

Feeling the heat

Can our culinary novice stay the course at world-renowned cookery school Le Cordon Bleu?

WORDS
TOM MELTZER
PHOTOGRAPH
GUILLAUME KAROUBI

"You see that?", Chef Loïc asks the class, pointing to a brown mark on the freshly peeled pear in front of me, "That's

because you did it wrong." I have been a student at Le Cordon Bleu, the celebrated cooking school, for just half an hour and I have already stabbed my pear. My petite tarte de poire pochée à la bourguignonne will not be perfect. Which is, perhaps, unsurprising, since before today the most complex dessert I had made was a lemon cheesecake. And that was a disaster.

Chef Loïc usually works at Le Cordon Bleu school in London, but today he has crossed the channel to teach a one-day taster course at the flagship school in Paris. Accompanying him in our lesson is Chef Frédéric, who two years ago left a job in the kitchen of the Élysée Palace to join Le Cordon Bleu as a teaching chef. Chef Frédéric is a practical joker, Chef Loïc just practical. While Frédéric feeds us a seed that fills our mouths with saliva, Loïc begins the class by showing us how to carry a knife. He has, he tells us, been stabbed twice in his career. "I'm not trying to scare you," he says, "Just to make you aware. But, in a way, to scare you."

He is not the only one scaring us. Another instructor tells us it takes 20 years to become a confident chef. What about the hat then, I ask, how long does that take? Cooking is great and all, but chef hats are awesome. I'm told I would have to complete the grand diploma, meaning 900 hours at the school, at a cost of just under £25,000, to merit a hat. I resolve to check eBay.

The school's teaching is divided into two courses, cuisine and pastry, and the grand diploma requires mastery of both. Though established in 1895, and originally based exclusively here in Paris, Le Cordon Bleu brand has now been exported worldwide and in the last 30 years dozens of new schools have been opened, in locations as diverse as Peru, Korea and Lebanon. A second London school will open in 2012. Demand for the courses is, seemingly, insatiable.

I ask Chef Loïc who can possibly afford it. "In the cuisine course, mostly you have bankers and lawyers - some coming for a one-off, some changing career. In pastry, it's mostly people from Asia, and mostly ladies. Pastry is



Meltzer plates up his over-peppered duck and 'car-tyre' potatoes

more civilised." Sandra Messier, who works in marketing at the Paris school, tells me that two-thirds of the students continue with their cooking, with most becoming entrepreneurs.

After a morning at the market buying ingredients, we don our whites and enter the kitchen. We are to cook ourselves a three-course meal, learning a mixture of cuisine and pastry techniques; mussels to start, an enormous breast of duck for main, and the tartlet of wounded pear for dessert. There are six of us students, two instructors and two assistants, and no one is in any doubt as to who the weakest link is.

The pear comes first. We peel it, rub off the lines left from peeling and remove the core. Chef Loïc removes his effortlessly, but I struggle, gouging it out in bits. We then move on to the pomme anna, a spiral of thin potato slices, coated in butter and cooked into one piece, like a sculpture. Chef Frédéric's is a work of art - mine resembles a child's model of a heap of old car tyres.

As we proceed, chefs Loïc and Frédéric do more and more of it for me. I am trusted with only the simplest tasks - rolling the dough into a tart base; creating a bouquet of salad leaves, tied together with a chive. Despite their best efforts, alongside my petite tarte de stabbed pear, I cook an over-peppered duck, a crushed pomme anna, and mussels avec une accidental hint of chocolate. At the end, exhausted from just four hours in the kitchen, we set about eating our work, a practice normally frowned upon in journalism.

While my dishes look less impressive than the others, they taste fantastic. Chef Loïc tells me I have over-salted the mussels, but my palate is not sophisticated enough to notice, and I finish them in seconds. The duck is soft and pink inside, and neither too soft nor too chewy. It goes down effortlessly with a miniature potato car tyre. The pear may be battle-scarred, but it's sweet and rich, with a red wine and a chocolate sauce that, since I had nothing to do with it, has come out perfectly. For possibly the first time in my life, something that I have cooked - or at least helped to cook, or at least, that was cooked despite my involvement - is delicious.

For more information on courses at Le Cordon Bleu London, go to lcbllondon.com