



Left and right: The pretty building dates back to the 15th century

WORDS: STEPHANIE SHELDRAKE

“It’s more like an inn than a hotel; it’s an old home. There’s something very familial, convivial and charming about it”

For writer, cook and blogger Jamie Schler, running a hotel is something that comes quite naturally. Originally from Florida, Jamie moved to France back in 1987 and she and her French husband Jean-Pierre Dagneaux have lived in both Paris and Nantes before deciding to move to Chinon in 2015 where they now run Hôtel Diderot.

The couple had reached the point in their lives where they wanted to run their own business, and with Jean-Pierre’s experience in change management and Jamie’s experience in the field of culinary tourism, running a cosy hotel seemed the ideal fit for them.

“We registered with a national brokerage firm that bought and sold hotels and restaurants, and we were looking at areas where there was a large Anglophone clientele, and a regular all-year-round business clientele, but also tourists. But we didn’t want mass tourism; we wanted people who were more into gastronomic or wine cultural tourism,” reveals Jamie.

Then one day out of the blue an estate

agent called to say he had a hotel for sale in Chinon that matched their requirements. “We weren’t really looking for properties in that area, but then he sent us the photos and we knew it was the one!” she remembers. “You have this idea in your head of your perfect hotel. And this was it.”

While the couple weren’t familiar with Chinon, they soon realised it was the perfect location for them. “Chinon is a beautifully preserved medieval small town with a fortress and it’s a centre of wine and gastronomy - it just had everything we wanted.”

The pretty limestone building was built in the 15th century and the top floors were renovated in the 18th century. “It was originally built as a home, so it’s very charming and beautiful,” says Jamie, who adds that it was important that the hotel had a friendly and homely feel. “We wanted it to feel more like a home than a hotel,” she says. With 26 guest rooms, the hotel was big enough to be financially viable and small enough to still have a family feeling. ▶



WHO:

American writer, cook and blogger Jamie Schler and her French husband Jean-Pierre Dagneaux

WHERE:

Chinon, Indre-et-Loire

WHAT:

Hôtel Diderot dating back to the 15th century

WHY:

To run their own business where they can use their existing skills in culinary tourism and project management

© JEAN-JACQUES ASTIE

RENOVATION WORK

The building became a hotel in the 1960s and Jamie and Jean-Pierre are the fourth family to run it. When they took it on there were seven rooms left to renovate before they started to refresh the ones that had been previously decorated.

The couple decided to live in the hotel for one year to really understand how the building and the garden 'live' before starting any work. "We upgraded everything behind the scenes that had been neglected: the equipment, the bar, organisational procedures for the staff. Then we renovated our first room and the garden," she says. "Last winter we renovated three rooms and this winter we're renovating two more. So we'll only have two more rooms to renovate and three that we want to refresh. And then we'll be there," says Jamie, who adds that owning an old building means that there is a constant process of refreshing and updating.

A MIX OF STYLES

When it came to interior design, the couple picked up where the former owner had left off. "All the rooms are different sizes; different shapes so the former owners decided to decorate each one individually.

"Most of the rooms have antique furniture - headboards, armoires, side tables and it's a mix and match of styles. Some bits come from old homes, some belonged to neighbours. A lot of the furniture that has ended up in the hotel has come from neighbours who have downsized. It's all odds and ends," says Jamie. ▶



Left:
"Most of the rooms have fabric on the walls. As far as I know, it's traditional in this region because the homes are built of limestone, so in a lot of the buildings (even the restaurants), the walls are covered in fabric for insulation and warmth."

Right:
"In the basement next door we discovered some old antique headboards and we decided to restore one and make it the centrepiece for one of the bedrooms. We decorated the room in a very modern style but it has this antique headboard as its centrepiece which is fun."




"The dining room is very interesting because when the building was restored the owner discovered the original 16th-century fireplace. The fireplace and the beams are original which make it a really unique room. In the corner is an antique armoire where the jams are stored - I don't know how many decades it has been there but it's a fascinating piece of furniture and people often take photos of it"

PASSION FOR COOKING

When Jamie took on the hotel, she also took on the role of jam maker - something that she really enjoys. "I've always been a home baker and I love playing with the flavours and inventing new things," says Jamie, whose cookbook *Orange Appeal*, with sweet and savoury recipes inspired by oranges, was published last year.

Most of the fruit comes from neighbours' gardens and they regularly turn up on her doorstep laden with fruit. "When a neighbour shows up with 30kg of greengage plums, I then spend a week making greengage plum jam," she says, adding that often she will try to freeze produce so she can cook off-season too. She reveals that she makes approximately 1,000 jars of jam in a year. "Now I've been doing it for three years I've got the feel for it. I can do it with my eyes closed" she laughs.

It seems that for Jamie, her passion for food, culture and hospitality has been the perfect recipe for her success. 

hoteldiderot.com

lifesafeast.net



Jamie Schler's citrus-inspired cookbook *Orange Appeal* is out now. Published by Gibbs Smith and retails at \$24.99 / £18.99. Available on Amazon.



Above:

"The garden and terraces are a very big attraction for clients - it's a nice place to have a glass of wine in the afternoon and we serve breakfast there in spring and summer."

Left:

"I spend a lot of time making jam which guests can enjoy at breakfast. It's a tradition from the first hotel owner in the 1960s - the jams have always been made on the premises and I feel like I won the lottery because that's my job now."