



RELAIS DESSERTS

Guardians of Haute Pâtisserie

THERE ARE APPROXIMATELY A HUNDRED WHO ARE THE CHOSEN. THEY ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR KEEPING EXCELLENCE, RIGOR AND GOOD PRACTICES WITHIN THE CRAFT BUT THEY ARE ALSO A SOURCE OF CREATIVITY, TRENDS, VANGUARD, AND THE FUTURE. *So good .. magazine* recently had the great privilege to attend as invited media the Relais Desserts Fall 2015 Seminar at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure Pâtisserie (ENSP) in Yssingeaux (France).

They meet twice a year in spring and autumn. Attendance is mandatory. And it is not enough to just be in attendance. They have to work, contribute ideas, techniques, discoveries, and ultimately, share their own experiences with others, defending the foundations of the trade inside and outside home. These are the obligations required for membership in the association. The advantages are incalculable. First, the beneficial possibilities that come from ongoing professional exchange with the best. Secondly, access to new products that the market presents members even before its commercial release. And thirdly, the pride of belonging to the most exclusive and distinguished international association of pastry chefs in the world and be one of the guarantors of haute pâtisserie worldwide.

The autumn seminar brings them together every year in the small but charming town of Yssingeaux, in the Auvergne region, department of Haute-Loire. However, it is not the beauty of this town the reason why they hold the meeting there, but because the

famed Ecole Nationale Supérieure Pâtisserie (ENSP) is located there and serves as operational headquarter for the association. For added solemnity and distinction, the school can be found in the interior of the imposing Montbarnier castle since it was founded in 1983.

Attending a Relais Desserts seminar has a very special meaning for a professional magazine specialized in pastry such as *so good..*. It is like stepping into the epicenter of the sector and witnessing the world's largest concentration of pastry talent. It is a private meeting behind closed doors, without cameras and flashes, and therefore with no ostentation or egos. Only work and willingness to share their discoveries with others.

The association used this fall seminar to welcome three new members, Hideki Kawamura from Japan and French chefs, Jean Michel Raynaud (Sidney) and Jérôme De Oliveira (Cannes). Three new professionals arriving with the enthusiasm to learn, but also to contribute, which ultimately means a natural renewal of the association itself and its survival for the future.



PIERRE HERMÉ

"To evolve, permanent questioning is fundamental"

During our stay at the Seminar we asked the person who is probably the best known and respected pastry chef worldwide, Pierre Hermé, what membership in Relais Desserts gave him. And he highlights three things: good friends, technical information and technology, and, what surprised us coming from him, the ability to evaluate themselves in comparison to others.

When and why did you decide to join Relais Desserts?

I believe I became a Relais Desserts member in 1992. A long time ago. For me, it has always been the only real connection with the profession. It is a place for gathering and exchange that for me has become essential.



What benefits do you get from being a member in the association?

First, friends [laughs]. The most important thing is that we are enriched by sharing. There are ideas, sketches ... and working in the field of technology, there's really interesting things, discoveries ... For example, in today's talk on pralines there were things I already knew, and there were things that interest me and I will work on, I will put my teams to work when I return to Paris.

How does Relais Desserts impact the evolution of patisserie?

Actually, in the statutes of Relais Desserts, there is something we call "permanent questioning", and I think it is very important. It means judging yourself, put into questioning what each of us does in terms of what others are doing. This start-standing permanent questioning is what makes all of us evolve in our craft.

What aspects do you think could be improved in the association?

Since it's a nonprofit association with members, sometimes it's difficult to have everyone working at the same pace, it is something that everyone should be aware of. And also, perhaps, more computerized communication between us, because it is still done in a very archaic way. Some are very well equipped and very up to date, and others not so much. I think they could improve communication and work in depth on certain technological and technical aspects.

FRÉDÉRIC CASSEL

"Sharing is not an obligation, it is a duty"

He has been the president of the Association for 12 years, and a leading owner of establishments in Fontainebleau, Casablanca, Tokyo, Kyoto and Berlin.



During his time as president of the Association, have the objectives that had been raised met?

We have evolved a lot over the past 12 years. We have improved the image of the Relais Desserts seal, which is not a brand but rather a quality seal. We have helped pastry evolve by giving increasing value to health issues and new working methods. And we have delved into what really is important for all of us, sharing so as to advance haute pâtisserie.

Why are there only about a hundred members worldwide when there are many more quality pastry chefs that could be integrated into Relais Desserts through quality and philosophy?

If we grow in numbers we lose some of the best qualities of the Association, as is the friendship we have with each other. We all know each other and if we were 500 members, it would not be the same. Relais Desserts's strength is small, medium, and some very large businesses are all united as equals, from those with five employees, or 30 all the way up to those who have 600. And that's the beauty of it: we mingle and exchange with each other.

Is it mandatory to share everything with the other members of the Association?

Everything is shared, it's necessary, if not, it's useless. Even problems are shared. If someone buys a machine and it's not doing well, they must say it, we should all know so that others avoid suffering the same problem. The same goes with raw materials. But also with positive things, if you test a product in your house, you can communicate the results to the others. It is not mandatory to do so, but if done, it enriches all of us. It is not an obligation, it is a duty. We have no right to keep what we have discovered to ourselves. We are here to make pastry evolve around the world, so it's a duty. It does not mean replicating an entire cake, each person has their own personality, but you can adapt recipes, techniques or whatever is necessary.

How does the admission of new members work from the inside?

There are admissions officers. There are two, and if someone wants to be a member of Relais Desserts, they examine them. But first, the candidate must fill out a form and be sponsored by two members of the Association, so that means four people are already involved. And later, during the year, we work in areas, and each area has a leader who sends a report to the Paris office. And then, in each regional meeting, what has been inspected is reported, what is right and what is not.

Why do pastry chefs working in restaurants or hotels not belong in Relais Desserts?

We are exclusively pastry chefs with shops. There is Relais Chateaux and Relais Desserts, but they are two different things. In restaurants, pastry chefs are not usually the owners. However we are all owners of our shops. So the reality for one and the other is very different.

Restaurant pastry chefs and shop pastry chefs are, for

me, two different trades. It is true that there are now prominent pastry chefs in restaurants, and chefs have given them space, but it is a recent job, from 10 years ago. The menus of Alain Ducasse and Christophe Michalak are different. Now the name of the pastry chef is put in a menu, not in the past. We in pastry are a team, we work as a team and we value the team. It is difficult to explain this aspect.

And why do you think that pastry chefs have not yet achieved social prestige that chefs have?

Restauration can sell dishes at 20 euros. We sell cakes for 5 euros. Necessarily, they have more resources to communicate, more press, more visualization. A dish is more visual than a small cake.

Can we say that to belong to Relais Desserts one has to make pastry with a French seal?

In general, pastry chefs from other countries often necessarily make some French pastries. Or they have trained in France or have acquired a base of French pastries. But each of us retains our identity, country or area. That's what is nice, we are all different but the main thing unites us, which refers to the quality of raw materials, know-how and exchange of experiences and knowledge.

What about the future?

I'm not a fortune-teller [laughs]. I think that the ones who will succeed in pastry are those who will make quality. We see it when there is a crisis. In Relais Desserts not many people are in crisis. So it means to further promote quality, haute patisserie. True, there are many television programs that help us, but be careful with this as well because we need to make young people who are starting out understand that this is a difficult job that requires passion, and that's what we try to convey. That it is a difficult trade ... like all trades...