FOOD & ME
MARK PALOS, GRADUATE OF LE CORDON BLEU LONDON

Why did you decide on a career in food? I'm originally from Johannesburg in South Africa. As a youngster I was always helping out in the kitchen. After finishing school I did two years compulsory military service and applied to work in the kitchens. The training was very basic, but learning to cook for plenty of people proved a great experience. I then took nearly three years backpacking around Europe and Israel. I returned home and got a job as a waiter for a catering company. I saw how well they were doing, so started up my own catering business from home. A friend of mine worked at a conference centre – I began supplying him and within three months I was looking for a kitchen. From there it just kept on growing.

So what made you leave South Africa? My wife and I have two young daughters and one night we were attacked in our home by nine armed men. Eventually the police arrived, by which time the gang had got away. When we asked the investigating officer what we could do to make ourselves more secure, he replied: “There’s nothing you can do. Just get back in the queue and wait your turn again.” We decided that if the government wasn’t prepared to look after us then it was time to move.

You came to England in January 2005. Then what happened? We went to stay with friends in Cornwall for three months. I was back and forth to South Africa, selling property and cars and winding up the catering business. My wife looked for a business that we could purchase, something food related, like a deli.

We found a pizza and kebab shop in Dawlish, Devon. We thought we could develop the business and do some different things with it, but while Dawlish is a lovely seaside town, the monsters do come out after 11pm. It was really hard. We were running the business about a week when we decided to sell it.

What have you been up to at Le Cordon Bleu London on Marylebone Lane? I’ve just graduated with a diploma in patisserie. I found the course really inspiring and learnt so many new techniques. One of the many highlights was learning to work with cigar paste. It’s like a pourable dough, and once it sets you can use a stencil to create patterns – I’d always wondered how they got the patterns onto the cakes. We did a lot of chocolate work, hand-tempering chocolate and learning dipping skills and how to make truffles. We learnt sugar work – making artistic sugar creations. We learnt how to make magnificent cakes and desserts, and worked a lot with puff pastry.

Was there a final exam? Yes, we had six hours to make a brioché, sable biscuits, chocolate truffles, two desserts and a 3D sugar sculpture. Mine was a sort of space fantasy, which looked quite nice – even if I say so myself.

Didn’t the students also host an afternoon tea party at 108 Marylebone Lane? Yes, the event contributed to our overall grade. In the past it was held at the school, but now 108 Marylebone Lane has got involved. It’s a beautiful setting and also very spacious. The tea party was open to the public and there were more than 20 items on the menu. It was actually a lot of work.

What sort of creations did you make? Everything from simple scones to a delicate pear mouse encased in almond sponge. We made things like strawberry and champagne mousse, éclairs, Paris Brest, fruit tartelets, Gateau au Citron drenched in zesty lemon syrup, almond meringues layered with rich praline buttercream, and crisp macarons filled with a light rosewater jelly, fresh raspberries and a rich lychee posset. The students then worked as waiters, with some of us taking orders for coffee and tea from our family and friends.

Are there any more Le Cordon Bleu afternoon tea parties in the pipeline? There is one on 2nd November and one on 1st December, from 3:30 to 5:30pm. People can find out more, and then make a reservation by telephoning the 108 Marylebone Lane restaurant.

What are your plans for the future? I’d like to start a business in London. I have a couple of ideas and I’ve approached some of the other students to see if they’re interested. We’ll meet to discuss it further – and we’ll take it from there.

How has the family taken to London? We love London. I don’t know what made us think we could go from a huge city like Johannesburg to a small town like Dawlish – we’re definitely big city people.

LINKS
108 Marylebone Lane Restaurant & Bar
108 Marylebone Lane
020 7929 3900
108marylebonelane.com

Le Cordon Bleu London
114 Marylebone Lane
020 7935 3503
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