

APRIL 17, 2023

Brooklyn's Biggest Little Oyster Bar

By **ELIZA DUMAIS** Illustration by **NICK HENSLY**

After more than a decade, the story of Maison Premiere is being shared in an almanac that's part-history book, part absinthe primer, and all their own.

In a city as unsentimental as New York, dining mainstays are a rarefied thing. Food trends rotate, investors disappear, real estate prices spike. “If you wanna keep your doors open, you have to build a restaurant worth coming back to over and over again,” says Joshua Boissy, CEO of restaurant group *Premiere Enterprises* and cofounder of beloved Brooklyn bistro *Maison Premiere*. “But that’s not enough: You also need some lucky combination of right place and right time.” The charmingly anachronistic cocktail-and-oyster spot has altered minimally since its humble conception in 2011—even for all the outsize ways Williamsburg has evolved around it.

Designed as an homage to the classic French and New Orleans–style absinthe bars of the early 20th century, *Maison Premiere* is an aphrodisiac repository (think: oysters, mood lighting, martinis crafted tableside). Stepping inside feels akin to time traveling—not to a specific era, exactly, but to a vaguely appointed *better time*, when dining out involved proper pageantry. Waiters in bow ties and suspenders stir (never shake) gin martinis behind the bar, cocktails arrive in tailored glassware, and caviar service is always an option (predating the *caviar “bump”* movement). “I always loved places that had soul, that had a history, that had stood the test of time,” says Boissy, who opened the restaurant with his business partner and creative counterpart, Krystof Zizka, after the two revived nearby French bistro *Le Barricou* in the early aughts. “But I also loved the new craft cocktail movement, and in the early 2000s, I could rarely find both things in the same spot. We wanted to open a place that had it all: narrative, history, soul, and incredible booze.”

Now, more than a decade later, Boissy is treading new territory with a book that’s just as comprehensive: *The Maison Premiere Almanac*, coauthored by Zizka, along with novelist and food journalist *Jordan Mackay* and *Maison*’s longtime managing partner and executive bar director, William Elliott. It’s not a memoir—but it’s not NOT a memoir either. “Almanac” is an intentional term, one that speaks to the neither-here-nor-there-ness of the text: part French history book, part absinthe primer, part recipe book, part origin story. “We didn’t want to write a book that was meant to live, closed, on top of a table,” says Boissy. “We wanted it to be a handbook, ready to use, always in reach.” Ahead of the book’s release, Boissy sat down with TASTE to talk dining dress codes, horseshoe bars, and the true meaning of “almanac.”

Can you tell me the *Maison Premiere* origin story?

In 2007, I was 22 years old, and I lived above a restaurant called *Le Barricou* on Grand Street in Williamsburg. It was sort of a middling French restaurant, but I ate there often enough, out of convenience. I hardly ever saw the owner, Jean-Pierre Marquet, but the one time we did meet, we had a great conversation about the restaurant industry and fly-fishing and North Brooklyn. I didn’t think anything of it until, two weeks later, I came home to a business card taped to my front door with two words written on it: “call me,” signed Jean-Pierre Marquet. So dramatic, I know.

Long story short, Marquet explained that his managing partner was ready to walk away—and I could buy him out and take over as partner for next to no money. For whatever reason, he was strangely adamant—he had this bizarre confidence that I was capable, that I could make the restaurant work.

Obviously, I consulted Krystof, who was my closest friend and creative counterpart in the city, and I called my mom a thousand times, and the consensus was basically, “What’s the worst that could happen?” So I told Marquet I was in—with one caveat: I wanted full creative control, as president. He agreed, I handed over \$8,000 in cash in a freezer bag, and he handed me the keys. Then . . . I had to figure out how to run a restaurant.

Lo and behold, two years later, we were doing \$2 million in yearly sales—up from the weekly \$5,000 *Le Barricou* had been doing previously. By 2009, the place was so successful, we decided we wanted to open a new place of our own. Krystof found the white box that would become *Maison Premiere*, around the corner on Bedford, and we set to work—without knowing exactly what we wanted to build. So we traveled to Paris for inspiration, we did extensive research, and we worked for hours on end, until we found our footing. Then we opened our doors in 2011, and, well, the rest is history. Or rather, you can read about it in the book.

Given that you had no experience running restaurants, how did you turn *Le Barricou* around?

Well, I started at zero. And when you start at zero, the only place to go is up. In those days, Williamsburg had very few restaurants—especially on *our* side of Williamsburg. We got lucky because we had a neighborhood that was quickly growing more populated with young people and artists, and they were hungry, literally and figuratively. And there we were: this little neighborhood bistro.

In the beginning, I just spent all this time going to my favorite New York restaurants: Balthazar, Pastis, Bar Tabac. I was obsessed with all the design touches: the light fixtures, the salt shakers, the mirrors. I spent hours and hours trying to refine the space into a more elegant, design-forward venue—until dinner service began. In those days, I was the only front-of-house employee.

I don’t think I ever formally asked Krystof to be my business partner—he just arrived and started doing things, and eventually he became *Le Barricou*’s GM. First, he completely took over the music: jazz at dinnertime, then indie rock for the evening. Soul and funk music for brunch. Then he created a coffee program—we were the first folks in Brooklyn serving *La Colombe*. He worked with the kitchen staff to revamp the menu, and he went to work on our oyster program. He focused on bringing in good bread, good produce, good wine, and I focused more closely on the interior design and the marketing and the tax forms—the business side of things. Overall, it took about two years to make *Le Barricou* into a thriving, successful restaurant with 55 employees—and by that point, we all felt like we were ready to build a place from scratch.

You guys have been known for serving the classics since *Maison Premiere* opened. How have you kept up with the ever-growing craft cocktail movement?

We wanted to focus on historic drinks that people had forgotten about: Aviations, Last Words, sidecars. We had this idea that we’d bring them back, but with lots of new personality. And for us, that meant running a cocktail program that was a bit over the top: glamorous garnishes, tableside services, vintage-inspired glassware. We wanted our “classics” to feel celebratory, grand, larger than life. We wanted to change people’s minds about drinks they’d thought they didn’t like—say, Negronis, or even piña colodas.

That said, obviously, as a restaurant, if you’re not growing, you’re dying—so we knew we couldn’t just build a successful old-school menu and leave it at that. Plus, in the early aughts, the craft cocktail movement was really taking off. Every restaurant that opened nearby also had nugget ice and excellent bartenders and inventive drinks. So, in the interest of keeping things fresh and exciting, we started adding our own variations on the classics to the menu. Right now, we have three different varieties of tableside Sazerac, and variations on both your standard Pimm’s Cup and piña coloda, among other things. And finally, the last 10% or 15% of our menu has always consisted of truly innovative, experimental, rotating cocktails. Sometimes we’ll add four drinks a season, sometimes five, but we’re not competitive in terms of numbers. We’d rather add three really good new drinks to the menu than 15 mediocre ones, just for the sake of novelty.

What spurred the decision to write a book?

Over the years, we’d had a publisher or two reach out to us about our interest in making a book. Obviously, we were so flattered every time, but I think we all wondered if we were ready—if *Maison* felt complete enough to be book-worthy. You know, once you document something like this, that’s it. In a sense, that means the story has already ended.

Right before COVID-19 struck, we took a meeting with this writer, Jordan Mackay, and he really sold us on the idea. He was really excited about our story, and it made *us* excited too. So we agreed. Then, of course, we went into quarantine. *Eater* published a story claiming that *Maison* had shut down entirely, which wasn’t true, and that spurred all kinds of silly drama. Everything felt difficult and chaotic, but at the same time, I think we all felt like we wanted to be in control of the narrative again. We wanted to work on this book.

People have always viewed us the way that they want to view us. Some will say, “Oh, it’s a New Orleans place.” And some will say, “Oh, no, it’s a Brooklyn hipster place.” And some will say, “It’s an oyster place,” or, “It’s a French bistro,” or “It’s an absinthe spot.” So when we decided to work on the book, it was the first time we felt like *we* could explain who we were, in *our* words.

What did the book writing and cowriting process look like?

To be honest, it was so much more challenging than I ever imagined—and I think we all felt that way. Of course, opening a restaurant is immensely complicated and difficult and taxing, but the book was equally complicated because we’d never done anything like it before. There was no blueprint to follow.

While we were first quarantined, Jordan was in California. Will was in New York. I was in London with Krystof. We were all in completely different time zones—by *many* hours. And somehow, for the sake of the book, we were supposed to be this unified, creative force. Gathering information and meeting deadlines was always a challenge. It was hard to inspire and motivate each other because we weren’t getting dressed up and going into work together like we usually do. And then, closing *Maison* really impacted all of us. At one point, we were like, “How do we write a book about *Maison* while *Maison* is closed—and may never reopen?”

But eventually, deep into the process, once we started flowing, we could see the material piling up. Someone would turn in one thing, and it would energize the rest of us. Then, at some point, Jordan came to my house in Upstate New York for a few days. We spent lots of time foraging for ramps, cooking everything, and drinking wine, and he would just interview me for hours—we talked about everything under the sun, and he recorded. And then he went out to Bellport, Long Island, and did the same thing with Krystof. Then he did the same thing with Will. And after those sessions, we all knew he’d tapped into something—that we could trust him to tell our story better than we ever could.

Of course, you can’t capture everything. But the way Jordan documented all of that material was beautiful. It gave me chills—honestly, it was really emotional. When I first read the draft, I was like, “I can’t wait for people to read this.”

Cook with us.

Get our freshest features and recipes weekly.

your@email.com

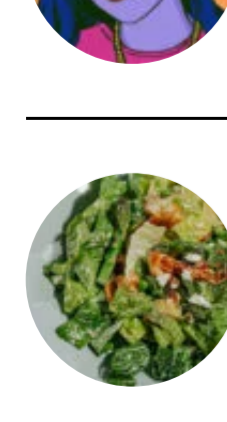
GO

By clicking Go, I agree to receive news and updates from TASTE and Penguin Random House. I acknowledge that I have read and agree to the Penguin Random House [Privacy Policy](#) and [Terms of Use](#) and understand that Penguin Random House collects certain categories of personal information for the purposes listed in that policy, [discusses with or about certain personal information](#) and [shares personal information](#) in accordance with the [policy](#). You can [opt out](#) of the sale or sharing of personal information anytime.

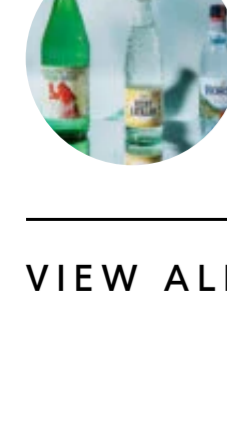
by

ELIZA DUMAIS

MOST RECENT FEATURES



This Is TASTE 384: Ghia's Got Flavor with Mélanie Masarin
April 10, 2024



Salad-for-Dinner Season Is Here
April 10, 2024



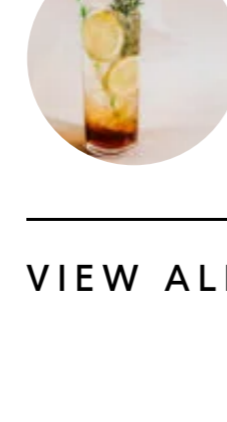
Mineral Water Gets the Silent Treatment
April 9, 2024

VIEW ALL

MOST RECENT RECIPES



Big Green Spring Salad
April 9, 2024



15-Minute Puttanesca with Tuna
March 26, 2024

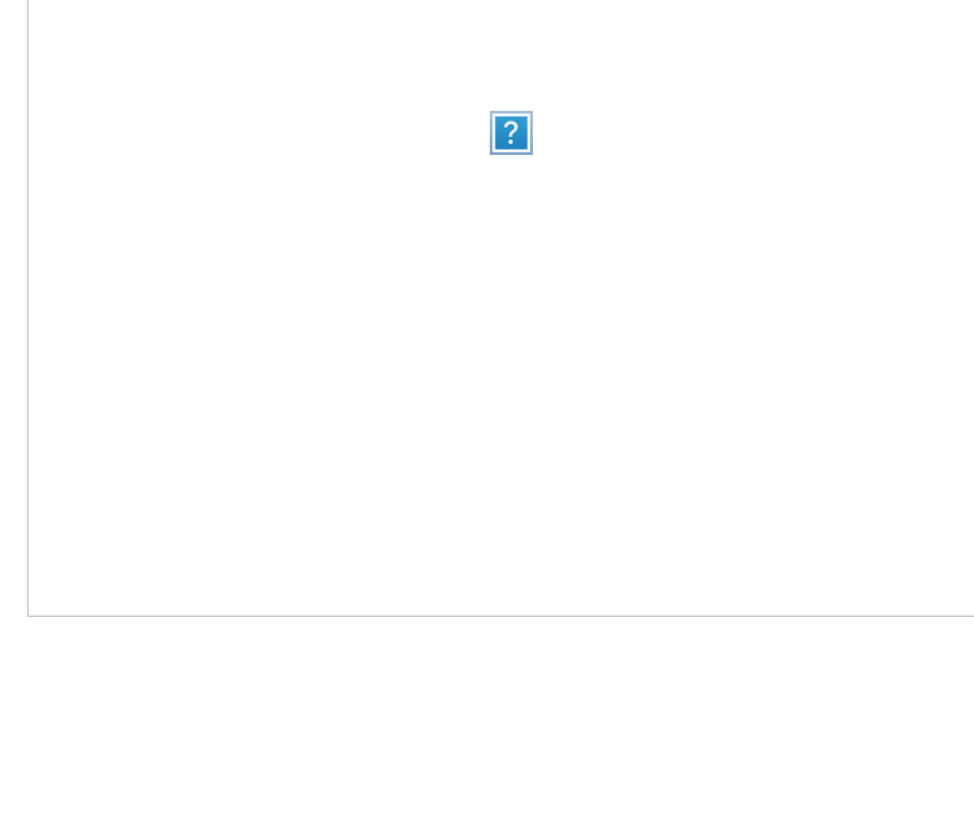


Fancy Housemade Soda
March 20, 2024

VIEW ALL

FROM INSTAGRAM

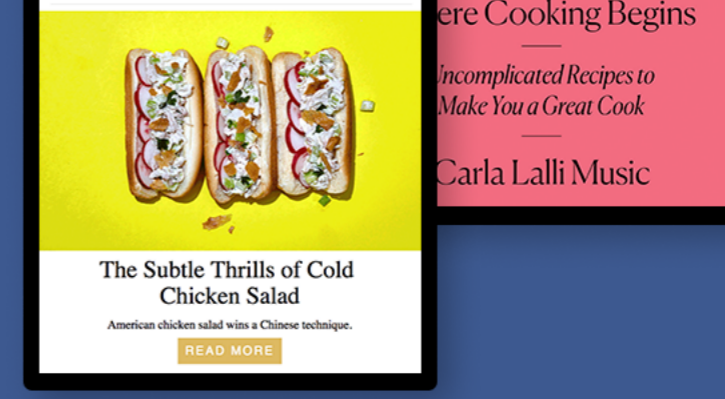
Taste Instagram Photo



Get TASTE (Almost) Daily

The latest in food culture, cooking, and more.

Stay in touch with TASTE



TASTE

ABOUT US PRIVACY & COOKIES TERMS AFFILIATE PROGRAM DISCLOSURE

DO NOT SELL MY PERSONAL INFORMATION

COPYRIGHT 2024 - TASTE, A DIVISION OF PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE LLC.
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.