The Way To a Man’s Heart

Christophe Martet cooks up some of Paris’ best action

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Christophe Martet is a happy man. After stepping down from a hectic two-year stint as president of ACT UP/Paris last September, Martet, 37, leads a nearly idyllic life. He spends mornings looking for fresh fruit and vegetables at the outdoor market, maybe stopping for a *café au lait* or a *pain au chocolat* before heading to the cheese store and the fish market to get supplies for dinner. Martet and his partner, François, are both fabulous cooks. *Pot-au-feu* (beef stew) is their specialty in the kitchen; activism is their specialty on the street.

The two *gastronomes* met at an ACT UP/Paris meeting five years ago -- soon after Martet had returned from an eight-month sojourn in New York City, where his first ACT UP meeting turned him overnight into an activist.

“I was involved in the major actions in New York, and I saw that we needed the same energy and visibility in France. There was already an ACT UP in Paris, but it drew few people and got little public attention. It was a big difference coming from New York. I felt I had arrived on another planet.”

Notoriously reserved when it comes to publicly discussing AIDS, sex, homosexuality and drug use, the French media shied away from such “private” issues; Martet gave them high visibility. He started a media committee that put AIDS and ACT UP on the map. “People had to think about AIDS since we were in the newspaper and on TV.” Martet was pivotal in large-scale actions and demonstrations, including one in Notre Dame Cathedral to protest the church’s opposition to condoms. “One year, we also put a gigantic pink condom on the obelisk in the Place de la Concorde for ’Day without Art.’ Nobody in France could ignore the epidemic after that,” he says.

Activism became a more-than-full-time occupation. “It was passionate and serious and joyful. It became the most important thing in my life -- that is, until I met my husband,” Martet says with a charming slurring of the aspirated “h,” the only trace of a French accent in his perfect English. “We realized at some point that we had to be careful not to burn out with ACT UP since there were so many responsibilities as the group grew larger. Now that I’m not president anymore, I have more time on my hands, and we are taking better care of ourselves, of our health. We cook elaborate meals for our friends. Our home is a little cocoon in the world.”

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