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new glory days

Sensational in the 18th century but dilapidated by the 20th, the gardens of the Château de Saint-Loup are on their way back

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SET IN A RIVER VALLEY west of Poitiers, the 17th-century château seems almost a mirage on a misty morning. Here the rear facade overlooks the work-in-progress *jardin potager*, which takes up almost five acres and is lined with an allée of old chestnut trees.



A REAR VIEW OF THE CHATEAU shows its 17th-century core. The medieval keep, visible through the trees, contains a dungeon where Jean le Bon was imprisoned by the English in 1356. The cobblestone canal dates from 1631 and welcomes wild duck and heron.



“The whole point about Saint-Loup is that it is deeply rooted in enjoyment”

—Charles-Henri de Bartillat

PRIVATELY OWNED CASTLES of real historic or architectural importance are vanishing in France,” says Charles-Henri de Bartillat, a 48-year-old former international lawyer who, 18 years ago, met and fell in love with just such a castle, Château de Saint-Loup. As we stand before the imposing early-17th-century structure, the stone facade flaking discreetly under its proud hip roof, it is easy to imagine the impact of that first encounter. As shafts of morning light pierce the house from front to back through its long and numerous windows, all that masonry appears to be lifted inches off the ground. This is the stuff of which romance and passionate real estate deals are made.

Fifty kilometers from Poitiers and just far enough south of the Loire Valley to be officially off the beaten path, the Château de Saint-Loup—house, gardens, and extensive parkland—has spent the last two centuries in somnolent decline. Its glory days were in the eighteenth century, when the property’s wealthy and enlightened owners lavished it with every refinement, and, if de Bartillat can realize his ambitious dream, a portion at least of that glory may be restored in the new century.

The château itself is actually the least of its owner’s preoccupations. Once the nearly 125 acres of Saint-Loup’s gardens received the coveted designation of a *monument historique*, de Bartillat embarked on a 15-year project to restore them to the condition they enjoyed circa 1745, using national, regional, and European funding. That still leaves him with a hefty 20 to 50 percent of the tab, however, and the immense task of making sure his restorations are historically accurate.

CHARLES-HENRI DE BARTILLAT and his golden retriever, Boni, sit near the restored pavilion, opposite page. A VIEW OF THE POTAGER, this page, shows cabbages in the foreground. Eventually each section of the potager will have borders of edible, medicinal, and decorative plants, as well as rows of fruit trees lining the plots. Remains of the old surrounding wall have been uncovered and will be restored.



"I can't stand things to be average. I need them to be perfect," de Bartillat insists with his customary energy. "This isn't about my vision or taste but about fidelity to history. I go to the best people, because I want to learn, and learn well." One of those people is Joël Cottin, the head gardener at Versailles, who has

taken an interest in the project and stops by on occasion to offer guidance. Excluding the areas of clipped lawn fronting the house, which, for the moment, are "just being kept tidy," the focus of this white heat is Saint-Loup's *jardin potager*, which occupies almost five acres behind the house. Today—after only two years of

restoration—this part of the garden is again a stunning assemblage of squares and rectangles that are gradually being given over to artichoke and pumpkin, raspberries and asparagus: a kitchen garden rivaled only, perhaps, by Villandry's. Leaving what de Bartillat calls the architecture vegetal of the *potager*, we



THE INNER COURTYARD of the orangery, above, is filled with portable citrus trees and fragrant flowers. In the foreground are green-glaze vases from Anduze. **THE MAIN COURTYARD**, top right, looks out onto the orangery. **BONI**, right, is an expert on the orangery's suitability as a place of rest and contemplation.

The decoration on the roof of the orangery is meant to underscore the festive nature of this part of the garden



PLUM, PEACH, AND APRICOT trees are espaliered along the walls of the orangery's outer courtyard. The wedge-shaped islands are bordered in snapdragon and box.



THE ROMANTIC PAVILION, above, which resembles an elegant dollhouse, is the perfect place for intimate dinners. Before its restoration, the pavilion's roof had completely caved in. Today it straddles the canal, faithful in every detail to its 1745 incarnation. DE BARTILLAT FOUND the design for the garden bench, left, in an engraving by Fragonard.

head for the orangery, first crossing an allée of mature chestnuts and the seventeenth-century canal that leads down to the restored pavilion, a perfect venue for romantic dinners. The orangery is the part of the garden that is most nearly completed. Entering the larger of its two courtyards, one is struck by the color and order: serene green quadrants crossed by narrow gravel paths

are punctuated at measured intervals by wooden planters and beautiful earthenware jars containing citrus trees. In the second, wedge-shaped garden, eighteenth-century wooden benches copied from a Fragonard engraving invite the visitor to sit while surveying the espaliered fruit trees that line the honey-hued walls.

It's a grandiose plan, Saint-Loup. But

no matter how difficult the road ahead, de Bartillat is determined that the garden retain its connection to pleasure. "The whole point about Saint-Loup is that it is deeply rooted in enjoyment," he says during our garden ramble. When he notices a visitor resting on a grassy verge, he exclaims, "See that fellow over there! He's not concerned about chervil or chives. He's just happy to be here."