



“My natural tendency is for juxtaposition because I like to display objets d’art that you wouldn’t classically see together under one roof”

WORDS: LUCY SHRIMPTON

It can be challenging confining oneself to one sentence alone to describe someone’s outlook on life, so when it comes to the type of person who would refer to Montreuil’s proximity to London as if it were a Marlow, a Maidstone or a Maldon, then really three words should do it: *Tout est possible*. And when you pay a visit to Tim Mathews’ Maison76 - once the home and working premises of generations of pharmacists and now a *maison d’hôte* - in Montreuil-sur-Mer, it’s clear to see why he is so happy to call this walled and perfectly preserved Pas-de-Calais town his home.

CAREFUL CURATOR

From the outside, bar some ornately sculpted embellishments framing the windows, this *centre-ville* townhouse looks pretty much like any other in rue Pierre Ledent. Set one foot

inside however and you can immediately see it lives up to its genre of *hôtel particulier*, with a strong sense of the contemporarily chic yet historically sensitive.

The eagle-eyed will spot the odd pharmaceutical throwback (ceramic potion bottles, the door wallpapered in original prescriptions) and - alongside the hallway collection of monochrome photographs - you get the feeling that Tim has injected some alchemy all of his own.

“My natural tendency is for juxtaposition,” says Tim, broadly gesturing towards 1920s glassware, Italian infinity mirrors and a painted panel of a life-size jockey picked up at a *vide-grenier*, “because I like to display *objets d’art* that you wouldn’t classically see together under one roof.” Despite these treasures, amassed from each era of Tim’s life and his travels, it’s an easy-going space, with neither home nor



WHO:
Tim Mathews

WHAT:
A *hôtel particulier* that was once a working pharmacy

WHY:
To start a B&B business

WHERE:
Montreuil-sur-Mer, Pas-de-Calais

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Old prescriptions make an original wallpaper

Clockwise from top left:
The striking collection of maritime-themed monochrome photographs is the first hint of Tim’s careful eye for detail; the romantic garden is planted with roses, lavender and wisteria; the drawing room is decorated with frescoes and features the original panelling and parquet flooring; the bateau-style bath makes a statement in one of the bedroom suites



Whites and greys set the tone for the choice of colour palette

Tim is clearly obsessed with the house's period features and nowhere is this more evident than in the sage-toned drawing room

(perpetually aproned) owner taking themselves too seriously, with bikes to borrow, Union Jack cockerel doorstop and 24-hour cake station to prove it. "Guests should feel a sense of homeliness and privacy, so if a guest comes down from their room in a robe, I know I've won," says Tim.

DNA DE LA MAISON

Tim is clearly obsessed with the house's period features, or DNA as he puts it, and nowhere is this more evident than in the sage-toned drawing room, oozing sumptuous Rococo styling. "If these were Gainsborough originals," mock-chokes Tim referring to the frescoes, "they'd be worth £25 million."

In actual fact, they were commissioned by owners in the 1890s, one of many facts unearthed by producers of the TV channel France 5 who recently filmed here. The DNA is detectable all through the house from the parquet flooring, pharmacist's dispensing hatch tucked away in the dining room and the polished oak staircase (trimmed with budgie trill to prevent slippage, for the record) leading to three guest bedrooms and suite.

A BEDSIDE MANNER

As befits a house with 190 years of medical heritage, bedrooms are named in honour of noteworthy French doctors, from Pasteur to lesser-known medics Madame Pelletier ("she was a radical lesbian doctor later locked up for insanity," says Tim) and Laennac, who invented the stethoscope.

But despite the property's medical connections there is no hint of the clinical here, rather a meeting of classic French styling (bird meets botanical wallpapering, antique provincial furniture), touches of chic rusticity (exposed brickwork, wooden flooring and the odd drape of faux-fur) and a restrained palette of pantone-du-jour greys.

The bedrooms go large - albeit discreetly - on



the ergonomics. "My guests of a certain age appreciate this grab pole when they come out of the shower," says Tim as an example. "They wouldn't even notice it's there, but *Le Figaro* did when they featured us."

The suite, named after former occupant Docteur Sarazin, goes one step further in giving the illusion of a home within a home, with a dressing room and freestanding bateau-style copper bath as the centrepiece. Completing the serene scene, there is an oversized sailing-boat model, some eased oils and a view of the garden, which is an intimate space with small swimming pool, tennis pavilion and stylish garden mirrors that were once Islington factory windows.

CALLING IN THE CONTACTS

While Tim clearly has a natural flair for interiors - "I banish friends and family for a few days when I move into a new property," he divulges,

"it's a deeply personal thing to unpack and plan new surroundings" - he was savvy enough to exploit some of his nearest-and-dearest when it came to specialist *savoir-faire*.

Tim's friend, the homewares designer Arianna Brissi, was key in offering advice on colour for the wall tones and soft furnishings, while Parisian buddy and *traiteur* Francis helped him to equip the kitchen right down to the very last teaspoon.

In terms of builders, Tim used the very best he could, and with one exception all of the suppliers were local.

"It's important to recruit locally if you want to align yourself with the community," he says. "Plus, if you have a post-job issue, you don't want to call someone in Kent - you want someone close at hand."

And there was plenty to do. "It was in great condition when I bought it, for the 1950s!" laughs Tim. "All the wiring was covered in material - an accident waiting to happen if ever

Main image: The sage-toned drawing room pays tribute to the house's period features, or DNA as Tim likes to think of it

Inset right: The grey colour scheme can be seen in the Pelletier bedroom and the kitchen

Inset left: The bedrooms are named in honour of noteworthy French doctors to reflect the house's medical heritage

there was one. Nothing had been touched here for 50 years."

A NEW BRAND OF B&B

"Going back to my original vision for Maison76, I took inspiration from my friends over at Le Manoir in Gouy-St-André. They redefined what constitutes a French B&B," he says, referring to how they turned the original notion of a *chambres d'hôtes* on its head, from rustic, family-run overnight stop to high-end offering.

At the time, Tim lived in nearby Sempy where he had bought and renovated a ramshackle house (or "solid tent", as he called it) and from where he would dive back and forth to London for work. "But I was looking to move to a town location to start a B&B business so that guests could enjoy a drink and not have to worry about driving back to base, or driving across the fields as the locals used to," he adds with an enigmatic wink. "When this word-of-mouth sale came up about 10 years ago, I jumped at it." ▶

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FIRM FRENCH FRIENDS

Two moments in time define Tim's history in Montreuil: the first when he turned up on a whim and a motorbike aged 18 (looking for a room for the night, unaware that he would later stay for good), and the second, "... a few years back, when the annual fireworks were almost cancelled by *Monsieur le Maire*. I stepped in to help and I was plastered in grateful *bises!*"

Tim ditched the commute four years ago and his personal life has been in French, not English, ever since. He does however admit to playing on his Englishness from time to time, amusingly adding "*Est-ce que le pape est catholique?*" and other translated idioms to the local lingo.

He has also become a key figure in Montreuil's cuisine scene, having helped to

establish La Destination Gastronomique, a quality foodie listing reflecting the fact that the town has - for such a small population of 2,000 - more foodie addresses than you can shake a baguette at. Lauding every food artisan from the *petit-producteur* at the market to the Michelin-starred, Tim has helped to put Montreuil firmly on the map.

"It's an extremely convivial community to be part of. And there's a wonderful degree of spontaneity about socialising - you just know where you need to be at any given time of day if you want to be part of the action. I think it's fair to say I'm a true local now; those *bises* after the fireworks, well... they've never really ended!" 

maison76.com

ladestinationgastronomique.com

Main image: A bateau-style copper bath is the centrepiece of the Docteur Sarazin suite, where Tim has created the illusion of a home within a home

Below left: The kitchen, equipped with the help of Tim's Parisian friend, leads out to the dining room

Below right: Guests can enjoy sitting in the summerhouse during the warmer months and looking out on the garden