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## Starck's Reality

The Designer on Flea Markets and Food

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# At Philippe Starck's Table

BY TOBIAS GREY

**W**hen designer Philippe Starck touches down in his native France after one of his many trips abroad, he heads not for the swanky shops of Le Marais or the Boulevard St. Michel but for the Marché aux Puces de St.-Ouen, on the outskirts of Paris.

Mr. Starck developed what has become the habit of a lifetime as a small child in the 1950s, exploring the famous flea market's narrow alleyways with his airplane-designer father, André.

"It was one of several outings my father used to take me on," says Mr. Starck, now a youthful-looking 63-year-old with several days' growth of beard and a pair of half-moon spectacles perched on the end of his nose. "I don't think he was at all interested by furniture or knickknacks; what interested him was building human relationships."

This sentiment lives on in Mr. Starck, who prizes the flea market for its unique atmosphere above all else. "The Marché aux Puces has always been for me a kind of utopian society with a particularly French accent," he says. "It assembles a synthesis of French society which is cultivated, has a sense of humor, a special way of speaking and a rather secretive way of being—without much snobbery."

But for years Mr. Starck couldn't shake off the feeling of being an outsider. "When it was lunchtime, I would see the stall-holders bring out their tables, bottles of Champagne, red wine and copious amounts of food, which they'd eat and drink in an atmosphere of laughter and shouting," he says.

"For decades I was incredibly jealous," he adds. "Finally my wife [Jasmine] and I said to ourselves that the one way we could have our own table would be to buy a stand at the Puces where we could cook our own food and invite our friends."

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**'The Marché aux Puces has always been for me a kind of utopian society with a particularly French accent.'**

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The Starcks were on the verge of executing this modest plan just over two years ago, when they acquired a charming ivy-covered stall, Le Pavillon de Lièvre, in the high-end Paul Bert et Serpette sector of the market. But the organizers of the Marché aux Puces had another, more ambitious idea that they felt would help to re-energize the recession-hit market. "Why not open a res-





taurant?" they asked Mr. Starck. "That way everybody can come."

So while Le Pavillon de Liège lies empty (Mr. Starck's plans for it remain alive but under wraps for the moment), a little further down, at the entry of the Paul Bert et Serpette sector, a fleet of SUVs and limousines line the street around the back of Ma Cocotte—the latest culinary address to set Parisians abuzz.

Built on the site of a piece of waste ground and a converted warehouse, the €5.5 million, 250-seat restaurant has been designed by Mr. Starck from top to bottom. It is owned by husband-and-wife team Philippe and Fabienne Amzalak, with whom he also collaborated on the restaurant Bon, which opened in Paris's upscale 16th arrondissement in 2005.

From the outside, Ma Cocotte resembles a solid, if rather chic, workmen's canteen—a "Monopoly house," in Mr. Starck's words—with its redbrick ground level beneath a gray zinc first floor. The inside is almost entirely decorated with objects that Mr. Starck picked out from the flea-market over the course of two years.

There is a studied harmony to it all, from the colored dining plates embedded in some of the concrete walls to the diamond-shaped tiles on the floors. Indeed, one of the waiters whispers that every corner of the restaurant

has been photographed, to ensure no object strays from its designated spot.

"As it's me who put everything more or less in place, for me it is very clear why everything has its place," says Mr. Starck. "But if someone else comes along with another idea, then they can move things, with pleasure."

Down in the basement, the space-age bathrooms look like a set from Stanley Kubrick's "2001." On the ground floor, an open-plan kitchen and several long tables give the restaurant a communal feel, though there is also a small salon for hosting private meals. On the top floor, a cocktail bar and book-lined lounge surrounded by a spacious outdoor terrace are perfect for a laid-back lunch.

The mostly organic food, courtesy of chef Yannick Papin (previously of the restaurant Bon), is reasonably priced—the lunch menu, including main and starter, starts at €19, the dinner menu at €30—and filling, with the fish and chips a notable highlight.

"Over the years I've observed the atmosphere at other people's tables, where there was no elaborate décor—simply human warmth and intelligence," Mr. Starck says. "I decided to create Ma Cocotte in the same way, without any elaborate decoration or fashionable trappings. Perhaps that is why it's become such a big success."



Stéphane Remael for The Wall Street Journal





Much has been made of Mr. Starck's remarkable ability to marry different objects and perspectives. So it is especially enlightening to hear how he chose Ma Cocotte's furnishings, many of which are from the melting-pot period of the 1940s up to 1955, when Scandinavian and especially American influences began to filter into France.

"Sometimes there is a moment of poetry," he says. "That is when I buy something. I buy a moment. I think of the person who made the object and their inspiration. When I create something, I do it for the person who is in front of me; when I buy something, I buy it for the person who was behind it."

Now that the Starcks finally have their own table at the Puces, Mr. Starck professes to eating there "whenever possible." Holding court with his "tribe" of collaborators and friends, he relishes what he describes as a place "where everyone feels at home."

A staunch socialist (he famously designed the interior of the Élysée Palace for President François Mitterrand and his wife) and self-described "democratic" designer, in favor of creating affordable work accessible to as many people as possible, Mr. Starck has in recent years turned his talents to luxury designs, be it the interiors of glamorous Paris hotels like Le Meurice and Le Royal Monceau, or a number of super-yachts, including one for the late Steve Jobs. His lat-

est interior design is for an Asian-fusion restaurant, Miss Ko, which is opening on the Avenue Georges V in Paris later this month.

"There are still as many democratic things I do as luxury ones," he says, citing Ma Cocotte as an example. "The problem is that the media always prefers to talk about luxury things as opposed to democratic ones. So it's a vision which is lopsided.... Today, I think it's very interesting to do both because, like Robin Hood, I use the rich to give to the poor. If I am able to study how to make things for the rich, I can then see if I can adapt these creations for people with less money."

Mr. Starck has recently designed a line of prefabricated houses, P.A.T.H., which he says will produce more energy through solar-paneling and wind turbines than they consume. The houses will cost around €1,000 a square meter—slightly cheaper than state-subsidized HLM housing—according to Slovenian company Riko, which will bring them to market throughout Europe later this year.

P.A.T.H. is just one of many projects, many of them ecologically linked, that Mr. Starck has planned. But anyone trying to guess what will come next is likely to come up short. "I spend a lot of time and energy covering my tracks so as never to be pigeonholed," he says. "I never liked things in square-shaped boxes—I prefer tracing diagonals."



**MORE PLEASE** | Left page, Philippe Starck at Ma Cocotte in the Marché aux Puces de St-Ouen; the restaurant at the entry of the Paul Bert et Serpette sector; its gray zinc first floor and redbrick ground floor, both decorated with objects from the market. This page from top, the ivy-covered facade of the Starcks' stall, Le Pavillon de Lière; a view of the market.





## A Twist on the Everyday

Philippe Starck is renowned for turning everyday household objects into quirky, sought-after collectibles. "All my life I've wanted to make them bearable," he says, "to imbue them with a bit of love, a bit of poetry, a bit of sexiness, to the point where the object becomes less vulgar and boring." Here are five of his most enduring creations.



**MISS SISSI**  
These robust table lamps in dyed polycarbonate were introduced in 1990 for the Hotel Paramount in New York. Available in multiple colors, they are currently produced by Flos (around €94).

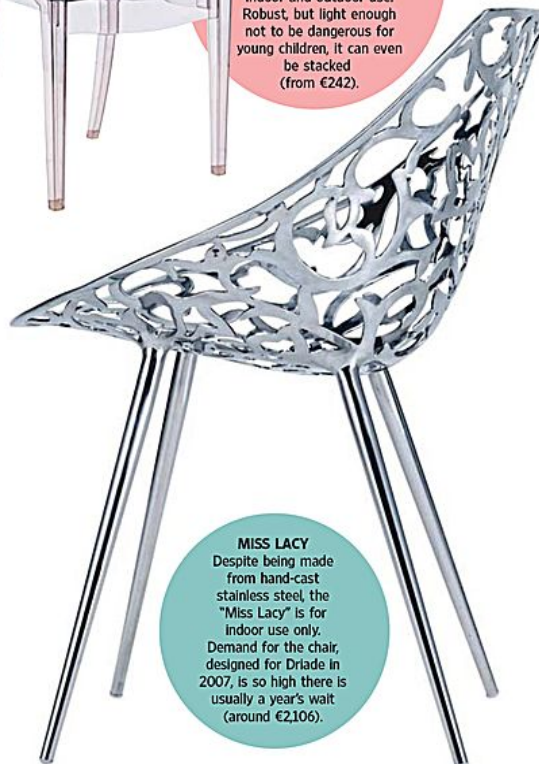
**JUICY SALIF**  
Inspired by the squid he had eaten for lunch, Mr. Starck drew the prototype for his famous stainless steel lemon squeezer on a napkin. It was brought to market by Alessi in 1990. "The 'something else' with the 'Juicy Salif' is that as well as squeezing lemons it also squeezes the conversation," Mr. Starck says (€59).



**OUR FIRE**  
This crystal candleholder, which Mr. Starck designed for French firm Baccarat, is handmade in France using a centuries-old technique to create a deep, rich color and characteristic sparkle (around €695).



**LOUIS GHOST**  
Created for the Italian firm Kartell in 2002, the clear polycarbonate "Louis Ghost" armchair is exceptionally well-balanced and suitable for both indoor and outdoor use. Robust, but light enough not to be dangerous for young children, it can even be stacked (from €242).



**MISS LACY**  
Despite being made from hand-cast stainless steel, the "Miss Lacy" is for indoor use only. Demand for the chair, designed for Driade in 2007, is so high there is usually a year's wait (around €2,106).

Philippe Starck