

Love strikes at French Laundry

South Africa ...



Chef Pat Tessier (right) and the French Laundry team executed the eight-course lunch menu...



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Many gourmands rearrange their schedules to land a coveted reservation at the French Laundry. Jennifer "Jen" Reich rerouted her life.

Secretly, she longed to someday work for Thomas Keller, but her job as a broadcast news producer in New York for Peter Jennings and Barbara Walters meant her career track was set.

"I was standing in Barbara Walters' office when the towers were coming down," said Jen.

With no culinary credentials but hungry to learn, she convinced Keller of her determination and decided to move to the Napa Valley.

"My family thought that I had lost my mind, and my mother just about disowned me," said Jen.

During the next seven years, she worked every position on the restaurant floor before being named the director of special events for Keller's California properties.

After graduating from restaurant, management and wine schools in France (including the Tain l'Hermitage, which accepts just 14 students into its sommelier program each year), the Provence native and son of a restaurant family went on to pour for a number of Michelin-starred restaurants in France.

One night at a bar in Monaco, Greg met the celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay. Not long afterward, not knowing a word of English, he moved to London to work for Ramsay and opened his namesake restaurant in Chelsea as well as his restaurant Petrus.

For two years, Greg and Jen barely noticed each other. But in 2007, they teamed up while planning a friend's 40th birthday.

"Jen and I share a thread of fearlessness and adaptability. We realized we had to deal with our lives in order to be together," said Greg.

"It's not your conventional love story, that's the reality of it. There was drama," said Jen.

For the next five years, they focused on making "each day memorable," whether spontaneously driving down the coast for Jen's favorite sushi in Los Angeles to building trust with Greg's daughters, Clara (now 8) and Elizabeth (now 5).

They supported each other through job transitions as well. Greg, now 36, left the French Laundry in 2008 to become the wine director for Sotirrage, a Napa Valley firm that specializes in promoting rare wines and spirits.

When Jen finally met Reich and told her how that one review changed the course of her life, Reich replied, "Jen, stop! You are scaring me!"

It was only fitting that Jen and Greg marry at the French Laundry. The eight-course lunch for 60 family and friends was designed by chef de cuisine Tim Hollingsworth, who attended, as did Thomas Keller. Her employer, who died in 2010, was not there, but Jen was comforted that he had enjoyed a meal in the same dining room on his last visit.

The wedding feast included signature dishes (Oysters and Pearls) and restaurant recipes that included gifts like truffles from Gourmet Attitudes and Richard chocolates.

Before the reception, Jen and Greg peaced in the vegetable garden to slip a special sake Greg had imported for the occasion.

"Our lives took more than led us to the French Laundry," Jen said. "Call it luck or fate - but to feel our professional passions and find love? What this place has brought us is beyond what we could have ever imagined."

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