

So prestigious is Le Cordon Bleu cookery school's Grand Diplôme course, it's next up for Great British Bake Off champ John Whaite

He whisked, blended and baked as though his life depended on it, sacrificed his own blood on the altar of pastry perfection when he cut himself on an electric mixer, and finally triumphed in the final of The Great British Bake Off with his Heaven and Hell cake.

You might think John Whaite has done more than enough to prove his cookery skills. But he has other ideas. When he was asked what he planned to do after his win, he had just one thought: to save up for the nine-month Grand Diplôme course at Le Cordon Bleu – the most prestigious culinary qualification in the business.

Attitudes to Le Cordon Bleu have changed since the days when it was considered a suitable recreation for upper-crust young women, including the young Lady Diana Spencer, who applied to study there before deciding her future lay outside the kitchen. London's famous cookery school has undergone an astonishing metamorphosis since it was bought in 1984 by André Cointreau (of the Cointreau and Rémy Martin families). These days, it's the flagship in a network of over 40 schools worldwide, where 20,000 students annually sign up to toil over the chopping boards.

Of those taking the Grand Diplôme, a course in classical French cuisine, the majority have their sights set on a future in a professional kitchen. Which means that standards are rigorous. 'It's very tough. The first day was like being enlisted with the Army,' admits Luiz Hara, 40, who has just graduated from



John Whaite with Paul Hollywood and Mary Berry

Back to school for the Bake Off boy



Left to right, Le Cordon Bleu students Becky, Lloyd and Luiz

the Grand Diplôme. Luiz is an experienced cook who runs his own supper club, catering for dozens of people from his tiny north London kitchen. Nevertheless, he says the standards expected at Le Cordon Bleu came as a shock.

'The chefs are from the industry and you are the lowest of the low. You have to start from scratch – you learn how to behave in a kitchen, how to cut vegetables, hygiene... A typical day will start at 8am. You have to be on time, in all

the gear – the hat, hairnet and clogs. You might watch a demonstration that goes on for three hours and then you have to replicate that dish.

'You'll have four or five pans cooking together, and it's so easy to over-reduce a sauce or burn your meat. At the end of the session you bring up your plate and you're assessed. It can be difficult. I've seen people cry. I've felt incredibly demoralised at times. I was exhausted.'

And Luiz is no stranger to stress and long hours. For seven years, he worked

as an investment banker in the City. Last October he turned his back on a six-figure salary to pursue his culinary dreams. 'My gosh, I've learned so much,' he says. 'I've absolutely no regrets. I loved it. And now I could walk into a job in a professional kitchen or any career around food.' In fact, the Grand Diplôme is estimated to be the equivalent of spending some six years in a restaurant kitchen.

But what is it about cooking that makes anybody want to fork out £27,750

for a course that is clearly no picnic? 'TV has made cooking glamorous,' says Le Cordon Bleu's London head Larry Montack. 'What Jamie Oliver has done to bring food culture to a prominent position in our society is fantastic. Switch on the TV on a Saturday morning and it's all cookery shows.'

And The Great British Bake Off is also, it would seem, having a measurable effect. 'Cuisine has always been our most popular course, but now it's been overtaken by pâtisserie – it's about 60/40 now.' Montack has recently introduced a new six-week cake decorating course to meet the increased demand.

We're talking over croissants on the sunny terrace of Le Cordon Bleu's café, in a quiet square a stone's throw from the British Museum. All around, white-coated alumni are chattering in a bewildering variety of languages. There are, in fact, students of 53 nationalities taking courses here which explains why, at the beginning of this year, Le Cordon Bleu moved to Bloomsbury Square from smaller premises off Marylebone High Street.

The demand is only likely to increase: despite the recession, the restaurant industry seems constantly hungry for new talent. And savvy students are realising that the cost of the Grand Diplôme is a sound investment in a guaranteed career – unlike, perhaps, a student loan.

That was the assessment of Londoner Becky Gawn, 19, who graduated from Le Cordon Bleu this summer. 'I was going to apply to university to study science, but decided to do the Grand Diplôme instead,' she says. 'I realised there'd be a lot of debt for my degree and no guarantee of a job after.' Her investment has already paid off: she's started working at Squire's Kitchen in Surrey.

Other students are hoping their culinary skills will get them jobs in cookery writing or on TV (like alumnus Rachel Khoo of TV's Little Paris Kitchen). Many top chefs, such as Pierre Koffmann, Raymond Blanc and Tom Aikens actively recruit Le Cordon Bleu graduates. 'It's an amazing opportunity,' says Lloyd Pinder, 17, from Cardiff, who's won one of Le Cordon Bleu's first full scholarships for the Grand Diplôme. 'When they called out my name, I was overwhelmed. It will change my life.' ■

Lydia Slater

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