School dinners

WHILE OPINIONS ON CUISINE ARE HARDLY IN SHORT SUPPLY, TRUE AUTHORITY FIGURES ARE A RARITY. THE STAFF AT LE CORDON BLEU NOT ONLY KNOW THE GOOD FROM THE BAD, BUT ARE CHARGED WITH TEACHING THE NEXT GENERATION OF CHEFS HOW TO MAKE THE SAME DISTINCTION

WORDS MATT ROSS

In terms of culinary prestige, few names carry as much weight as Le Cordon Bleu. Founded in 1895 by journalist and publisher Marthe Distel, the French cooking school has risen from inauspicious beginnings to become synonymous with world-class cuisine. Today, 115 years of experience, close to 30 institutions worldwide and more than 20,000 annual enrolments highlight the fact that Le Cordon Bleu’s blue ribbon has become a global benchmark for culinary expertise.

Recipients of the school’s highest accolade – the lauded Grand Diplôme – must complete advanced courses in both pâtisserie and cuisine, and are widely accepted as aspiring talents beyond compare. For chef Loïc Malfait, academic director of Le Cordon Bleu London, the key to the school’s success is the wealth of experience the staff are able to impart to the next generation of young cooks. “Most of the master chefs here have been working for 20, 30, even 40 years. They know all the tricks of the trade. We are the best in the world because our methods and education are focused on technical abilities.”

Maintaining Le Cordon Bleu’s reputation as the finest purveyor of cooking means constantly adapting to the ever-changing face of modern cuisine. “We follow the trends,” explains Yann Barraud, head technical chef of cuisine at the London school. “I think it’s important to reflect what the industry offers. We continuously keep ourselves updated on what’s going on out there.”

Staying abreast of the latest trends is one thing, but predicting what diners may be enjoying in the future is difficult. “It’s hard to say,” chef Yann continues. “We’ve been through a lot, we’ve been through fusion and molecular gastronomy. I would say that it won’t be anything new. I think that people will want to enjoy the classics.”

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Of course, culinary fads can also change overnight if provoked in the right direction. The right celebrity chef pushing the right product can create a new trend in moments. "There can be a chef who writes a book about a shank of lamb," chef Loic explains. "At that time, a shank of lamb can cost 50p (AED 3) or less. One chef does something with it, and it appears in a restaurant, and the next thing you know it's selling for £15 (AED 85) a kilo in the supermarket. A trend can come from a chef writing a book, and how the media react to it."

If ever-shifting food fashions weren't enough, there's also been the small matter of financial storm. Not that a term at the school is a stress-free endeavour. The school has developed a reputation for high standards, so many just graduating from Le Cordon Bleu is seen as an achievement in itself.

"Cooking can be dangerous," Loic explains. "People are working with very sharp knives, so you have to be strict. It's a hard environment to work in, conditions are not the easiest, so I think it's important to teach [the students] exactly what they're going to come across when they get themselves a job out there."

It's this attention to detail and demand for perfection that makes Le Cordon Bleu years ago, is now the head pastry chef at Gordon Ramsay in Battersea." Loic recalls. "She's done extremely well. She was an exceptional student, really one-of-a-kind. I think her hard work, commitment and willingness all paid off, and now she's running the pastry section in a three Michelin-star restaurant within five years."

And with other former students boasting similar stories - one now runs a cake business that counts Elton John and Madonna among her customers - it's clear that Le Cordon Bleu remains every bit as prestigious as its hallowed name implies. "Students want to come here to learn how to cook," Yann says. "At Le Cordon Bleu, our classes are 10 - 15 to one chef, which is the nearest you'll get to a proper restaurant. I will not criticise other schools, but with them they have maybe 20 - 30 in a class and they have one chicken between four people. How students can learn from this I don't know. But at Le Cordon Bleu they have to learn on their own."

It's no more complicated than that. Le Cordon Bleu has the best staff, teaching the fundamental skills to students who want to make cooking their career. No matter what the specialty, there are techniques that every aspiring chef needs to learn. And Le Cordon Bleu remains the best place in the world to do it. "It's simple," Loic concludes. "Even if you are working with molecular gastronomy, if you have a chicken in front of you, you need to know how to cut that chicken into eight."