



SOUPY SALES
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THE CULT OF

TETOU

For decades this storied eatery near Cannes has attracted a famous clientele—from Picasso to George Clooney—eager to savor a bowl of its legendary bouillabaisse.

BY JAY CHESHES PHOTOGRAPHY BY TUNG WALSH

IT'S ALMOST 10 P.M. as Kristen Stewart braves flashbulb barricades outside Tetou in a black-and-white Chanel frock. Susan Sarandon is already inside, arm in arm with Naomi Watts. The beach around the restaurant has been carpeted with wood planks, a pop-up deck ringed by tiki torches and stern guards in dark suits. Perrier-Jouët flows as waiters pass around canapés. It's the second night of the 69th Festival de Cannes, and this modest seafood restaurant, just up the coast from Cannes in Golfe-Juan, is teeming with celebrities. Kirsten Dunst and Mads Mikkelsen, two of this year's jury members, are among the last to arrive. Linen-topped tables, lit by overhead lights dimmed to a flattering glow, begin to fill with starlets. “*Mesdames et messieurs, prenez vos places!*” a waitress announces. Dinner is served.

For the past three years Karl Lagerfeld has held sway over this film festival soirée, sponsored by Chanel and the French edition of *Vanity Fair*.

Two years ago, Sharon Stone swept in late to steal Lagerfeld's fingerless gloves to auction off for charity at an amfAR party the following night. The designer, who ought to be holding court at his central table, has been detained at the last minute in Paris, “working on his latest collection,” according to one of his celebrity dressers. Chanel image director Eric Pfrunder is here instead, huddling with Jessica Chastain and Christian Louboutin, enjoying the restaurant's signature dishes—*tomates à la Provençale*, bouillabaisse, beignets with jam for dessert—served family-style in big portions, just as they've been for nearly a century.

For years I'd been hearing about this mythic restaurant. My wife and her father, who is French, still rhapsodize about the bouillabaisse they ate there, even though their last visit was more than 30 years ago. My father-in-law first dined at Tetou as a young boy in the 1950s, “back when you could still get in anywhere,” he says. “The bouillabaisse was so filling,” he

recalls, “we never had room for dessert.”

Ernest “Tetou” Cirio came to this pristine stretch of Mediterranean coast after being wounded in the French navy in World War I to start a new life in the restaurant business. In 1922 he built a shack on the beach, cooking his bouillabaisse open-air over charcoal. When the Cannes Film Festival began in the mid 1940s, Tetou quickly became a celebrity magnet. With its spare white nautical interiors and impeccable seafood, it provides a dreamy escape from the madness of Cannes. “The only thing they ever change is the price,” says photographer and bon vivant Jean Pigozzi, who has a home nearby. “A lot of girls don't like it because the light is very strong—doesn't look good for their makeup.”

Run by the same family for four generations, the restaurant today is as well known for its bouillabaisse as for its exorbitant prices and steadfast refusal to accept credit cards. “I often refer to it >



AT YOUR SERVICE
Clockwise from left: Tetou's owner, Pierre Jacques (rear, center), and team; a table along *la bordure*, overlooking the beach; Tetou's guestbook, signed by Karl Lagerfeld; a bubbling pot of fish soup, for bouillabaisse; coffee cups.



as the Peter Luger of the Riviera," says John Sloss, a producer who held an intimate dinner there after his Amy Winehouse documentary premiered last year (referring to the legendary, cash-only Brooklyn steakhouse). "They've got one or two dishes they're famous for, and you've got to bring a lot of cash."

Over the years, Tetou has served everyone from Pablo Picasso and Charlie Chaplin to Catherine Deneuve and Angelina Jolie. "I will confess that I am yearning for this soup right now," wrote Barbara Bush of the bouillabaisse in her 2004 memoirs. Kirk Douglas recounts taking Peter Sellers to the restaurant as a consolation prize after he failed to win best actor at Cannes for his 1979 performance in *Being There*.

The entire restaurant (with room for barely 100 guests) isn't generally available to rent out for private events—particularly during the clubbiest two weeks of the year. So it was a coup when *Vanity Fair France* made its debut at Cannes in 2013 with a party at Tetou. "When people heard we'd be taking over the entire restaurant for a night, they didn't believe it," says Albane Cleret, the French nightlife impresario and party planner who first convinced the owners to host the fete she's organized there annually ever since.

An ideal meal begins with a bubbling crock of breadcrumb-topped tomatoes—as a special treat the kitchen will crack an egg on top. The bouillabaisse, available with optional lobster, features whole fish, cooked in low-and-slow broth (bouillabaisse translates, essentially, as *boil then simmer*), then deboned tableside on rolling carts. The fillets are served on silver trays, with potatoes, croutons and *rouille*, and the rich rustic soup in a serve-yourself tureen.

Ordering the bouillabaisse with lobster is an

amateur move, according to Charles Finch—son of actor Peter—a jack-of-all-trades in the film business (director, agent, party host, financier) who has hosted many dinner parties for industry friends at Tetou. "Anyone who orders the bouillabaisse royale, with lobster, is not my friend, is never going to be invited again," he says. "If you want lobster, go find it in Cuba or something, don't order it at Tetou."

Our waitress likewise steers me away from the lobster when a friend and I order the bouillabaisse the night before this year's film festival. Croutons and rouille arrive first for snacking, alongside radishes and tiny black olives—the extra-garlicky mayonnaise and crisp husks of bread both stained golden from Iranian saffron. Tetou's version of this iconic dish features scorpionfish, John Dory, gurnard and sea bream delivered in two no-nonsense courses. We fill our bowls with potato, hunks of flaky fish and croutons, ladle on the fragrant rusty-hued soup, slurp and repeat. A mountain of sugary beignets finishes the meal—*les élégances*, they call them here—with a big bowl of whipped cream and a rainbow of jars of intense fruity jams. "*La peché de la maison* [the sin of the house]," says the owner, rushing by.

The enduring appeal of Tetou can't be broken down to any one bite of food. It's the sum of its many quirky parts—the Mediterranean lapping just outside its big picture windows, its playful staff, loyal clientele, familial vibe—which would make it impossible to replicate elsewhere, say in Dubai or New York.

The restaurant's legend begins with Ernest Cirio, a young fisherman who went by the nickname Tetou. He was born to a washerwoman and baker in the tiny port of Golfe-Juan in 1882. When he turned 20, he

joined the French navy, and his story from that point on, passed down from one generation to the next, long ago morphed into myth. "We never knew by which circumstances, but he became the private cook of the admiral," wrote his late grandson, Jacky, scribbling down Tetou's life story a few years ago. After World War I he launched his small restaurant, *Chez Tetou*—not long after the Hotel du Cap, the region's most glamorous hotel, up the coast (originally a winter retreat) began to open for the first time in summer. The hotel's glittery patrons were among his earliest clientele.

Tetou would fish at night by torchlight, often with his young daughters on board, cooking his catch the next day over Polish charcoal (which burned extra hot). Sometimes he'd pull lobsters from the rocks, but he became best known as the "king of bouillabaisse," as he's described on an early postcard. One (possibly apocryphal) story, passed on by Jacky, has Tetou emerging from the water one day clutching a five-pound lobster just as a chauffeured Rolls-Royce drives by. "How much for that beautiful beast?" asks the driver, sent out to inquire. "Tell your boss he doesn't have enough money," replied Tetou. It was the Baron de Rothschild in that car, wrote Jacky.

Between the world wars Tetou's little beach shack drew artists, writers, singers, dancers and early Hollywood stars. Josephine Baker, performing in Nice, came to dine. Isadora Duncan met a dashing young man there one evening—or so the story goes—who would later cause her death when her silk scarf got caught in the wheel of his car. When the Second World War reached the French Riviera, the restaurant shut down for a few years, its stretch of beach occupied



ASTRAL WEEK

Clockwise from left: A bowl of Tetou's bouillabaisse; paparazzi crowding the restaurant's entrance during the Cannes Film Festival; Karl Lagerfeld, flanked by (from left) Barbara Palvin, Jessica Chastain, Eva Longoria and Julianne Moore at the annual Chanel/Vanity Fair France party at Tetou.

by Axis troops. In the early days of the war, Francis Picabia—a longtime regular—traded art for Tetou's cooking. His portrait of the fisherman-cook, painted in that period, still hangs on a wall near the bar.

Tetou died before the war's end, at 60, passing the restaurant onto his three daughters. It reopened in the fall of 1946, just in time for the first Cannes Film Festival. Through the late '40s and the '50s the restaurant's fortunes soared. Picasso, who had moved full-time to the area, became a frequent fixture. "He used to do the ice cream cones outside," says Pierre-Jacques Marquise, the great grandson of Tetou (and nephew of Jacky) who runs the restaurant today. "He would draw a little picture, sign it, wrap it around the cone, give it to the kids. They'd eat the ice cream and throw it away."

The restaurant's guest books are a trove of impromptu sketches and amusing inscriptions from the early days to the present. On one page is an entry from the grand duke of Russia; on another, Ella Fitzgerald, dining with legendary jazz impresario Norman Granz. "Yves Montand, he came in often," says Pierre-Jacques, flipping through a guest book's yellowed pages one afternoon. There's David Niven, John Huston, Pél , Sergio Leone. Marc Chagall left a sketch; so did Tim Burton and Quentin Tarantino. Julian Schnabel drew his dining companion, Dan Aykroyd (in town to promote his *Blues Brothers* redux). "Pedro Almod var," says Pierre-Jacques. "We send him our jams in Spain. George Clooney; he was super funny, except that he was flirting with my wife in the parking lot."

Pierre-Jacques came of age in the restaurant—Tetou is his great-grandfather on his mother's side. When

his parents split up in the late '70s, he moved with his dad, at 15, to start a new life in Southern California. His father's American branch of Tetou opened shortly thereafter in Calabasas, California, featuring bouillabaisse made with Pacific fish. Patrons of the C te d'Azur original, among them Robert Wagner, Natalie Wood and Quincy Jones, showed up for the opening. Pierre-Jacques attended the Lyc e Fran ais, alongside celebrity kids like Jodie Foster. He would see many of his classmates again after he returned to Golfe-Juan in 1982, when he officially joined the family business. "My grandmother immediately sent me to wash dishes," he says.

After the film festival, throughout summer's high season, Tetou becomes packed with mostly affluent families out for long, languorous lunches fueled by plenty of Provence ros . The restaurant runs a small beach club next door, renting out lounge chairs around changing cabanas. You can swim, shower, change and then come in to eat. The bouillabaisse is an annual tradition for well-to-do continentals who return year after year to villas nearby or suites in the H tel du Cap (as it is for more modest vacationers out for a once-a-year splurge).

"We have some clients, we know the first night they'll go to Tetou and the last night they'll go to Tetou, for years and years, it's a well-worn path," says Gilles Bertolino, head concierge at the du Cap. "They will go to the H tel du Cap every year and to Tetou every year. It's part of the trip." Many hotel regulars reserve a table at the restaurant the minute they check in—just as Hollywood mogul Marvin Davis did moments after arriving in July 1993. Never mind that armed thieves had held up his limousine en route to the hotel from

the airport, swiping \$10 million in jewels from his wife. "I was amazed he was so calm," says Bertolino. "That was his medication, I guess, his happy place."

Roman Coppola dined at the restaurant for the first time in 1974, when he was 9 years old and accompanying his father, Francis Ford Coppola, to Cannes (*The Conversation*, his paranoid thriller, took the festival's top prize that year). He's been back many times since. "You see familiar faces year after year," he says. "They remember when I was a little kid sleeping under the table."

New dining venues have come into the H tel du Cap's beau monde orbit over the years. Bacon, a more formal seafood restaurant nearby with its own very good bouillabaisse, has its partisans among the hotel's A-list guests. Le Michelangelo, in Antibes, famous for its truffled pizzas and gregarious impresario-owner, hosts its fair share of star-studded soir es (George and Amal Clooney were spotted there this year). No restaurant, though, is more closely linked to the hotel than Tetou.

Pierre-Jacques and Bertolino grew up together in Golfe-Juan; their careers have run parallel for 30 years. "Tetou always saves their best tables, *la bordure*, the first row, for our clientele," says the concierge. Guests can even charge the meal to their room. "It's an extension of the hotel, a true partner," he says.

For a while, beginning in the 1990s, the close ties between the hotel and restaurant frayed after a guest, Hollywood producer Richard Zanuck, didn't get the table he wanted. "The restaurant was full; what could we do?" says Pierre-Jacques. The outraged producer complained to the hotel's general manager, Jean-Claude Irondele, who responded by issuing an official ban on sending guests to Tetou, a fatwa that endured until his retirement in 2005. Bertolino and his crew continued to book on the sly, though. "I think it made people want to go there even more," he says. In the log book they marked "PJ," code for Pierre Jacques, instead of "Tetou."

The restaurant is "one of the few places where you can still feel what F. Scott Fitzgerald found on the Riviera," as *Vanity Fair France* editor in chief Anne Boulay describes Tetou. But it might not survive in its time warp much longer. Lately Tetou has been fighting for its life on the beach, so close to the breakers the Mediterranean froth at high tide almost laps at the windows. The restaurant is battling a 10-year-old French law forbidding seasonal bars and restaurants like Tetou—open March thru October—from having permanent structures along the coast. The letter of that littoral law demands dismantling the existing landmark structure and starting all over again with something less permanent. Although the law has been enforced sporadically by the government so far, with local discretion, the situation has left Tetou in a state of legal limbo.

With the new mayor of its seaside community showing no support, however, the restaurant's future is beginning to look bleak. "For the moment we're arguing that everything *can* be taken down," says Pierre-Jacques. "With the elections though they're not focused on this. I think we're safe for the next year at least." ●