

# In France, a Labyrinth of a House



Susan Herrmann Loomis, a food writer, chef and cooking teacher lives in Louviers, France.  
Owen Franken for The New York Times

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## LOUVIERS, France

When Susan Herrmann Loomis recently remarked on the “dark” side of her adopted French town, she was referring to the local exorcisms and burnings of two priests accused of witchcraft in 1647.

But she also could have been speaking of the troubled spirits who she suspects inhabit one room of her ancient house, which stands across from a Gothic church in this Norman town about 100 kilometers (62 miles) north of Paris.

Ms. Herrmann Loomis, a food writer, chef and cooking teacher, lives in a 12th-century house whose rambling layout pairs well with its lengthy history.

The structure on Rue Tatin, which also is the name of one of Ms. Herrmann Loomis’s memoirs and of her cooking school has about 350 square meters (3,800 square feet) of living space. There are 15 rooms on three levels, in a kind of labyrinth, with a creaky spiral staircase to the second floor and two more staircases to separate third-floor rooms on slightly different levels.

The house has clay roof tiles, two fireplaces, a mishmash of wooden beams throughout, a garden area and a property dividing wall made partly from old tombstones. It also has a roomy stone wine cellar that was part of an underground tunnel system the village’s Catholics used to escape from the French Huguenots in the 16th century, at least according to local residents.



Ms. Herrmann Loomis in her kitchen.  
Owen Franken for The New York Times

“That said, it might be false, but it makes a great story,” Ms. Herrmann Loomis said.

After buying the house in 1993, Ms. Herrmann Loomis and her husband, Michael Loomis, a sculptor, attempted to preserve its ancient character. The couple, who have since divorced, retained the single-paned windows that date back a century and even left a strip of old washed-out blue-gray paint in the master bedroom.

“This house has a lot of feel to it,” Ms. Herrmann Loomis said. “I didn’t want to lose too much of that.”

The house’s only room with distinctly modern touches is the kitchen, where Ms. Herrmann Loomis teaches cooking to students from around the world. Designed by Mr. Loomis, the room is framed with large windows and skylights and is heated by an open-hearth fireplace and a British-made cast-iron Aga oven, similar to the one in Ms. Herrmann Loomis’s childhood home in England, where her father was stationed as a United States Marine.

“It’s completely contrary to my normal environmental tendencies,” she said, while dropping coal into the oven’s bowels with a pair of tongs.

The kitchen also has what she calls her “dream” stove, an Italian-made Cometto, an industrial behemoth with six blowtorch-like gas burners, above which hang copper pots. Off to one side is her “prop room,” filled with hundreds of dishes and other kitchen gear and doubling as the family’s TV room.

Ms. Herrmann Loomis first became acquainted with Louviers in 1980 while she was an apprentice in a Parisian cooking school. As a member of Servas International, a hospitality exchange organization, she stayed with a Louviers family, and cooked for them, while on breaks from school.

She returned to live in France in 1993 to write “The French Farmhouse Cookbook,” and Louviers seemed a natural place for the then-couple to settle and to raise their son, now 18, and later their daughter, now 9.

They bought the house for 310,000 francs (\$60,000 at the time) from a Parisian antiques dealer, who had purchased it in 1975 with plans to open a shop. But the dealer never moved in and, by the time the couple bought the house, it was occupied by squatters and marked by graffiti, with holes in the floors, walls and ceilings, and mounds of rubble strewn about.

The local parish also had wanted to buy the house and when parish officials learned that the Loomises were purchasing it, the bishop from Evreux, a nearby town, called them in New York in an awkward attempt to undo the transaction. Ms. Herrmann Loomis said relations have improved over the years, and the church itself, dating to the 13th century, has become a benevolent presence in the house, with its bells sounding every 15 minutes and music from its pipe organ wafting across the street.

The couple settled into temporary quarters while Mr. Loomis began renovations and they moved in a year later. The work continued for a decade in dribs and drabs—insulating, installing heating, replacing the wooden beams—as money became available. Ms. Herrmann Loomis estimates they spent tens of thousands of euros on renovation materials, not including Mr. Loomis’s labor.

Ms. Herrmann Loomis’s house has few equals in the area. But, on average, real estate prices here generally range from 1,500 to 2,000 euros (\$1,940 to \$2,585) a square meter and a typical three-bedroom house sells for 250,000 euros (\$323,165), according to Manuela Marques, a broker with Objectif Pierre, a local real estate agency.

The real estate downturn has been felt, with brokers saying values in Louviers, a town of 20,000, have been down 15 to 20 percent over the same period the year before. But a typical recent buyer, Ms. Marques said, is a Parisian seeking a country home of authenticity, made of stone and wood, in Louviers or other nearby villages in the Seine Valley.

The house has six bedrooms and an office where Ms. Herrmann Loomis most recently has been working on her ninth book, whose working title is, “Nuts.”