



Students at Le Cordon Bleu.

A LESSON IN REFINEMENT *at Le Cordon Bleu*

By Chris Mallinos

With just four simple words, I began to wonder if I had missed my culinary calling. “Your ganache ... it’s fantastique!”

This was no ordinary compliment, you see. It came from none other than Hervé Chabert, a renowned pastry chef who has worked in some of France’s finest pâtisseries. And I was in no ordinary kitchen. Instead, I found myself at the Ottawa campus of Le Cordon Bleu, the legendary Parisian cooking school that has trained world famous master chefs like Julia Child.

I was there for what the school calls its “gourmet short courses,” a way for nonprofessionals to get a taste of what has made Le Cordon Bleu the heartbeat of French cooking for 120 years. They’re a series of multihour and even multi-day classes on everything from bistro cooking to macarons.

Founded in 1895, the school now brings its reputation for refinement to 20 countries worldwide. The Ottawa campus—the first outside Europe and only one in North America—traces its roots to Ottawa native Eleanor Orser, who graduated from the original Le Cordon Bleu Paris in 1979. Orser began teaching what she learned out of her home, and in 1988, sold her school back to Le Cordon Bleu.

The rest, as they say, is history. Delicious history.

I arrived at the Ottawa campus with a mission: learn how to make chocolate truffles. From the moment I walked in the door, the school’s prestige was hard to miss. Located in a converted Victorian mansion not far from Canada’s Parliament Buildings, the campus is complete with crystal chandeliers and a grand staircase. It’s not your typical cooking school.

I filed into a classroom with 35 or so other students—young, old, women, men, even a few couples. This is where Hervé would show us the chocolate techniques that have twice carried him to the Coupe du Monde de la Pâtisserie, the World Cup of Pastry. An elaborate set up of mirrors and cameras allowed us to watch Chef’s every move in his state-of-the-art kitchen.

Scribbled on a large white board were the various working temperatures for all kinds of chocolate, which immediately had me feeling intimidated. When Hervé began talking about fat molecules and emulsion, I couldn’t help but think I was in over my head. “Chocolate is very delicate,” Chef would tell us repeatedly, with his melodic French accent. “We need to respect it.”

Over the course of two hours, Hervé showed us how to make three kinds of truffles: dark chocolate with Cointreau, honey ganache with milk chocolate, and white chocolate passion-fruit. It was clear that he had fun demonstrating his skill, which put everyone at ease. Though when he told us that he refuses to eat any chocolate he receives as a gift if he disapproves of its quality, I couldn’t quite tell if he was joking.

Once the demonstration was over, it was our turn. We were led upstairs to two white-tiled practice kitchens, with stainless steel counters as well as a mini stove and fridge for each student. Even though Hervé and his assistants were there to help, we were guided mostly by

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The fine art of making truffles.

the notes we took during the demonstration. Call it trial by fire.

After donning a white apron and chef’s hat, I began stirring my cream, milk, sugar, butter, and chocolate into a velvety ganache. It was smooth and shiny—just as Hervé instructed. His high praise as he came by to inspect my work reassured me that I was on the right track.

The murmurs and laughter in the kitchen grew louder as we all became more confident in what we were doing. Some students even began experimenting with the array of finishes we were given, everything from crushed nuts and sprinkles to a stock of alcohol that would make any decent bar proud. As my ganache cooled, I picked up a supply of cocoa powder and whiskey.

The trickiest part of the whole process was piping just the right amount of ganache into our heart-shaped polycarbonate molds. During the demonstration, Hervé warned us that putting in too much would leave no room for the bottom layer of our truffles. It was a warning I failed to heed. “You were too generous,” Chef told me with a smile.

After 10 or so minutes in the fridge, the moment of truth came when we had to remove our truffles from their molds. If you don’t get the technique just right, they stick. One by one, I watched the other students remove their pristine truffles, celebrating their accomplishment with a cheer or fist pump. Then came my turn. With one nervous smack of my mould against the counter, a dozen beautiful truffles fell with ease.

And with that, I knew my day at Le Cordon Bleu was a success. The richness of my truffles paired perfectly with the hint of whiskey. Sure, the bottoms looked a little funny because of my piping mishap. And sure, maybe I wouldn’t be the next Julia Child.

But that didn’t stop me from scarfing down half a dozen of my chocolates on the drive home.

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Le Cordon Bleu’s Ottawa campus.



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