

In pursuit of perfection

OUR FOOD EDITOR ADDS SOME FRENCH POLISH TO HER CULINARY SKILLS

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Meet your maker

Anna Tait-Jamieson concentrates on getting it right for Le Cordon Bleu chefs Adam Newell, Francis Motta and Sébastien Lambert.



ON A SCALE OF DIFFICULTY from one to 10, I'd say de-boning a quail rates a nine – trickier than raising a soufflé and on a par with preparing French macarons.

It was certainly the most difficult task I performed during my time at Le Cordon Bleu earlier this year. It did occur to me, as I attempted to extract the quail's tiny wishbone with the point of my knife, that the effort required in preparing the bird was out of all proportion to the bite-sized reward of consuming it. But that wasn't the point; the pleasure was in the execution. I can't remember the taste but I do remember the satisfaction of finishing the job and arranging my now-boneless quail alongside the remains of its ribcage.

I'd enrolled at the new Cordon Bleu school in Wellington because I wanted to learn how to do stuff like this. I wasn't driven by professional ambition; my motivation was entirely self indulgent. I took time out and paid my fees in exchange for a 10-week stretch doing something I love at an institution that has long been on my bucket list.

Le Cordon Bleu has been operating in one form or another since 1895. There was a time when it had a soft reputation as a sort of finishing school for young women whose parents could afford to send them to London or Paris but, since André

Cointreau took over the helm in the mid 1980s, the school has expanded across more than 20 countries and re-established itself as a highly regarded chefs' training ground with a list of alumni that stretches from Julia Child to Yotam Ottolenghi.

I was channelling Julia the day I unpacked my new knife kit in the spanking-new Cordon Bleu kitchens. Like Julia, I was here to learn the foundations of French cuisine from chefs who were grounded in the classic techniques.

I had taught myself how to cook from recipe books; I knew all the shortcuts and now I wanted to learn things the hard way. I imagined myself clarifying stocks, trussing chickens and making flaky puff pastry. And I imagined having a lot of fun doing it. Like Julia, if my soufflé flopped I would call it a crêpe and be done with it.

As it happened, my soufflés turned out just fine. By the time my course was over I'd made them three ways. Not only that, I'd struggled with puff pastry, stitched up a chicken, performed keyhole surgery on the aforementioned quail and learned how to fillet a fish in two knife strokes. It was immensely satisfying but more challenging than I'd ever expected. Le Cordon Bleu is prescriptive – there is a correct way to do everything – and its chefs demand nothing less than perfection. ▶



Anna Tait-Jamieson and Francis Motta.



Practical sessions in Le Cordon Bleu's state-of-the-art kitchens are not without their lighter moments, thanks to a tutor whose instructions are sometimes lost in translation.

Each class begins with a demonstration session during which the chef tutor cooks the dishes which the students then replicate in the practical session that follows. There were 13 of us on my course, New Zealanders and internationals, all younger than me and all hoping to find work as chefs, cooks or caterers. They were ambitious but also good fun and competitive in a serious way only when it came to flicking tea towels at the end of the day.

Our tutor, chef Francis Motta, had recently arrived from Provence. He came with Michelin credentials, a good sense of humour and a charming French accent which helped maintain our attention. He began by teaching us how to chop vegetables: julienne, brunoise, bâtonnet, all according to specification. This appealed to my perfectionist tendencies. I bought bags of carrots and practised at home. I even lined up my julienned carrots and checked them for length with a tape measure.

And then we moved on to potatoes. We learned how to “turn” them into regular barrel shapes and then we carved mushroom caps into spirals. It wasn't easy. We all grumbled about doing something that seemed so old-fashioned and, when we finally got the hang of it, chef Francis told us we'd probably never do it again – no one serves vegetables like this anymore. So why had he insisted we do it? Because now, having practised for weeks, we finally knew how to handle a knife.

Le Cordon Bleu is all about technique. Chef Francis had made a name for himself in Provence with food that was lighter and much more contemporary than the bistro-style food we started making in class but he insisted the foundations were the same. Modernist chefs have added to the repertoire with gels and foams, pacojets and sous vide equipment but the classic techniques still underpin European cuisine.

HERB-CRUSTED LAMB RACK WITH BABY VEGETABLES

This recipe calls for a reduced demi-glace beef stock. It can be bought ready-made in chilled pouches from specialty food stores and some supermarkets.

- 2 French racks of lamb, 6 ribs each salt and pepper to season
- olive oil for frying
- 50g butter
- 2 shallots, finely diced
- 2 cloves garlic, crushed
- 100g fresh breadcrumbs
- 4 tablespoons chopped parsley
- 1 teaspoon chopped rosemary
- 1 teaspoon chopped thyme
- salt and pepper
- 1 tablespoon dijon mustard
- 300ml demi-glace beef stock
- ½ cup red wine
- 2 sprigs thyme
- 1-2 teaspoons cornflour dissolved in a little water (if necessary to thicken)
- 20g butter

Preheat oven to 180°C. Season lamb racks and sauté in oil over high heat to seal outside of meat. Remove and set aside.

Melt butter in a shallow pan and fry shallots and garlic slowly without colouring. Transfer to a bowl with breadcrumbs, parsley,



rosemary and thyme. Mix well and season with salt and pepper.

Place sealed lamb racks in a roasting pan (ribs down) and brush mustard evenly over the meat. Press herb-crumbs mixture over the top and cook racks in pre-heated oven for 12-15 minutes until crust is browned and meat is medium rare. Remove lamb and keep warm. Add beef stock to pan with wine and reduce by half over medium heat, scraping the pan to remove any caramelized bits. Thicken with cornflour paste if necessary then pass jus through a sieve and whisk in the butter.

Carve the racks into cutlets and serve with jus and glazed baby vegetables. *Serves 4*

GLAZED BABY VEGETABLES

Peel 12 baby carrots and 8 small onions or shallots, leaving some stalk on the carrots. Place in a pot with 40g butter, 1 tablespoon sugar, pinch of salt and enough water to just cover. Simmer until tender then remove and set aside. (Note: the carrots will be ready before the onions so remove them first.) Reduce remaining liquid to a syrup and keep warm. Meanwhile, blanch 4 large radishes, cleaned and halved vertically, in a separate pot of boiling water for 2 minutes then drain and refresh in cold water. Place all vegetables in syrup, toss to coat evenly and reheat to serve.

And so we practised our emulsions, sabayons and reductions on dishes like consommé de boeuf, poulet chasseur, soufflé chaud and crème caramel. I loved it. We took no shortcuts. We boned, trimmed and filleted; we made the stocks for our sauces and we had fun spinning sugar for a succession of calorific desserts.

The amount of cream we went through was shocking. Chef Francis declared the New Zealand product “exceptional!” and he couldn't get enough of our butter. It became a class joke. Whenever he finished a sauce he would check it for seasoning and then invariably reach for more butter. “And now we monter au beurre” he would say as he whisked in a lump and declared the sauce perfect. At the end of each class our dishes were marked out of six. It was very hard to get a six. There was always something not quite right: incorrect seasoning, undercooked pastry or a sauce that was dull because we'd neglected to monter au beurre.

Slowly we improved and so did our marks but we approached the final exam with some trepidation. We badgered our chef for

clues as to what we might be expected to cook but he wouldn't let on. It was all very French, by which I mean serious.

When the time came we were given two recipes with various components designed to test a range of techniques. The most challenging aspect of this was the timing – that and the unnerving experience of cooking together in total silence. As each dish was completed it was whisked away to be picked over and tasted by a panel of judges who saw fit to fail almost half the class. This was tough and it could have been stressful except that Cordon Bleu rules allow students a second chance. By the following day everyone had passed on the re-sit and most of my classmates had committed to the next level of training.

As for me, I've called it quits. I might return one day for a crack at pâtisserie but in the meantime I'm back in my kitchen at home where I've become insufferably territorial and somewhat obsessive. I strain my sauces, I core my tomatoes, I check internal temperatures with my flash new thermometer. In short, everything has to be perfect. Because that is the Cordon Bleu way. ▶



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BECOME A CORDON BLEU CHEF

Le Cordon Bleu students attain Le Diplôme de Cuisine or Le Diplôme de Pâtisserie by completing certificates at Basic, Intermediate and Superior levels over a period of nine months at a cost of \$33,500. Students who complete both programmes are awarded the prestigious Le Cordon Bleu Grand Diplôme. For more details and information on shorter courses offered by Le Cordon Bleu, Wellington, visit lecordobleu.co.nz

VANILLA BAVAROIS WITH STRAWBERRY GLAZE

- 250ml milk
- 1 vanilla bean, split lengthways, seeds scraped out
- 3 egg yolks
- 75g sugar
- 3 leaves gelatin soaked in cold water
- 250ml cream

Strawberry glaze:

- 100g strawberries, hulled and quartered
- 50g caster sugar

To garnish:

- 6 whole strawberries
- tuiles (optional – recipe at right)

Use a flavourless oil to coat the insides of 6 bavarois moulds or small ramekins (½-cup capacity).

Place milk in a pan with vanilla bean and seeds and bring to the boil. Immediately remove from heat and set aside. In a bowl, whisk egg yolks and sugar until pale and creamy then slowly whisk in warm milk. Return mixture to pan and cook gently,

stirring continuously with a wooden spoon until mixture thickens enough to coat the back of the spoon. Do not cook past this point. Remove from heat. Drain soaked gelatin leaves and add to hot custard mixture, stirring until dissolved. Strain through a fine sieve into a bowl and allow to cool, stirring occasionally.

Place cream in a separate bowl and whip to soft peaks. Sit bowl with custard mixture over a larger bowl filled with ice and gently fold in cream. It will start to thicken. Just before setting point, pour into prepared moulds and place in refrigerator for about 3 hours until firmly set.

Make a glaze by simmering strawberries and caster sugar together in a pan. Reduce to a syrupy consistency and strain.

To serve, tip bavarois moulds upside down onto plates to unmould (if necessary, slide a knife around the inside edges to loosen). Serve with strawberry glaze, whole strawberries and optional tuiles. *Serves 6*



Recipe For Salmon Tartare with Dill & Chive Cream and Pikelets, go to nzlifeandleisure.co.nz

TUILES

Tuile is also the French word for a roof tile or slate.

Heat oven to 180°C and line a baking sheet with baking paper.

Beat 40g softened butter and 80g icing sugar together. Using a rubber spatula, add 2 egg whites and beat until smooth. Add 2 drops vanilla essence and fold in 50g plain flour.

Make a stencil by cutting an elongated triangle shape from a piece of cardboard. Place stencil on baking paper or silicon sheet and use a palette knife to spread mixture onto cut-out shape.

Lift off and repeat to make several triangular tuiles on baking sheet. Bake in preheated oven for 8 minutes until golden-brown. Remove and quickly press each tuile around a rolling pin to create a curved shape. (If they harden too quickly, return them to the oven for a few seconds and they will soften.)

Cool and store in an airtight tin.