance and robust. Carbon fiber carries, as well, over to the dial and to inserts in the strap.

With the style echoing that of the racing Super Trofeo models which have preceded it, the L-evolution R brings a new level of sophisticated high watchmaking to the genre of sport chronographs. •





urs is an epoch of change. More than celebrated and relished, it is the motor of our prosperity. Imagine the opposite; a freezing of time. Mainframes ruling the earth; not even a hint that there could be such a device as a mobile phone, much less a smart one; air travel reserved for only a privileged few; cameras requiring film; written correspondence via an envelope, paper and, god forbid, a stamp; music played on 33 rpm records. For most things we have reason to rejoice in the kind of progress that has pushed these venerable ways aside. But the list is not all embracing. Take for example three of the world's most treasured and honored restaurants to which yours truly has been devoted for decades and which have been featured on these pages: Hotel de Ville in Crissier (Issue No. 1), Lameloise in Chagny (Issue No. 2), and Le Pont de Brent in Montreux (Issue No. 3).

For all three of these mighty icons the inspirational chefs who kindled the ardor which we reported in *Lettres du Brassus* and which the Michelin Guide seconded with their award of three stars year after year, have retired. Philippe Rochat to his mountain retreat in the Valais, Jacques Lameloise to his collection of classic cars, and Gérard Rabaey to his bicycle. *That* genre of change, far from being universally acclaimed often carries with it *frissons*. "What of the special spark from these departing grand chefs? What of that warm reassurance on every return visit that these masters were tending the stoves?"

That which has transpired is best captured by the French expression *la transmission*, the passing of the baton to a new generation. Now presiding in Crissier is Benoît Violier; in Chagny, Eric Pras; and in Montreux, Stéphane Décotterd. Can there be a more fundamental change for a restaurant than the installation of a new chef? So it falls to us to revisit each of these iconic







Left to right: Benoît Violier; Eric Pras; Stéphane Décotterd.

institutions to update our reports. If you are given to flipping pages instantly to extract the conclusion or, perhaps, are blessed with staff who gin up daily news summaries, we will lighten the burden. For all three *la transmission* has been a resounding success and our recommendations remain undiminished in their enthusiasm. But that summary traverses the real genius of the transformation of the three restaurants. Each has confronted the daunting specter of both respecting the venerated history, style, and personality of the institution and allowing each of the new chefs to express his own creativity and ideas. Said another way each has sought to walk that fine line so as to soothe and reassure devoted clientele while at the same time tantalizing with innovation and evolution. How that balance has been found by chefs Violier, Pras and Décotterd is the real story.













HOTEL DE VILLE, CRISSIER. BENOÎT VIOLIER.

Along the entry wall to the newly refurbished kitchen, gleaming with ultra-modern induction cooktops (and if you are a home cook lusting for professional equipment, set aside all notions of gas fired burners; the latest generation of induction burners offers higher power, quicker heating, and greater precision than gas), is a memorial to the successions, for there have been two, at Crissier. Lined up in linear fashion and shining against the slate gray wall are names "Girardet-Rochat-Violier". Girardet is of course, Fredy Girardet, who founded the restaurant in 1971 and, on his way to earning the accolade as the finest chef in the world, created and defined modern Swiss cuisine.

The heritage of Crissier may be set out in a line, but there is an argument to be made for a circle as Benoît's style seems to more closely evoke Girardet than Rochat. This is not to by any means suggest a radical departure as the differences are in nuance. During his brilliant tenure, Rochat's cooking took on a degree of added complexity and incorporation of exotic Asian flavors. Benoît has inclined more toward Girardet's pioneering ethos with lighter, more straightforward preparations and banishment of the occasional Asian overtones.

In common with all three of the *transmission* chefs, Violier's credentials confirm the wisdom of placing Crissier in his hands: five years as Nicolas Sarkozy's chef during his tenure at the Ministry of finance in the early 90's; pastry chef at famed Lenôtre in Paris; Joël Robuchon at Jamin; Alain Chapel in Mionnay (one of the early pillars of *la nouvelle cuisine*, a brilliant *** career cut short with his tragic death in 1990); arrival in





Top left: Ormeau. Bottom left: Côtes d'Agneau. Right: Tronçon de Saint-Pierre.

Crissier in 1996 for Fredy Girardet's last year; promotion to Philippe Rochat's second in 1999; earning the award of *Meilleur Ouvrier de France* in 2000. Violier points to Chapel, Robuchon and Girardet as the strongest influences on his development; indeed, labeling his current style now as an "evolution of Chapel".

Paramount in his philosophy is respect for ingredients. Nothing is left to chance as he works personally with his suppliers both to insure that he is receiving the finest that they have to offer and to drive them even further to improve the quality of what they produce. That, of course, has been a guiding principle for the restaurant since its founding in 1971. There is a connection between his obsession with ingredients and the lightening and purification of his preparations. As Girardet pioneered with his removal of flour from sauces, Violier has radically reduced the use of cream and butter, turning instead to intensely flavored stocks (including vegetable and root stocks). Even a rich dessert preparation such as a chocolate genache has been transformed, removing the butter from the classic recipe and replacing it with highly concentrated milk. Seeing Asian spices as masking and standing in the way of the natural flavors of the key ingredients in a dish, they have been eliminated.

The intensity of Violier's passion and the energy and drive he is bringing to Crissier is evidenced in what he has accomplished in just four months since taking over the restaurant. Of course he has conceived three entirely new menus, all bearing the stamp of his cooking philosophy. But soaring above that achievement, which alone would content those of high ambition, he has designed and presided over complete refurbishment of the dining rooms and garden. "Refurbishment" is somewhat of a limp term which communicates little of the scale of the redecoration and the excruciating devotion to detail that Violier has pursued in the transformation of the dining rooms. The color palate is now both brighter and warmer with blond woods and beige tones on the walls. Offsetting the woods and lending a touch of modernity and sleekness to the rooms are subtle brushed metal accents and slate gray carpeting. In place of flowers on each table are Baccarat bears, ducks, and penguins. Refined and understated serving tables echo the décor of the walls. Unseen is sound deadening which brings a calming tranquility to the room and computer controlled lighting that allows for individual adjustment of the illumination at each table. Outside, Violier has created terraces surrounded by a Japanese inspired garden.



PURITY, LIGHTNESS AND SPARKLING FRESHNESS MARK VIOLIER'S CUISINE.

Three recent meals spotlight the purity, lightness and sparkling freshness of Violier's cuisine. If a single dish could be put forward as demonstrating his philosophy, one would be tempted to nominate Minestrone iodé de Moules de Bouchots de la baie du Mont Saint-Michel "rafraîchies". A radiantly bright red cold fresh tomato broth of otherworldly concentration and ripeness (Just how did he do that??? Plainly this was not a boiled reduction of tomato jus, as the flavor had no hint of cooking. What method was used to intensify flavor?) surrounds a mound of perfect shelled mussels, enlivened with a miniscule dice of crunchy vegetables, sophisticated by slivers of summer truffles. The genius of the preparation is its uncompromising intensity of flavor delivered with wondrous lightness and freshness. Or one might nominate Violier's Œuf de poulette en chemise et Petits Légumes du moment cuisinés au jus de persil. This presented a poached egg encrusted with barely cooked sweet peas and a small dice of Jerusalem artichokes, poised on a bed of fresh peas, all bathed in an intense luminous parsley sauce. Sophisticated,

light, fresh and intense. These are the adjectives that naturally pop to mind with his cuisine.

A brilliant starter from his second menu is *Ormeau, Coques et Palourdes de la baie de Morlaix*. Minimaliste intervention was the key to this dish featuring abalone and clams arrayed in the abalone shell, bathed in an impossibly light sauvignon sauce which served just to offset the natural sweetness of the shellfish. Similar deftness of touch showed in the following *Gelées ravigotées de Crabe batailleur du Phare de Chassiron en Coque à l'Osciètre Impérial*. Green crab from the Charente Maritime topped with a generous mound of oescettra was poised on an emulsion of shellfish stock accented by grapefruit. Violier's sensitivity to nuance was displayed in every dimension. The *agrume* in the sauce offering just a polish of citrus, bits of fennel offsetting with sweet earthiness and crunch, caviar bringing salty contrast to the sweetness of the crab.





Warm fish preparations recalled the genius of Giradet as they translated classicism into a modern, light idiom. A stunning example is Violier's Tronçon de Saint-Pierre de Porten-Bessin flashé, persillade au citron de Nice et petite salade amère. Cooked until barely translucent St. Pierre was enveloped in a rope of intense parsely puree, creating a Zebra-like appearance for the fish, both offset by a nearly luminous fish stock/citrus emulsion. Mesmerizing is the perfect description of the intensity and depth of flavor which Violier achieved. Similarly stunning is the Bar de ligne de La Pointe du Raz poêlé sur peau, Verjus de Féchy perlé à l'huile d'olive extra vierge. The bar is seared on the skin side, accompanied by a tempura of spring onion and zucchini flower, and sauced with a perfectly balanced reduction of verjus and fish stock, both accented by just a touch of remarkably fragrant olive oil. The key to the dish is the perfect harmony of the sweet fish and slightly acidic earthiness of the verjus reduction. Showing his fondness for textural contrast, the sauce offered small crunchy bits of fennel. Homard Bleu de Bretagne étuvé, réduction coralline à la Folle Blanche was at once classical and innovative. Tail and claw cooked to the perfect degree of translucence were accented by a classical shellfish stock, deepened by just a hint of the *Folle Blanche* Armagnac.

One of the grand traditions in Crissier is the tableside carving of fowl. And that tradition is doubly respected as Maitre d'Hotel Louis Villeneuve, a master of what the French call découpage and a longtime fixture in Crissier, continues to perform it along with his deft orchestration of the service in the dining room. If cooking fish until the flesh barely opens up as translucence arrives is a test of the precision of kitchen, so. too, is the roasting of fowl, particularly pintade. One minute too short and the guinea fowl arrives unappealingly bloody; one minute too long and it becomes equally unappealingly dry. Violier hit the mark perfectly with a magnificent dark bronzed bird presented first on a platter before Louis Villeneuve displayed his carving craft. The breast and sot-l'ylaisse were both enrichened by the sauce constructed with guinea fowl stock, a touch of veal stock (for added richness), bolet mushrooms and hint of thyme. One measure of the concentration of a wine is its length on the palate after swallowing. So, too, with a sauce. Violier's was astonishing in its

power, its essence lingering for well over a minute in the mouth. The second service of the leg and thigh respected a long tradition in Crissier, as the same intense sauce arrived with a decadently rich potato puree.

Violier's lamb, Côtes d'Agneau des Alpes de Haute-Provence poêlées au thym sauvage, on its own, merits a visit. Roasted with thyme, the rack is astonishing in two dimensions. First is the impossibly small diameter of the flesh and bones, plainly from a lamb who made his acquaintance with the butcher only a few days after entering the world. Second is texture. Of course the rules of restauration and polite table manners demand that a knife be set to accompany the plate, but there is no other reason. The meat is other worldly in its tenderness, the weight alone of the knife, no added pressure needed, serves perfectly to carve off the thyme accented morsels.

Desserts have been revisited to both lighten and intensify the flavors. The *Bouchée de Pêche de vigne à la verveine* is a case in point. A small tower of perfectly ripe *pêche de vigne* encased a lime zest flecked mousse of verbena. At the base was a puree of pêche de vigne. Plainly fascinated by texture contrast, Violier hid within the mousse small bits of almond and miniature croutons of sablé. Equally remarkable was the Croquants de Framboises, rafraîchis au citron Yuzu. The raspberries were miraculously enormous, almost recalling Woody Allen's movie Sleeper where he knocks a guard unconscious with a giant strawberry. Each of the three crowned a small tart filled with a powerhouse raspberry gelee (and further underscoring Violier's fondness for crunch, spikes of almond); served alongside was a parfait of yuzu, sprinkled with lime zest, raspberry gelee, and raspberry sorbet.



ERIC PRAS.

Although Eric Pras' three year overlap with Jacques Lameloise was shorter than that of Violier's 15 years with Rochat or Décotterd's 10 years with Rabaey, his resume before taking command rivals those of the other two. Like Violier he holds the coveted honor of *Meilleur Ouvrier de France*. Notable ports of call prior to his arrival at Lameloise in 2008 were Troisgros (during the period when both father Pierre and son Michel were working together, *** in Roanne), Le Buerehiesel with Antoine Westermann (*** in Strasbourg) and Régis and Jacques Marcon (*** in the Midi).

What is remarkable is that even at the outset, Jacques Lameloise was open to Eric's innovations. One by one, celebrated classics were subtly refined. For example, *La Tarte Fine aux Pommes avec Sorbet Granny Smith*, which for decades

has reigned on the dessert card as a reference point for apple tarts, was elevated to an even greater height with one studied modification by Pras. Formerly, the sorbet was served on the side, as it wouldn't do to pose it directly on the warm surface of the tart. Pras' solution: building a small mound of apple dice in the center both to place the sorbet on the tart and protect it from the heat below. Voilà, a subtle but effective revision.

The card at Lameloise is now a mixture of Pras' original creations, plainly done with a deep understanding and appreciation of the restaurant's traditions, and revisited classics, more the former than the latter. One of the enduring graces of the house is ordering and taking the aperitif in the salon, and only later settling in at the table. Of course a generous slab of amuse-bouches and accompaniments are part of the traditional





ballad of a meal at Lameloise. Pras, has, however, completely reworked these appetizers. A recent meal featured, to name a few, a brilliant cherry tomato with an escargot parsley stuffing, marinated sardines with fresh goat cheese and zucchini, rolled smoked salmon with quinoa, and a remarkable "sandwich" of local saucisse, cornichon and butter. Although these appetizers vary with the season, there is one fixture which always dazzles with its ingenuity: escargot flavored popcorn.

There is one other tradition of sorts which is essential to the Lameloise experience, the extraordinary continuity of the wait staff. In the near quarter century that yours truly has visited, the Maitres d'Hotel (there are several each evening) have changed only slowly, and, even then, on the rarely occurring arrival of retirement. This carries over completely in the Pras era so that the habitués can be comforted and soothed seeing the same faces whose welcome and plain rejoice in the rhythms of the restaurant mark the occasion of every single Lameloise meal.

The amuse-bouches in the salon do not by any means displace those at the table. Pras displayed the deftness of his touch with a summer starter featuring cavaillon melon. Instead of pairing with ham, he found brighter fresher flavors by layer-

ing the thin melon slices on a base of local fresh goat cheese spiked with almost imperceptible dots of balsamic and herbs and a small shot glass of tarragon infused melon juice.

Appetizers, however satisfying, do not fully place on display the evolution of Lameloise's cuisine under Pras' stewardship. His Foie gras en robe de pomme de terre et chou en vapeur thoroughly demarks how he has respected the spirit of Jacques Lameloise but with an entirely new creation. Of course Lameloise has long offered warm foie gras preparations, but never before cooked en vapeur. Pras' method achieves an ethereal texture as the foie gras nearly levitates off the plate and vaporizes on the palate. Accompanied by summer truffles and an intense truffle sauce the dish becomes transportive. Respecting the restaurant's longstanding tradition of generosity, a small boat of the truffle sauce is always left at the table.

Langoustines chaud & froid au jus de pomme verte, crème légère à la moutarde Fallot/caviar d'Aquitaine has cemented itself with a permanent place on the menu. Side by side are an immense langoustine with a crisped puff rice coating and a delicate langoustine tartare poised on a radiant pale green apple gelee. The refined acidity of the apple provides a



Left to right: Pigeon en vessie, Foie gras en robe de pomme de terre, Langoustines chaud & froid.

perfect counterpoint to the tartare, particularly when offset with the caviar and extremely subtle mustard cream.

Turbot preparation has been reworked as well. Pras' arrival in Chagny brought sous vide methods to the kitchen. An example is *Turbot sauvage de nos côtes et couteaux*, *cuits en vapeur douce/rhubarbe*, *radis et mayonnaise chaude à la moutarde de verveine*. Not only does the sous vide cooking bring millimetric precision to the preparation, the natural texture of the fish is fully preserved as it never is exposed to high heat. The earth, with the sweet rhubard, and the sea, with the sweet couteaux, play off each other, all moderated by the subtle warm mustard mayonnaise (actually more of a light sabayon than a mayonnaise), keeping both in check and marrying them with the turbot.

If the foie gras and turbot were entirely new creations, the *Pigeon en vessie* is a Lameloise classic completely re-imagined. Formerly the entire pigeon was cooked in the pigs bladder, together with a rich cream based foie gras sauce. Pras has modernized the dish, eliminating the cream and cooking only the breasts with a port and foie gras infused pigeon stock. The pigeons themselves perpetuate a longstanding relationship

which Lameloise has with the Bresse producer Michon whose fowl are incomparable. Ensuring perfection in the cooking, Pras relies upon sous vide for much of the time. The perfectly rare breasts are served alongside small pasta towers encasing spinach and diced artichoke hearts and topped with finely minced truffle. Pras' new conception delivers decadent pleasure with every morsel—ethereally tender pigeon, a majestic sauce, truffles propelled by the artichoke hearts. Even the thighs served separately are satisfyingly accompanied by a mixture of root vegetables.

The dessert card is combination of immutable standards and new creations. The devoted Burgundy wine clientele would take to the streets were Lameloise's classic *Crêpes Suzette flambées devant vous au Grand-Marnier glace vanille et chocolat* to disappear from the menu. As advertised the crepes are finished tableside with the always entertaining fireworks. A new entry is the *Pêche jaune sur l'idée d'une Melba*. Although the construction is elaborate, this new creation delivers a perfect end of the meal punch. A succulently ripe peach half, glazed with gelee, is posed on a pain perdu base and filled with vanilla panna cotta. Under the base is an intense blood orange puree; poised on top, raspberry sorbet.





PRAS HAS REVISITED AND MODERNIZED THE CLASSICS AND INTRODUCED HIS OWN NEW CREATIONS RESPECTING THE RESTAURANT'S TRADITIONS.





LE PONT DE BRENT, MONTREUX. STÉPHANE DÉCOTTERD.

The road to taking the reins from an icon like Gérard Rabaey is never short. Stéphane Décotterd began his career at the famed Lausanne Palace Hotel. From there he moved but a few miles East to begin his career with Rabaey at Le Pont de Brent. Although he spent 10 full years under Rabaey's tutelage, his tenure in Montreux was briefly interrupted for a grand "road trip" adventure across North America. Following his return to Pont de Brent he won first prize as the best young chef in Switzerland (the Kadi d'Or in 2008) and earned fifth prize the following year in the French Bocuse d'Or competition in Lyon. Décotterd gained more than prizes and training in his decade before assuming command, he met his wife, Stéphanie, who was at the time the sommeliere at Pont de Brent.

As with the two others, he is intensely aware of the fine line he must tread—both to maintain the proud traditions of

Rabaey and, yet, at the same time to allow his own creativity to take flight. He was particularly sensitive to the perils of radical change as Stéphanie worked in Strasbourg, home of the once famed restaurant Crocodile which failed following a too ambitious revision of the menu apparently alienating the faithful. So Décotterd has applied a deft and measured touch to the restaurant's tradition, not that this forces an unnatural departure from his own philosophy, as he resolutely maintains that his cooking beliefs occupy common ground with Rabaey.

All the rhythms of Le Pont de Brent remain in full flight, as one settles at the table with the aperitif (highly recommended the champagne with pêche de vigne liquor), the weighty menu and wine decisions eased with a parade of irresistible appetizers. A recent selection offering a beignet de fromage (noteworthy for its depth of cheese flavor), tarte aux





légumes, tourteau en feuilleté, gelée de lapin à l'estragon, and a croustillant de ris de veau au poireau.

Décotterd's *L'aile de raie aux légumes grecs* demonstrates the dual imperatives of his own creativity and his faithfulness to Rabaey's philosophy. Bright and fresh, a hallmark of Rabaey, this entirely new preparation paired the raie with a cresson sauce that was at once ethereal and intense.

Hinting at adventures that await as the restaurant evolves, was the following *Vinaigrette de Homard au concombre et raifort*. Normally I don't naturally gravitate toward warm/cold combination preparations, but this one seduced in a way so as to banish whatever reflexive resistance that otherwise might have risen to the fore. Indeed, it was brilliant in all its dimensions. The warm half of the plate offered perfectly translucently cooked lobster, set on a bed of cucumber dice, and sauced below with a delicate vinaigrette dominated by the shellfish stock. Opposite were two "cannelloni" of cucumber stuffed with lobster tartare, and dollops of an elegant and subtle horseradish sauce. The fascination of the plate was the way in which a side ingredient, the cucumber, connected the two lobster preparations.

The studied refinement that Décotterd brings to the table was emphatically evidenced in his *Soupe de Pétoncles et Coquillages au fenouil*. Half of this dish recalled many of Rabaey's fish preparations which he sauces with impossibly small delicate clams. Their presence in this dish, brought depth and presence to the sweetness of the petoncles, punctuated by small hits of caviar. But what really brought an extra measure of sophistication was the fennel infused emulsion that showcased the seafood.

An entirely new fish preparation is a tour de force, *Le Filet de Rouget Barbet au Romarin*, "*Arancini di Maria*" aux Supions. The centerpiece is, of course, red mullet, skin side seared to generate a crust, and the underside just warmed to firmness. There is a symphony of flavors as the Mediterranean tomatoes (the Arancini di Maria) are reduced to a powerful confit, blend naturally with the rosemary, and, as well the fish stock enrichened by the liver of the mullet, all to accent the perfectly cooked fish.

A signature of Pont de Brent for decades has been a preparation of sometimes frog legs, sometimes ris de veau, sometimes morels married with three other components: a rich





Top left: Vinaigrette de Homard; Bottom left: Pêche Jaune; Right: Filet de Rouget Barbet.

veal stock, parsley, and a light foam. That tradition carried forward perfectly with *Morilles farcies au foie gras et aux asperges vertes*. Another riff on the theme is *Les Fleurs de Courgettes farcies aux Cuisses de Grenouilles, Roquette et Parmesan*. Stuffed zucchini flowers are well tread ground. Not like this. Instead of stuffing with a deadening flavor—have we all had enough cheese filling?—Decotterd doubled the intensity with a small dice of zucchini, subtle herbs and deboned frog legs. The effect is transportive as the preparation builds layers of flavor and texture—zucchini (the flower and dice amplifying each other), rich veal stock, delicate meaty overtones of the plump frog leg morsels, the zing of peppery roquette, and the nearly transparent cheese providing just a salty overtone.

There is another Pont de Brent classic that Décotterd has not altered: whole roast duck, cooked perfectly rare and carved tableside. Only a handful of restaurants in the world have mastered whole roast duck, decandently rich and unimaginably tender. And that comes after the theater of watching the gleaming mahogany colored bird arrive at the table for carving (always drawing approving leers from diners at neighboring tables). Of course, there is the second service

of the legs and thighs, accompanied here by a light salad dressed in walnut oil.

One element of the Pont de Brent ritual was revisited early on after Décotterd took charge, the cheese cart. Still impressive in its selections, the cheese now is exclusively sourced within Switzerland. Two ever present highlights are the long aged Gruyere caramel and the local Tomme de Rougement.

Even the small menu at Pont de Brent offers two desserts (not counting the petits fours and ending chocolates). Recent examples were mango three ways, an intense sorbet, a meringue with coconut accents and a riveting tarte tatin of mango. That mighty array was followed by a rhubarb tart flanked by vanilla ice cream and rhubarb sorbet.

Another evening presented La Pêche Jaune au Cœur fondant, en "Carpaccio" et sorbet. A peach lovers dream. No less than an essence of peach three ways, inventively layered into a unified whole. Building from the bottom were the carpaccio of succulently perfect peach, a nut encrusted cylinder of peach sorbet, bearing on top a white chocolate ball filled with peach mousse and dice of fresh peach. Altogether this was a brilliant



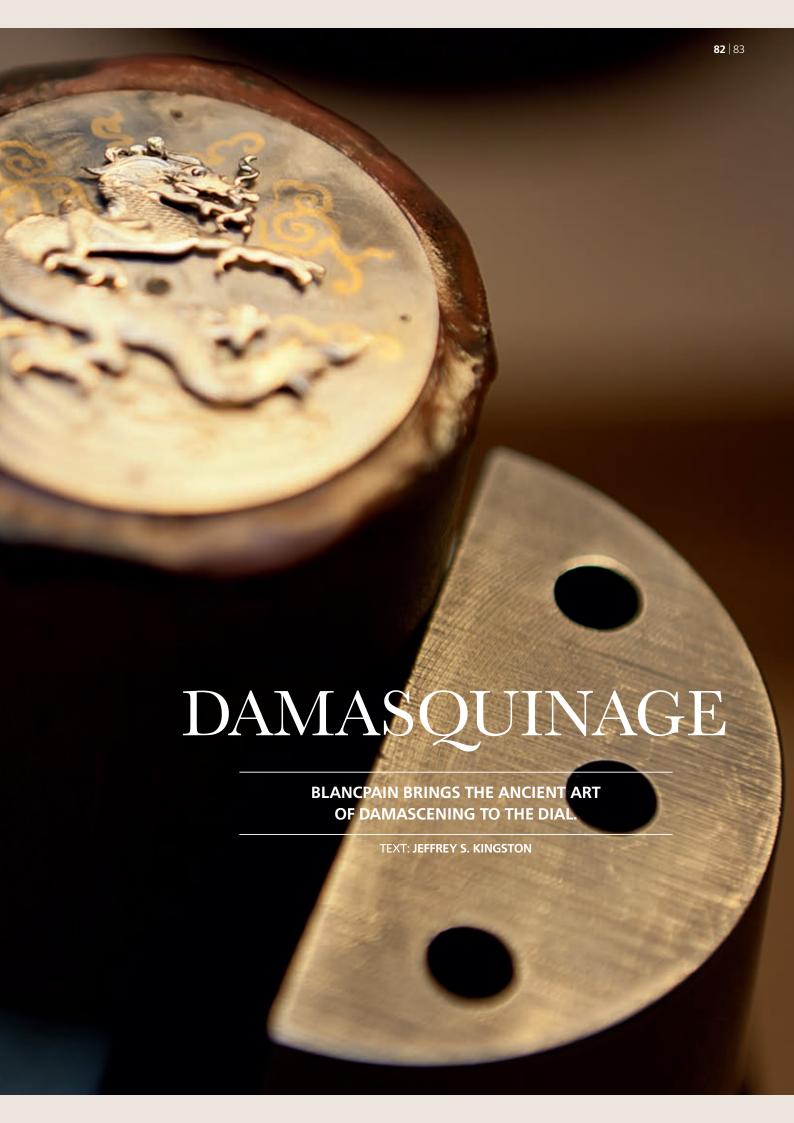
ALL THE RHYTHMS OF LE PONT DE BRENT REMAIN IN FULL FLIGHT.

expression of summer. The use of white chocolate was particularly clever as it added sweetness and complexity without upstaging the peach.

It is gratifying that all three restaurants have navigated the challenges of change of chef with such élan. Our wholehearted endorsement for all three remains undiminished in its fervor. Hotel de Ville, Lameloise, and Le Pont de Brent all stand out as three of the finest restaurants in the world.











With its origins in China, later propagating to ancient Damascus, and from there to Persia and India, thence to Toledo, Spain, the decorative art of damasquinage (alternately translated into English as "damascening" or "damaskeening") lays claim to an exotic heritage. Further enhancing its exotic reputation are the objects of war, swords and coats of armor, which have been among the principal beneficiaries of the technique.

Blancpain now has brought this storied hand craft to the watch dial.

Little has changed since the emergence of this art form working on bronze objects in the 16th century BC. The surface to be decorated is first carved with the design to form troughs. Thereafter rolls of soft metal, overwhelmingly a precious metal such as gold or silver, are hammered into the troughs and the top surface thereafter polished flat. The key principle is that the precious metal decoration is held in place by the metal surface into which it has been inserted and hammered. No glue, adhesive, or other form of attachment is used. Practiced today the handwork is much as it was originally, with painstaking carving and artisanal hammering and polishing.





LITTLE HAS CHANGED IN THIS ART FORM SINCE ITS APPEARANCE IN THE 16TH CENTURY BC.









BLANCPAIN'S DAMASQUINAGE COLLECTION OFFERS A RANGE OF DIALS EMPLOYING THIS HAND CRAFT.

Blancpain's Damasquinage Collection offers a range of dials employing this hand craft. The dials themselves are fashioned from Grade 2 titanium. The Dragon motif is utterly traditional in its realization. The design is first hand carved into the surface and 24 carat gold thereafter pounded into the chiseled troughs. Polished flat therefollowing, the design takes on a profound but refined radiance unequalled by any other decorative technique.







There is a second variation within the Damasquinage Collection, unique pieces. The initial design is that of a Chinese countryside. Other scenes will follow each a unique "series of one". Included will be the possibility to order bespoke designs with an image of the owner's choice. These unique pieces offer an expanded repertoire of damasquinage. Still remaining faithful to the dictates that the precious metal décor be held in place by the metal surface upon which it is placed, carved three dimensional design elements may be added. For example in the Chinese coutryside piece, the bridge, boat and tree have been first hand carved in 24 carat gold. After carving, the base of each of these elements is inserted into the titanium surface of the dial and the surrounding metal is gently hammered back in place so as to secure it. The result is a damasquinage design with dimensionality.

All of the pieces in the Damasquinage Collection are housed in 45 mm rose gold cases. Blancpain's caliber 15 manual wind movement, reserved for use in only the most special timepieces, powers the watch. •



UNIQUE BESPOKE PIECES ARE AN AVAILABLE OPTION FOR COLLECTORS.







Paradise beach at Oeno Atoll; the exuberant Pandanus forest at Pitcairn.

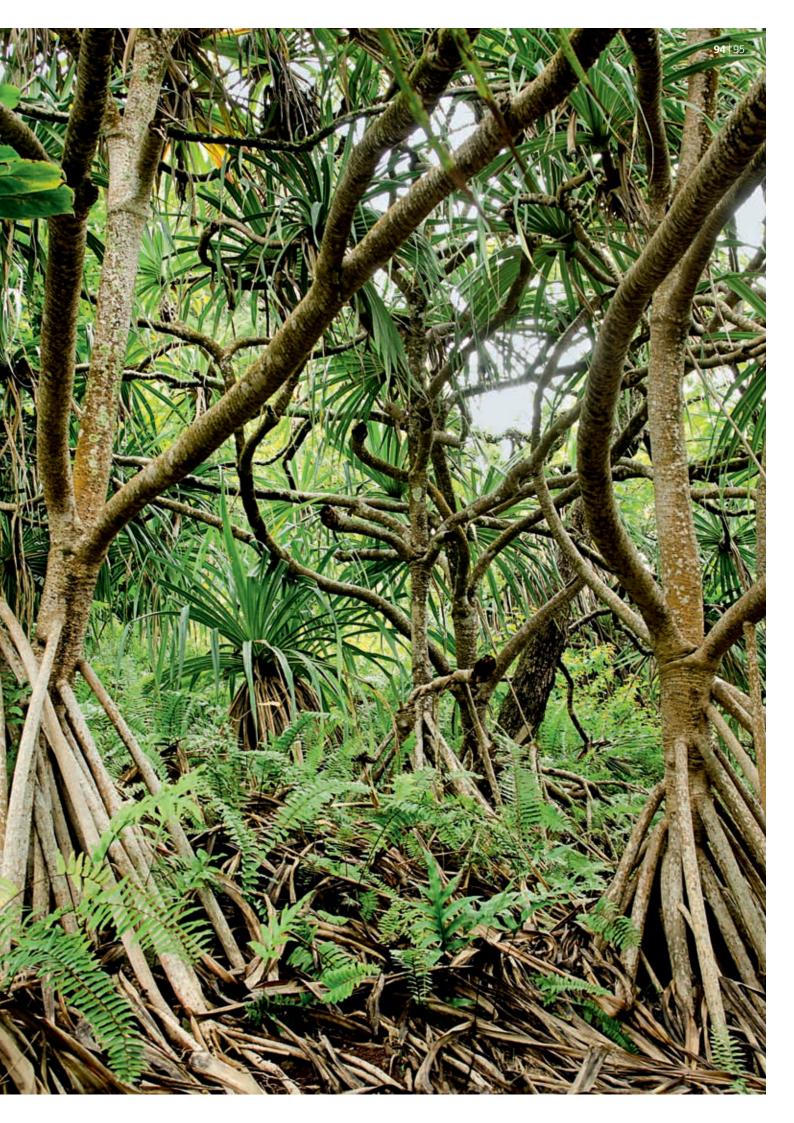
was trapped on an island, surrounded by thousands of miles of unforgiving sea. I had no ship, and no ships ever came by. I was isolated from the world, from everything I ever loved and longed for, in a prison without bars, on top of a dark rock rimmed by precipitous cliffs. The waves beat the island incessantly, eroding it little by little, and filling the air with an atrocious sound. I could not escape, and lost all hope to ever come back home. My heart was like a drum, panic overtook my mind, and then... I woke up, sopping wet sitting in bed, surrounded by silence, in the middle of a serene night. The moon had painted the sea with a delicate silver stroke, and a light wind caressed the palm trees outside of my window. I was on an island, but that was no prison. I was there on my own will.

My nightmare transported me to 1790, when Fletcher Christian and a handful of British mutineers arrived to Pitcairn Island in the South Pacific, fleeing from His Majesty's justice, after having taken possession of the infamous HMS *Bounty*. They and a bunch of Tahitian men and women landed on

Pitcairn, then uninhabited, and settled there. Quickly they burnt their ship, which sunk in the shallow reefs, leaving no visible trace. That day they signed their life sentence, hoping to not be found by any passing ship. The odds were low anyway, for the European discoverer of the island made a mistake and mapped it 200 miles off its actual position. But we are told that Christian spent a long time thinking about what they did, looking at the sea from a cave on the cliffs. Maybe I caught a glimpse of his memory during my first night on the island.

The human history of the most famous mutineers of history is the most pervasive memory of Pitcairn. But I was there for something bigger, something with a longer history. I wanted to tell a different story of this part of the world. My mission was to explore the underwater world of Pitcairn and three uninhabited islands nearby, a world that almost no one has seen.

In March 2012 I led a National Geographic expedition to the Pitcairn Islands, the only Overseas Territory of the United







Healthy shallow reefs at Henderson; giant clams are abundant at the Oeno lagoon; a whitemouth moray eel.

Kingdom in the Pacific. We collaborated with the Pew Environment Group, an American conservation organization, to assess the health of the marine ecosystems around the islands.

The four islands–Pitcairn, Ducie, Henderson, and Oenoare one of the most remote archipelagos on the planet. Pitcairn is inhabited by just over fifty people, most of them descendants of the mutineers of the *Bounty*. The other three islands are uninhabited. Even if you desire to travel to these islands, you will have a hard time. There are no airports, and only one ship travels to the island on a regular schedule–four times a year. Traveling to Pitcairn is traveling back to a time where things take longer, where everything comes into perspective. Out there one realizes what is truly important.

From Tahiti we took a weekly flight to Mangareva, an atoll in the Gambier Islands, the southeastern most archipelago in French Polynesia. The *Claymore II*, a ship based in New Zealand, was waiting for us there. It then took a night, a day, and another night to reach Pitcairn. During the crossing our ship rolled ceaselessly, climbing up and down swells large as a two-story house. These were long swells, coming all the

way from Antarctica, where giant storms unleash the power of the ocean. These swells can still be felt as far North as Hawaii, where they make the delight of surfers. In our case, they made us feel miserable. Our stomachs and heads did not want any part of it, and we chose to hunker down and hibernate.

The morning of the second day we saw Pitcairn arise from the dawn. The sky was the color of lead, and the island was dark and imposing, like an impenetrable fortress. As we got closer, the black became greens and browns and reds. Large chunks of the island had fallen into the sea. The local Pitcairners would later tell us that a month earlier they suffered the heaviest rains in many decades. In just one day they received as much rainwater as they did in the entire previous year. The islands could not take it, and all that land and its precious soil cascaded into the sea. Because of that, Pitcairn was ringed by a halo of brown water. Visibility was less than one meter, and scientific work and filming seemed impossible under such circumstances. In addition, waves kept pounding the island's shores, and the shallow waters became dangerous for diving. My mind kept asking "What are we going to do now? We



"...WE HAVE COME ALL THIS WAY TO FIND OUT THAT WE CANNOT DO OUR WORK." FOR A MOMENT I FELT DEFEATED BY NATURE.

have come all this way to find out that we cannot do our work." For a moment I felt defeated by nature.

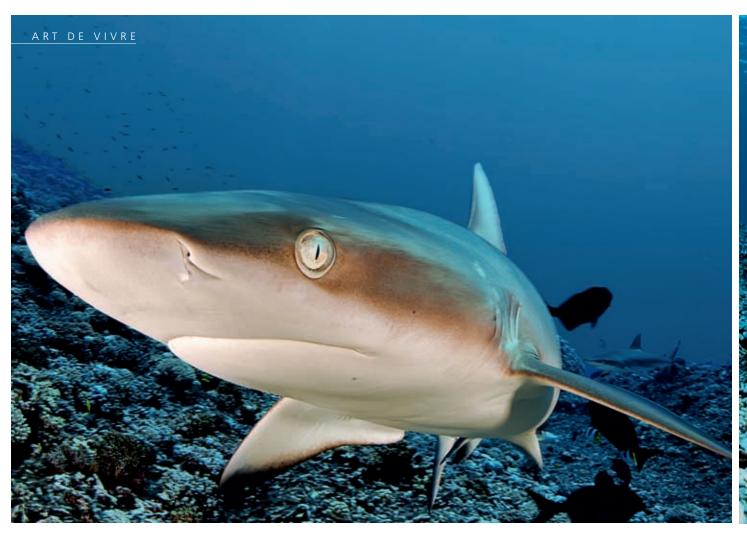
Trying to make the best of the situation, we decided to travel to Ducie Atoll, the most remote island in the archipelago, then Henderson Island, and then return to Pitcairn, hoping that by then, two weeks later, the rain and bad weather would have stopped, and diving would be possible. But with a day to kill, we decided to go beyond the murky water. Freshwater and seawater don't mix easily, for freshwater is less dense. That means that the freshwater with all the sediment stayed on top, and we hoped to find clearer water farther offshore and deeper. We jumped on our zodiacs and rode about a kilometer offshore. The line between the brown water from the island and the clear ocean water beyond was clean and precise. There was no soft transition from brown to blue. Here it was brown, and one centimeter away it was blue.

We moved within the blue and jumped in the water. And we had our first surprise.

Floating on the surface we could clearly see the bottom, at 30 meters depth. The bottom was covered with a healthy coral reef. We descended into the clear blue as though we were falling from the sky. The extreme visibility of the water offshore was unbelievable compared to what we just saw near shore. Already on the bottom, we found that living coral covers more than a quarter of the seafloor at 30 meters depth. We kept diving deeper, and the coral reef seemed to extend to at least 45 meters depth. Fish were abundant, and curious black trevally circled us at high speed. School of nanwe—the Pitcairner name for the chub—were everywhere, biting on turf algae and then swimming together to the next target. This was an unusually deep thriving coral reef, and the most likely explanation was the extreme clarity of the water.







Top predators like the grey reef and whitetip sharks dominate the underwater ecosystem at Ducie and Henderson.

CURIOUS BY NATURE, SHARKS ARE AMONG THE FIRST PREDATORS THAT COME OUT OF THE BLUE TO CHECK US OUT EVERY TIME WE DIVE IN A PRISTINE REEF.

The sea just taught us something, once again. Those who see obstacles as an opportunity to see beyond them will succeed. By looking beyond the murky water we discovered a new reef, which we would have never looked for had we been able to dive nearer to shore.

It took us another day and a half to reach Ducie. The weather improved, and for a few days we had sunny blue skies, which contrasted with a dark blue sea. Ducie is the top of an ancient volcano that emerged from the seafloor eight million years ago, at the time when the human lineage and chimpanzees separated from a common ancestor. Yet modern humans would not reach Ducie until 1606. Even with a ship and on a calm day, it is not easy to see Ducie. From a few miles away, Ducie is only a slim thickening of the horizon. Its highest elevation is less than five meters. No wonder it took so long to find it.

The water at Ducie reached another level of hyperbole. I had never seen such pure blue, clear water. We could still see each other underwater at a distance of 75 meters! Diving here was like nowhere else. Sometimes I thought what would happen to our minds if humans could, all of a sudden, fly without the needs of airplanes. Would we be able to overcome the sense of vertigo? Would our land-based bodies try to cling to hard surfaces? At Ducie I abandoned those thoughts, for I realized that I was truly flying. Only the regulator in my mouth reminded me that I was surrounded by water.

And so we flew, descending from our zodiacs, which from below looked like spaceships hovering motionless on the sky. Diving at Ducie we entered paradise. As far as we could see there was a landscape with smooth rolling hills, a pristine coral reef, with pale blue corals looking like giant roses covering all of the bottom. Man could never dream anything like that. This





was an evolutionary dream, the product of millions of years of biological trial and error. This purity was also the consequence of isolation. Far from man, nature is more spectacular.

We were diving with closed-circuit rebreathers, a type of diving gear that recycles the oxygen we breath out, allowing us to stay up to four hours on the bottom without having to resurface. And most importantly, we did not make any bubbles, which allowed us to get closer to marine life. Because Ducie is so remote and unfrequented by humans, many of the fish, including the sharks, had probably never seen humans before. Curious by nature, sharks are among the first predators that come out of the blue to check us out every time we dive in a pristine reef.

When we recovered from the hallucination of the pale blue reef we realized we were surrounded by thousands of nanwe. The nanwe eat algae, and they are supposed to swim near the bottom. But the nanwe at Ducie may not have known, and were darting to the surface in unison and then swimming back to the bottom, like riding a rollercoaster. Among the nanwe we saw our first sharks, grey reef sharks.

As they swam towards us, holes opened on the nanwe clouds, not frantically under the presence of the ultimate predator, but quietly, as though they knew the sharks were more interested in checking us out than in eating them.

Previous visits to Ducie by scientists reported "aggressive sharks", but we did not see any of that. It would be easy for me to make up hair-raising stories of shark encounters that nobody would be able to contest. But the truth was that the sharks at Ducie were among the gentlest I have ever encountered. They were very curious, and they came on almost every dive to check us out, on occasions so closely that they bumped the domes of our cameras, but we never felt threatened by them. Sharks are the ultimate predators, and they know that the secret to a long life is not to be reckless. While young sharks act like teenagers, cocky and goofy, large sharks are cautious and they approach divers very slowly. They circle you forever, drawing an infinite spiral from the outside in, which never seems to reach the center. And they get scared by brisk movements, so the secret to experience the beauty of sharks is to keep calm.



A yellow-edged lyretail at Oeno; a species of octopus new to science.

We spent five unforgettable days at Ducie, diving, measuring, and filming. Our studies revealed that, on average, more than half of the reef was healthy corals. In some places, like our dream pale blue reef, corals covered all of the bottom. This is extraordinary in our current world. In the Caribbean, for instance, it is difficult to find a reef where more than 5 percent of the bottom has coral. Fish were abundant at Ducie, and predators dominated. If we weighted all of the fish on the reef, top predators—mostly sharks—would account for two thirds of that weight, what scientists call biomass. Imagine going to the Serengeti in Africa and seeing two lions for every wildebeest. This would be impossible on land, but this is what a pristine coral reef looks like. It's an inverted biomass pyramid, the best indication of a pristine ecosystem.

After Ducie we sailed to Henderson, where we again suffered large swells from the South and winds from the North. The captain of the *Claymore II* spent all of five days trying to anchor on a sheltered spot–quite a challenge. I felt like a weathervane, pinned by a thin thread to the only sheltered cove of the island. Our days went by taking excursions on the swells, diving and returning to shelter. At the end of the day











Scenes of life at Pitcairn (clockwise): View from the Public Square; St. Paul's pools; the precipitous cliffs on the South side; launching the long boat to go fishing; lobster traps.

TODAY, HENDERSON LOOKS LIKE A TABLE FROM AFAR. IT HAS VERTICAL CLIFFS – 33 METERS TALL.

we were all exhausted, yet very happy. Henderson underwater proved to be another pristine environment, virtually untouched by humans.

Henderson is a raised atoll, which is a rarity. Eight hundred thousand years ago, Henderson was an atoll, with a coral ring encircling a shallow lagoon–like Ducie. But then another volcano raised from the seafloor, forming a high island that today we know as Pitcairn. That volcano lifted the continental crust, and raised Henderson atoll 33 meters above sea level. Today, Henderson looks like a table from afar. It has vertical cliffs–33 meters tall–all around, and a shallow depression inland—the ancient lagoon—which is now covered by impenetrable vegetation. Henderson is the last of its kind, the only raised atoll that harbours a pristine forest, including four species of birds that live nowhere else on the planet.

Sharks at Henderson were more curious than those at Ducie. They seemed to love to bump onto our camera domes, and scratched mine beyond repair. Yet we stayed calm and surrendered to the sense of awe and wonder that comes with observing an intact marine ecosystem. My heart was beating slowly and rhythmically, and I had goose bumps underneath my wetsuit. Other than love, this is what makes me happiest and more filled with life. In truth, it is another type of love.

We returned to Pitcairn after five exhilarating days at Henderson. The water cleared up a little, although it was still raining and near shore the visibility was not great. We dived and surveyed the reefs, and filmed. We saw healthy reefs and abundant fishes, but few sharks. We departed with the locals, who showed to us the secrets of their island, and also shared their worries. With an aging population, Pitcairn will need an



input of fresh blood to survive. The Pitcairners are reliant on help from the British government to survive. They have fruit trees and some agriculture, they sell a small production of honey, and wood carving and stamps to the odd cruise ship that stops for a few hours near the island. But that is not sufficient to keep their economy going. We kept thinking about their future. Maybe their future depended on something they rarely see.

With those thoughts in mind we sailed to our last destination, Oeno Atoll. The weather got worse, and there was no safe anchorage, for Oeno was only a mile in diameter, barely a refuge in a huge ocean. Swell and wind combines to turn the atoll into a maelstrom, the infamous ocean whirlpool capable of crushing and sucking ships into the abyss. With exhausted bodies after three weeks of diving and sailing, we were paying more attention than usual, being extra careful.

During a break in the storm we made it into the lagoon through a very shallow pass. An hour after landing on Oeno's only island, it was pouring once again. Our wet bodies got



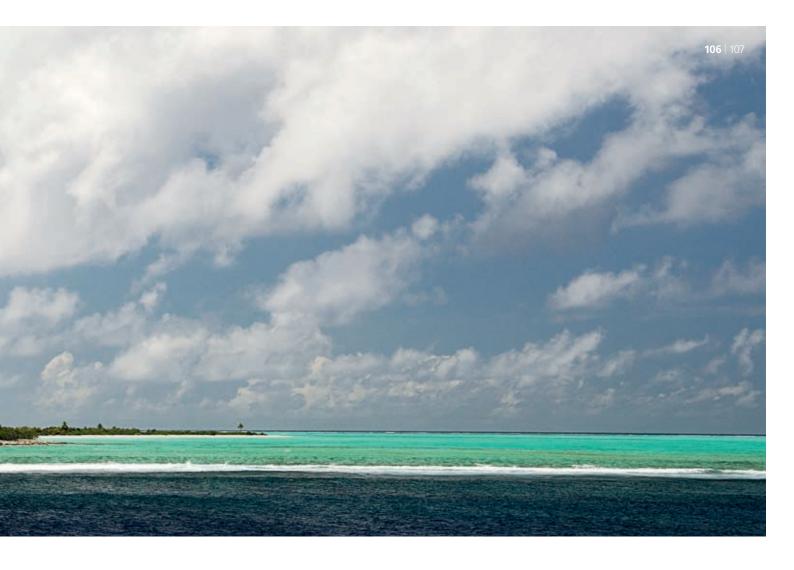
Oeno Atoll.

IF OENO IS ALREADY THREATENED, WHAT WILL HAPPEN NEXT? WILL THE PRISTINE HENDERSON AND DUCIE BE NEXT?

very cold in the wind, so we explored the lagoon by snorkeling. Over a sandy bottom we found patch reefs covered by a crust of pink encrusting algae, and giant clams so abundant that on some reefs reached densities of up to ten per square meter. On the way out, waves were breaking on the pass. Our skiff hit the reef. The "clunk" felt like a gunshot. My heart raced, and I suddenly felt very warm. Waves were breaking into the boat. Our captain turned around and tried again, and we hit the reef, metal over rock. I hate those moments where I do not know whether we will be able to escape or be trapped. Our captain tried a third time, and he masterfully took us out of the lagoon and into the open ocean, although we banged once again. Back on the *Claymore II*, we lifted the skiff and saw that our propeller was badly damaged. A small price to pay for our safety.

Dives at Oeno were troubling, and not only because it felt like diving in a washing machine. We were dismayed by the absence of sharks. How in hell we could not find any sharks on a remote, uninhabited atoll? We have explored many coral reefs worldwide, from degraded to pristine, and the only explanation is fishing. Without fishing, reefs have abundant sharks. Their absence is primarily due to overfishing. Oeno is the closest island to French Polynesia, and the Pitcairners report accounts of Polynesian and other fishing fleets targeting sharks at Oeno. If Oeno is already threatened, what will happen next? Will the pristine Henderson and Ducie be next?

There is only one solution: to protect these last South Pacific paradises from the human footprint. Currently fishing fleets are targeting 95 percent of the ocean, and less than



5 percent can be considered pristine. We should not destroy that 5 percent left just because we already degraded the other 95 percent. These pristine places are the only examples we have of a healthy ocean, the only instruction manual of the sea, where we can learn what we have lost, but also understand what the future could be like.

Epilogue: At the moment of writing this article, the Pew Environment Group and the National Geographic Society were discussing with the Pitcairn Island Council and the UK Government the possibility of creating a large marine reserve protecting the 200-mile exclusive economic zone of the Pitcairn Islands. This expedition was the first of the Pristine Seas partnership between Blancpain and National Geographic. •

Lettres

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