

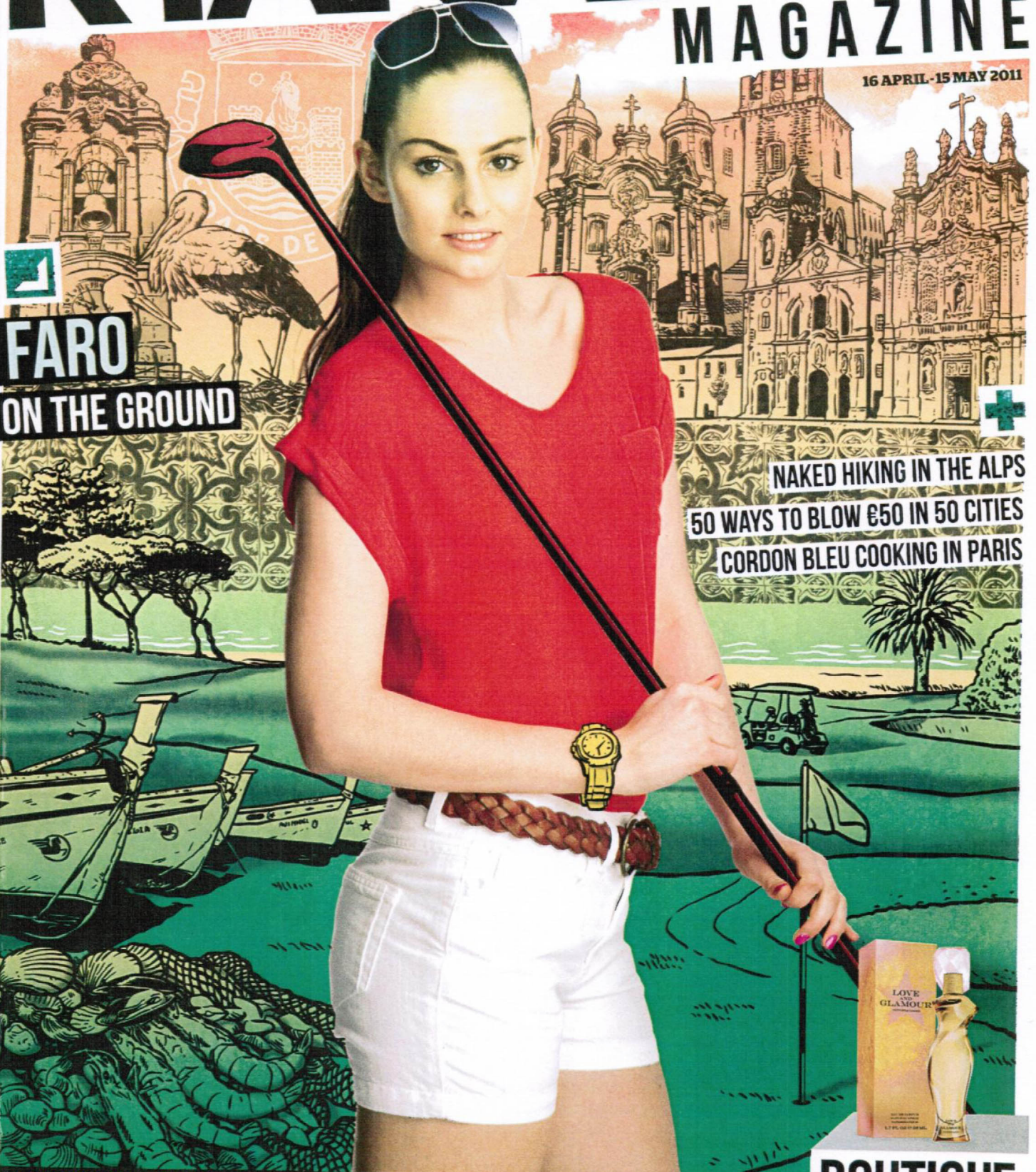
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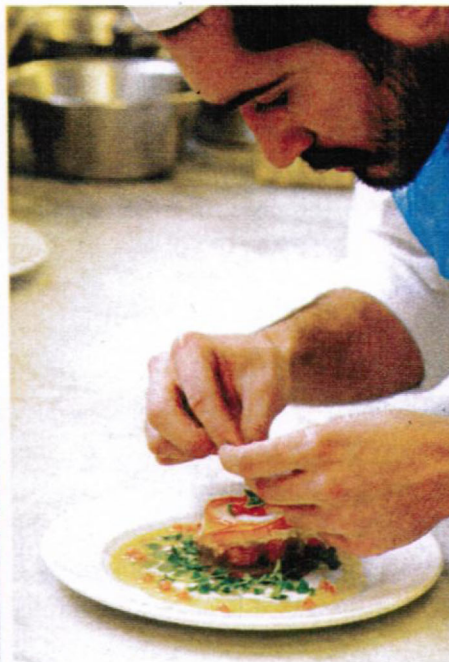
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ON THE GROUND

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CORDON BLEU COOKING IN PARIS



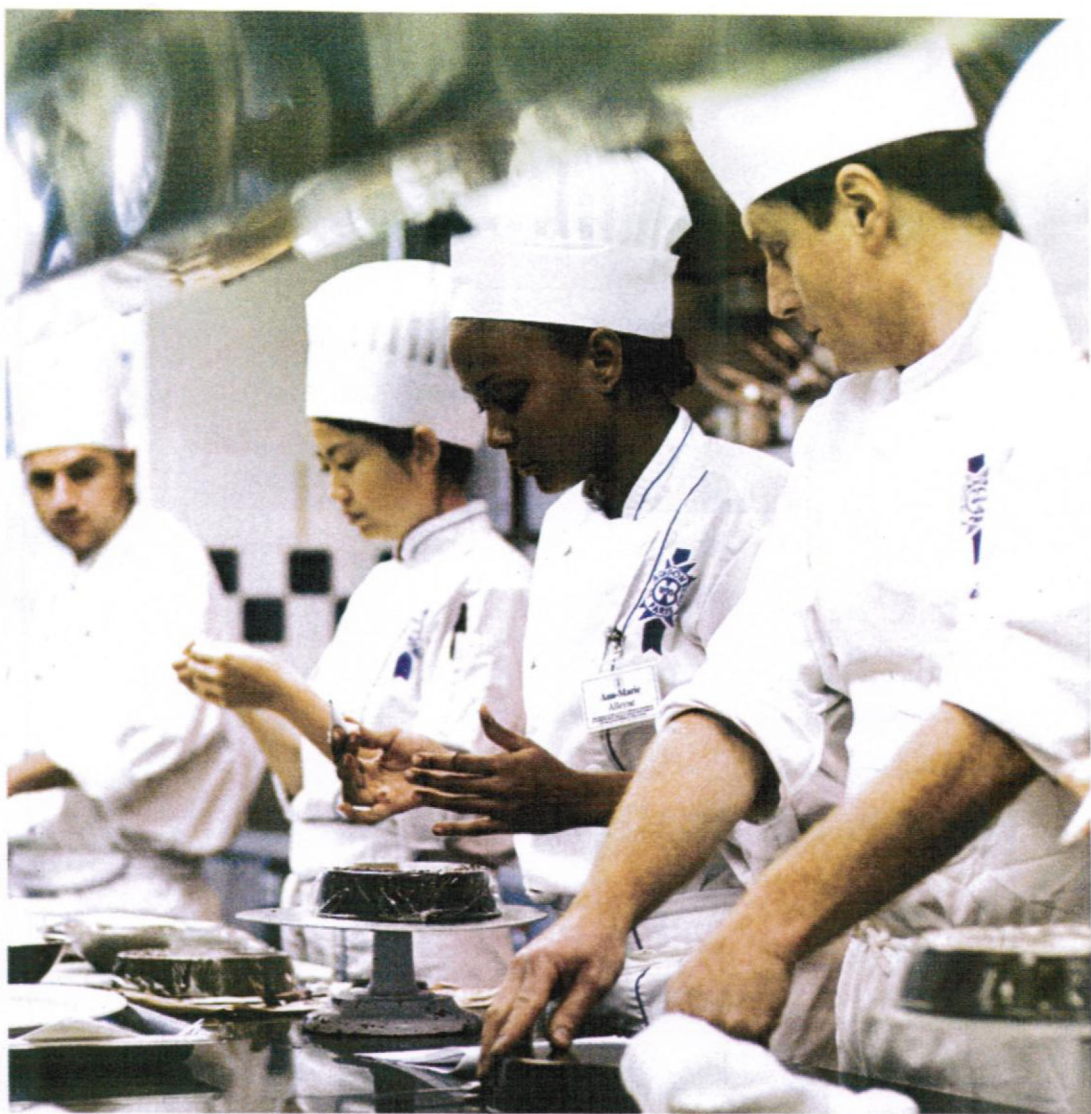
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BOUTIQUE



Le Cordon Bleu, the most famous cooking school in the world, attracts hundreds of students a year. **Goufrane Mansour** pays a visit to its London and Paris branches to see how her home-grown skills match up in a pro kitchen

RHYTHM & BLEU



The sweet smell of chocolate penetrates my nostrils the moment I step into the room. The aroma is so intense, I feel like I'm trapped inside a box of chocolates. But my name is not Charlie and I am not in the Chocolate Factory. I'm a writer who fancies herself a bit of a cook (as well as a chocoholic), and I'm at the London branch of world-renowned French cookery school Le Cordon Bleu, for a taster class in patisserie and basic cuisine.

Revered artisan of patisserie, chef Julie Walsh – creator of the late Queen Mum's 100th birthday cake in 2000 – is beside me, and we're

staring at a huge bowl of melted chocolate from which I am about to attempt to make some rum and dark chocolate truffles. With my chef's whites on I'm feeling pretty confident and if I had the hat too I'd be rolling, but apparently they don't give these out to just anyone.

It's exciting but nerve-wracking. I love cooking so much that I get goosebumps discussing the benefits of one saucepan over another, but whether I'm actually any good in the kitchen is what I'll be finding out on this course.

Le Cordon Bleu is a mecca for anyone into haute cuisine and wanting to cook – from



wannabe professional chefs to amateurs just looking to improve. Established in 1895 in Paris, the school has branches across the globe, from Tokyo to Lima, and draws visitors as well as students to its kitchens, which have been responsible for turning out some of the most respected and accomplished chefs in the world.

Today, the London school in Marylebone has become so popular it's a global destination in its own right, hosting students from 53 nationalities. Demand for learning so huge that a second campus will open in Bloomsbury in 2012.

Back in the kitchen my truffle-making >



EASY SQUEEZY

-  Chef Julie showing how to make chocolate balls
-  Top chefs get big hats



I try to squeeze out nicely rounded chocolate balls but what I get resemble tiny muddy puddles

attempts are meeting resistance. I have never used a piping bag before and it's a challenge. I am trying to squeeze out nicely rounded chocolate balls – a mixture of cream, rum and cocoa – but what I'm getting resemble tiny muddy puddles. Thankfully, chef Julie is here to help and once the balls are made I roll them in pure cocoa powder and dip them in melted chocolate to create that divine crust of the truffle. *Et voilà*, I've done it!

"When you work with chocolate, you don't need to use any hand cream afterwards," says Julie with a smile, referring to the cocoa butter that covers our hands. It quickly becomes clear that at Le Cordon Bleu, learning to cook is all about getting your hands dirty. Though there are demonstration-only classes on offer at both the London and Paris schools, for the majority of courses you'll be churning chocolate and ripping the guts out of a chicken yourself. As our teacher of cuisine, and academic director of the London

school, chef Loïc Malfait, says: "In other schools, there is one chicken for four students. At Le Cordon Bleu, there's a chicken for each student!" No skimping on ingredients then.

If you're not interested in studying for the long-term academic Diplôme de Pâtisserie or Diplôme de Cuisine, the London and Paris schools offer workshops spread over one to four days, the perfect thing to do if you're visiting either city for a short break or longer.

Meanwhile, I'm discovering that at the heart of Le Cordon Bleu's teaching is a technique that chefs pass on to their students. "It's like learning a new language," explains chef Loïc, "you repeat yourself until you know it. Here we do the same thing. To repeat is the only way to learn. Once acquired, you will know exactly what to do in any kitchen and will have a certain style of cooking."

Inspired by these words, I decide to pay a visit to the school in Paris, where it all began. After all, it is the world capital of gastronomy.

Conveniently situated in the 15th arrondissement, the school is close to the Eiffel Tower and the fabulous Saint-Charles food market. It's at the latter I meet my teacher, chef Frédéric Lesourd, to choose the ingredients we'll be cooking later. Once a chef at the Élysée Palace, among other Michelin-starred restaurants, Frédéric takes us through the vast array of fresh fruits, vegetables, fish, seafood, cheese, hams and bread, explaining the importance of the quality of ingredients for haute cuisine.

Our challenge in the kitchen is to cook "La Mouclade", a traditional dish of mussels, followed by a "Croustillant of Duck Breast with Potato Anna and Cep Mushrooms", and finally a "Tartlet of Poached Pear à la Bourguignonne in Dark Chocolate Sauce" – all in just three hours.

Culinary logic (and chef Frédéric) says we are to start with the dessert. I peel one of the pears we bought at the market and remove the core, then add a poaching liquid made of sugar, red >

wine, cinnamon, orange and lemon rinds and vanilla, which smells incredible. Leaving that to simmer on the fire I tackle the duck breast.

After removing all residual veins, I score the skin lightly in a criss-cross pattern, leaving untouched the inch of fat lying beneath it. I rub the breast with salt and black pepper and set it aside then start preparing the potatoes. Potato Anna is a relatively simple dish. Fine slices of potatoes are arranged tightly in layers in a 7-inch sauté pan with clarified butter and seasoning. Mine is actually looking quite sculptural. I put it in the oven feeling rather proud of myself.

Then it's back to the duck, cooked over a medium heat with no extra fat for about eight minutes until medium rare. Now I begin to feel the pressure and understand the phrase "if you can't stand the heat get out of the kitchen". I start to sweat amidst the heat and noise and forget about the pear until chef Frédéric barks at me and removes it from the stove before it turns to purée.

"Stay focused," I think, "concentrate on the

Our challenge is to cook a three-course meal in just three hours



ceps." Just as I get those simmering in the duck fat, chef Frédéric tells us it's time to start cooking the mussels. How the heck do they do all this at once?

Thankfully, chef Loïc, who is in Paris to help us, has already washed the mussels and prepared the mirepoix, garlic and herbs that will serve to make the stock. Quickly, I put all of it in a big saucepan with the butter, stirring while keeping in mind the ceps. I have to add some white wine and cook the mussels until they're open. It only takes a few minutes and they finish right on time with the ceps. But I still have to make the curry sauce for my mussels. A few minutes later my curry sauce is ready to be mixed, but then chef Frédéric decides to taste it. "It's too salty," he says. At this point, I just let him take over to adjust the seasoning.


We finish plating up the dishes together, adding a few fresh leaves to the duck breast and improving the presentation. The cooled pear is stuffed with a crème patissière prepared for us beforehand. Oh, and I must not forget the dark chocolate sauce to pour around the pear.

Finally, a little over three hours later, I'm exhausted, my hair is a mess, I want to pass out and the only thing left is to eat the meal. To my surprise every dish tastes delicious: the mussels (seasoned by Frédéric) go down





smoothly, my duck is tender, pink and good, and my pear is sweet, juicy and almost perfect.

"So do I get the chef's hat now?" I ask with a satisfied grin. Chefs Loïc and Frédéric look at each other aghast and say: "Ah, non. That would take over 900 hours of study and training at top-class restaurants. It is something you cannot buy but must earn. But you do get this Le Cordon Bleu certificate and you can keep the chef's whites."

After all my efforts in the kitchen over the last two days, I'll take that I think! 

FOR MORE DETAILS ON COURSES AT LE CORDON BLEU, VISIT WWW.CORDONBLEU.EDU, OR CALL +44 (0)20 7935 3503 (LONDON) AND +33 (0)1 5368 2250 (PARIS).

TASTY SHROOMS

-  Chef Frédéric picks out mushrooms with his students at the Saint-Charles market
-  Chop, chop – precision cutting in the kitchen



Fast facts

GETTING THERE:

Ryanair flies to London (Gatwick, Luton and Stansted) from over 100 destinations, and to Paris (Beauvais and Vatry) from 41 destinations. For more details, visit www.ryanair.com. Hertz (www.hertz.com) is Ryanair's exclusive car rental partner and provides special rates for passengers when you book your flight.