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Weaving magic in France



Lanie van Reenen

HOTEL CHÂTEAU SALLANDROUZE
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A spunky South African has turned a neglected chateau into what promises to become one of the most sought-after country hotels in central France. Hilary Prendini Toffoli reports

The tiny tapestry town of Aubusson has a population not much bigger than Pofadder's. It's right in the centre of France, where creamy white Charolais cattle outnumber people. A forgotten region that the French write off the way South Africans write off the Free State. But there's nothing backward about Aubusson, I soon discover. No wonder





Hotel Château Sallandrouze Glamorous interiors



Aubusson The tapestry town

former Oranjezicht guesthouse owner Lanie van Reenen has spent the past three years — and all her liquid assets — reinventing a château here that was once home to the family of a tapestry baron.

Founded by the Romans on two rivers below what are now the last forested hills in the region, Aubusson was a thriving hub of the tapestry industry in its heyday. Noblemen used to hang woven images of maidens and unicorns on their château walls to keep out the winter draughts, and then roll up the tapestries when they moved for the summer.

The town is still a class little act. Behind the lichen-covered stone walls of its narrow winding streets, among the charcuteries, boulangeries and pâtisseries you find in every French town, are shops, museums and factories dedicated to the tricky art of tapestry-weaving, both ancient and modern.

In a factory that has made tapestries for former Russian president Boris Yeltsin, you can watch a woman painstakingly restoring a 42 m² masterpiece that dates back to Napoleon. She's been at it nearly two years. And in a shop that belongs to the third cousin of ex-president Chirac — a treasure trove on the bridge leading to the old tapestry quarter

— you can buy original old tapestry designs on cardboard.

What's also special about this town is that it's not besieged by tourists. This part of France is so far off the beaten track it still belongs to the French. So the diners packing the high-street restaurants are people who know and love their culinary traditions. The food is uniformly good, and set menus cost little more than a meal in a better SA restaurant. The many taste delights I find myself indulging in include a variety of freshwater fish I've never heard of, served in and on imaginatively cooked and presented sauces and veggies.

Though they're a million miles from Paris, these are people who glory in the finer things, proving yet again that the French really know how to live. (And if you want to know why, get hold of Joan DeJean's riveting account of how Louis Quatorze set out to make himself and his country the centre of all things stylish in her book called *The Essence of Style*.)

Though she was not a Francophile initially, Van Reenen has since become one. She happened to be on holiday in France when she bought the château. Known as the Maison Rose because of its rose-pink façade, it stands on a hill

overlooking the town, opposite the rose garden planted by its original owners, the Sallandrouze family.

A château is a castle in the English-language sense of the word only when it has fortifications. Most of the châteaux in France are what English-speakers would call manor houses or palatial country residences. This was a particularly charming example, built in 1883.

Gabriel Charles Sallandrouze was one of the town's gritty land-owning entrepreneurs who kept tapestry manufacture alive during the difficult periods. His tomb and his marble bust are there in the family's small 12th century stone chapel of St Jean de la Cour, over the road from the château. Shaded by giant plane trees, it's an enchanting building that Van Reenen plans to use as the hotel's wedding venue.

She knew exactly what she wanted to do with the beautiful old château the minute she walked in. "The place needed work but was basically intact: the original gold-green embossed damask wallpaper in the salon; the herringbone-style French oak on the floors; even the stained-glass Aubusson dragon in the foyer. It was perfect for a small hotel. I immediately began to visualise the

tapestries and gilded mirrors I'd hang on the walls under those 5 m ceilings."

When I visit, three years and a helluva lot of euros and shredded nerves later, the place has been totally restored and revamped by Van Reenen and her partners back home, with a little financial help from the French government.

Cape architect Wynand Wilsenach has retained the original ambience, while adding modern en-suite bathrooms to each of the 10 spacious bedrooms. And Van Reenen's décor is equally sensitive. Using period furniture made in North Africa and upholstered in gloriously luxurious SA fabrics that are contemporary yet timeless, she's succeeded in giving the rooms a freshness that is in no way at odds with the château's elegant past. The Belle Epoque feel is totally alluring.

Though it still lacks a few finishing

touches, Hotel Château Sallandrouze opened in August, complete with a public restaurant run by a young English-speaking, Paris-trained chef, Regis Fleury. One of his delicious meals I taste is rare duck breasts, slightly charred and served with a melting potato pie, a regional speciality.

The restaurant has been humming since its opening and the whole place looks set to become a sense-of-occasion destination, sought after by both French and foreign tourists. Van Reenen expects a few South Africans as well: "They're always curious about what other South Africans are doing abroad. And proud when they see what you're achieving."

Visitors will find more to see than just tapestries. The weekly fresh-produce markets are always fun, and so are the brocantes — the flea markets that take place in different villages every Sunday,

where people sell things like their family silver and its monogrammed linen.

The forests are great for hiking and biking, and you can take a picnic basket to Ile-de-Vassivière, or drive out to the slightly surreal hamlet of Masgot, overflowing with the quirky creations of sculptor Francois Michaud, or Oradour-sur-Glâne, the haunting village left untouched after the Nazis killed 630 villagers who were active in the Resistance.

At Boussac, about an hour away, Lucien and Bernadette Blondeau have restored and furnished the 15th century castle built by Joan of Arc's friend, Jean de Brosse.

Near Vichy is Charroux, described by tourism signs as "the most beautiful medieval village in France". There you'll find France's finest mustard factory, a Clock Museum and Madame Bernadette's Rose tea garden. Its huge selection includes tea from Afrique du Sud.

□ Rooms at Hotel Château Sallandrouze start at €200/room/night, buffet breakfast included. Three-course dinner with wine: €40. Lunch in Café Sallandrouze with wine: €25.

Aubusson is 90 km from Limoges, reachable by air or train from Paris. ■
□ The writer was a guest of Hotel Château Sallandrouze.

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— LANIE VAN REENEN