

PBI's editor, an Italian girl
who can't cook,
treks to Paris' esteemed
Le Cordon Bleu in search of
culinary nirvana — or at least
a recipe or two.



Vive la France!

My invitation to visit the renowned Cordon Bleu couldn't have come at a better time. Until now, my dream of preparing *anything* gourmet was strictly delusional; the homespun tutelage of my youth was cut short when my Italian mother announced we were all going vegetarian. The time-honored tradition of generational cuisine had come to a halt. Grandma DiEdwardo's deliciously tender and spicy *braciola*, among other delicacies, would remain a mystery to me forever. Instead, I learned how to make tofu taste like chicken, or anything else for that matter. "That's the wonderful thing about tofu!" Mom would smile in defense of the putty-white bean curd.

I examined the invitation, knowing this was my opportunity to discover if in fact I lacked the cooking gene, or if my mother's well-meaning veer "off the menu" was the culprit behind my culinary deficit.

I boarded a USAir flight in Philadelphia for

direct passage to Orly International. Business class was first-class indeed, making resting up for the days ahead or indulging in the *pâtisserie française à l'orange* a virtual toss up. While I don't remember falling asleep, I do recall fantasizing about the transformation ahead — if indeed I would actually learn to cook something, anything.

My arrival at the luxurious Plaza Hôtel Athénée heralded a promising start. Perhaps the most charming and romantic of all Paris' grand hotels, this five-star landmark opened on the breathtakingly chic Avenue Montaigne in 1911, and has since been a favorite among artistic, literary and fashion divas. It sits among the world's most famous *haute couture* and jewelry houses — Chanel, Vuitton, Cartier, Ungaro, Dior, Ricci, Laroche, Saint-Laurent and Bvlgari — and is centrally located between the Place de l'Alma and the Rond-Point des Champs Élysées.

Once inside, it took a moment to remember that I was in the ultra-smart eighth arrond-

Illustration by Marjorie Shropshire

issement, not the country. Sounds of birds filled the leafy terraced courtyard and flowers were everywhere. In fact, I am told hotel management spends more each year on flowers than on electricity! A guest once asked if the birds were real, or merely recorded. They are quite real, as are the flowers.

As for service, nothing is left to chance; a staff of 400 attends to the hotel's 200 rooms. Of special note is apartment number 109-110, the duplex penthouse suite which offers a panoramic view of Paris from the *Sacré Coeur* to the Eiffel Tower. At a cost of more than \$1,600 per night, its sheer size redefines extravagance. A list of former guests reads like a who's who of celebs and other notables. The lobby, its restaurants and the tea room gallery are geared for maximum razzle-dazzle. These are the places where the paparazzi flock and grand entrances are made.

Check-in complete, and feeling rather rested, I prepared myself for the following day's visit to the Cordon Bleu. Thumbing through my information packet, I was fascinated to learn of the school's history.

Founded in 1895 by Parisian Marthe Distel, the school began as a small cooking coterie in the Palais Royal to teach daughters of upper-class families how to prepare meals. Upon her death in the 1930s, the school was taken over and relocated by Elizabeth Brassart, another dynamic woman who quickly gained fame as the *grande dame* of Le Cordon Bleu. It was here, under Brassart's direction, Julia Child earned the coveted Grande Diplôme and proceeded to teach America what French *haute cuisine* was all about. Well into her 80s, and determined to maintain the school's high standards of excellence, in 1984 Ms. Brassart sold the school to André Cointreau who moved it to its present location.

Today, as in the past, courses are taught entirely in French — multilingual teaching assistants translate. Courses are divided into a variety of categories, tailored to the student's skill level and interest. The Classic Cycle epitomizes the ultimate of accomplishment and consists of three, three-month courses while specialized courses include a three-month pastry study that combines both basic and advanced skills. Four-to-five-day intensives are offered for amateurs, and specialize in a variety of cuisine. For the real beginner, three-hour-long demonstrations are held several times each day.

In addition to its Paris facility — the world's largest private culinary institute of its kind — Le Cordon Bleu operates schools in Tokyo, London and Ottawa as well

as six boutiques and tea rooms in the Far East. Most recently, Cointreau brought the celebrated Cordon Bleu name to Palm Beach's Worth Avenue with the purchase of Pierre Deux — a well-bred collection of stylish French Country home furnishings boutiques which include a special room devoted to the school's gourmet products. It was nice knowing the Cordon Bleu name would follow me home.

The hotel concierge arranged for my transportation. Within 20 minutes, including countless navigation errors, I was delivered to 8 Rue Léon Delhomme, a quiet street on the Left Bank.

Perfectly modest about my level of expertise, I joined the 9 a.m. demonstration, during which I would watch chef Christian Guillot prepare a three course meal. While the watch-and-learn technique had, in

the past, failed to improve my culinary skills, I was open for a new experience.

The menu? *Flamiche aux poireaux, longe de porc aux pruneaux, mousseline de céleri rave* and *poires à la diable*. My lowbrow French aside, this didn't sound like breakfast fare. Translation? Leek tart, pork loin with prunes and celery purée, and pears diable with almond tiles. I quickly rearranged my expectations, added the six hours lost somewhere over the Atlantic and took a front-row seat in the small amphitheater. Tilted mirrors framed the demonstration area which was equipped with a museum of cooking paraphernalia — most of which I had never seen before.

The art form about to be demonstrated represented a culinary tradition of impressive proportion, I knew. And while this might have been intimidating, it wasn't: its purpose was clearly identified as a preview — a sampling — of the school's curriculum. Actual classes involve personalized, hands-on training. The demo represented advanced skills: beginners, like myself, were encouraged to start at the ground level.

Our cheerful interpreter adroitly translated each step, slice and sauté, quick to answer questions and lend some levity to the chef's dramatic display. He began with the *flamiche aux poireaux*; methodically detailing the ingredients — explaining the importance of preparing the recipe in metric measurements. "This cannot be altered!" he boomed, then laughed, the accent thick but understandable. Done. I ceased thinking in terms of equivalents. We began with the pastry dough: 300 grams of flour (though he never measured), 150 grams of butter, two eggs, five grams of salt and one egg, beaten, for the wash. No problem.

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The dough was assembled and refrigerated in what looked like an enormous pizza oven. Next came the contents of our tart: 500 grams of white leeks, 50 grams of butter, two egg yolks, 200 grams of crème fraîche, 150 grams of some kind of cheese, and fresh ground pepper. As each ingredient was introduced, the room's aroma changed in a rich and wonderful way.

While the leeks were stewing, chef Guillut moved on to the *longe de porc aux pruneaux*, *mousseline de céleri rave*. I lost him somewhere between the cutting of the pork loin and the preparing of the purée. What began as a methodical walk down gastronomy lane turned into a marathon — first one saucepan, now another, and where did the Dutch oven come from? It wasn't on the list. The last thing I remember was the making of an unscheduled pastry crust that at the last minute was added to the *longe de porc aux pruneaux*.

The demonstration finished, we

shared in chef Guillut's creation and compared observations. I listened.

On the return home, I examined my notes — knowing they contained little usable information. Sure, I had ingredients and measurements. But what was missing could not be contained on paper. Beyond my half-hearted desires to prepare a gourmet meal (and other over-inflated expectations), I uncovered the real truth. I don't like to cook. It's not in my genes.

And as my flight raced back across the Atlantic, I thought of chef Guillut, my meagerly-stocked kitchen, my lifelong fascination with the microwave, and most of all, where I would hang my prized Cordon Bleu certificate. ♦

For information regarding classes, programs or demonstrations at Le Cordon Bleu, or to order cookbooks and videocassettes, call 1-800-457-CHEF. Information can also be requested by writing to: Le Cordon Bleu, 8 rue Léon Delhomme, 75015 Paris

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