the comforts of home

At La Villa, a Paris restaurant by Gilles & Boissier, diners are encouraged to loosen their ties.

Maison Boulud in Beijing, the LAN Club in Shanghai, Hakkasan in Istanbul and Miami Beach, Cha Cha Moon in London. These are only a few of the highly lauded restaurants for which Patrick Gilles and his wife, Dorothee Boissier, are responsible. Yet until now, rather bizarrely, they had never designed one in their home city, Paris. "Nobody ever proposed a project of a significant enough scale," Boissier explains. That just changed. Gilles & Boissier's La Villa has opened a stone's throw from the Arc de Triomphe, in a typically Haussmannian building that once housed Galerie Durand-Ruel—renowned for buying and selling literally thousands of paintings by Claude Monet and Pierre-Auguste Renoir around the turn of the last century.

The renovation included installing larger windows on the ground level of this 19th-century building near the Arc de Triomphe.
There was already a 4,000-square-foot restaurant space on the building's ground level when Gilles & Boissier was hired. The brief for La Villa was the antithesis of a Paris bistro—something more like the 1960's Hollywood mansion that the feckless Peter Sellers character wanders through in Blake Edwards's The Party. Expanding on the California idea, the designers also took inspiration from the songs of the Rat Pack. ("Dean Martin as opposed to Frank Sinatra," Gilles clarifies.) The overall approach was rather cinematographic. "It was almost as if we were writing a film script. The story evolves through the different spaces," Boissier says.

The first scene opens in a terrace dining area set off from the sidewalk by boxwood in oak planters. With a white canvas awning overhead and wooden planks underfoot, you could be on the deck of a luxury yacht. Urbanity enters the picture right inside the huge new front windows, in a lounge and bar where white tufted banquets back up to elaborately carved boiserie. To increase the element of surprise, the main dining room is invisible from here. It's reached via a corridor lined with pink glass panels—Gilles calls it a "tunnel to draw you in."

At the far end, you emerge into a 16-foot-high space capped by a spectacular oval skylight surrounded by a ceiling covered in leaf motifs drawn by an artist. "He works without any preliminary sketches. It's almost as if he's in a trance," Gilles says. Doric columns and tall potted plants ring the room's perimeter, evoking the grand hotels of the 1930's. The goal, he explains, is to "make people dream of faraway places." Boissier concurs: "You could be in Singapore or Havana."

Averse to typical Michelin three-star stuffiness, she prefers sophistication and elegance that's a little laid-back, like a "slightly slippersh tuxedo." The boiserie may be formal, but the 1950's floral linen on banquettes and throw pillows is California casual. Meanwhile, the rectilinear lines of the architecture are offset by sensual curves, starting with the entry's velvet-covered sofa. Almost all the furnishings
Opposite top: Custom brass sconces are mounted on brushed-oak paneling in the lounge.
Opposite bottom: The entry's sofa, covered in wool velvet, faces a lacquered desk. Both are custom.
Top: For the bar's sidewall, a John Stewart photograph was printed on canvas and distressed with an electric sander. Bottom, from left: Leather upholsters a banquette in the lounge. Hanging over the polished-granite bar counter, a custom pendant fixture has a shade made from watercolor paper.
are custom. However, the dining room's rug, meant to look like someone set fire to a traditional Aubusson, was a Gilles & Boissier design already in production.

Tiling the floor everywhere except the dining room, limestone was subjected to flames, hammers, and an acid bath. Gilles and Boissier often go to great pains, in fact, to add a bit of wear and tear. "We consider a project successful," she says, "when people tell us, 'You'd think it's always been there.'"

At La Villa, the couple even resorted to an electric sander to distress the bar's photomural, an odalisque printed on canvas. The original shot is by John Stewart, something of a living legend in his 90s. He worked with Alexey Brodovitch at Harper's Bazaar in the 1950's and subsequently returned to Burma—where he'd spent years as a prisoner during World War II, building the notorious bridge over the River Kwai—to serve as technical adviser for David Lean's film on the subject.

History of a sunnier sort plays a part in a current Gilles & Boissier project, a restaurant at the Grand Palais, built for the Exposition Universelle of 1900. Yes, that's again in Paris—as are a couple of other restaurants the firm is working on. All three are due to open in September.
Opposite top: The dining room's new plaster columns, which serve a strictly decorative purpose, surround a rug by Gilles & Boissier.

Opposite bottom: An artist, Cyriene Chabert, drew in felt-tip pen on the ceiling.

Top, from left: A 1950's linen pattern covers a banquette and pillows in the dining room. Custom serving tables combine lacquered tops and oak bases.

Bottom: Back-painted glass, framed in lacquered oak, lines the corridor between the entry and the dining room. The floor tile, a flamed limestone, was furthermore pounded with a hammer and treated with acid.