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EDITION 2014

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MONACO YACHT SHOW



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24 - 27 SEPTEMBER 2014

PORT HERCULES, MONACO

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SAILING A SWEET COURSE

LOUISE SIMPSON REVIEWS DUCASSE EDUCATION'S TAILOR-MADE CULINARY PROGRAM FOR YACHT CHEFS.



It's 8am as my Mini Cooper Cabrio motors into Cap d'Ail. The harbour is still asleep as I drive to the far side where several of the world's most impressive superyachts lie. These majestic white whales dwarf the catamaran minnows on the other side of the jetty. These cruise liner-sized floating empires provide gainful employment for crews of up to two dozen full-time staff and a depository for priceless works of art and state-of-the-art technology. Some contain private cinemas, helipads, swimming pools, gyms and even music recording studios. The typical staff-to-guest ratio is about two-to-one.

I step gingerly off the gangway onto the 65-metre yacht and lodge my shoes into one of the shoe pockets conveniently placed beside me. Guests head right and upstairs into the staterooms, but I dip left and downstairs into the staff quarters in the submarine underbelly where I'll be spending the day in the yacht's kitchen.

A tribute to gleaming inox sets the stage for Ducasse Education's two-day desserts and pastry course that I shall be covering. World-renowned chef Alain Ducasse has expanded into culinary arts training with professional training centres in Argenteuil (near Paris) and Yssingeaux (south of Lyon), as well as a Paris-based school for amateurs. His latest innovation is a tailor-made culinary program for yacht chefs with two and three-day courses designed to address the complex issues of cooking onboard. Ducasse looks at how to maximize the limited equipment, manpower and storage that are the leit-motifs of yacht cuisine.

Today's course has been designed for six professional yacht chefs so I am relieved that I am only here to write. I am the first to arrive so I grab the chance to look around the kitchen. Space has been optimized so that two fridges, two pizza ovens, a steamer oven and a vacuum-packing machine have





been squeezed in. This kitchen is considered enormous for a galley kitchen, even though it's only the size of a compact household kitchen. This goes to show how small most galleys are.

Looking around me, I start to empathize with the constraints of cooking onboard. I reflect upon how single chefs in galleys five times smaller than this are required to cook up breakfast, lunch and dinner for numerous guests. Lone chefs have to mirror high culinary standards for guests accustomed to Michelin-starred perfection, but in submarine conditions without the team of sous-chefs or limitless storage of their restaurant-based counterparts. It's an enterprise that even the most experienced chef would find challenging.

As I ponder my own culinary inexperience, a pain au chocolat comes my way with the welcome addition of a strong noisette (the French version of a caffè macchiato). Other chefs are beginning to arrive for the course hailing from as far as South Africa and New Zealand. The atmosphere is jovial as our trainer chef Emmanuel Lacaille goes through the agenda for the two-day program. We will learn how to develop a range of original and balanced puddings

that could be adapted ad hoc as cocktail nibbles, full-plated desserts or buffet and trolley options. Day One will be spent on preparation and methods, while Day Two will be devoted to assembly and presentation. We finish our coffee and get down to the business of preparing pastry, cream interiors and biscuit bases that will later be turned into multiple different desserts. We work away for several hours before taking a well-earned lunch break. Over lunchtime sandwiches, I ask a French chef on my right why he has decided to come on the course.

"As a yacht chef, the challenges are many and varied", he says. "We are in a completely different culinary environment than in a traditional kitchen. We're on a boat that moves. We have storage capacities that are much smaller than in a restaurant. We must constantly renew ourselves, we must constantly look for new ideas. We work all alone. We need to prepare meals everyday for the same people, which means that we need new recipes, new ideas, new techniques."

The conversation turns to the issue of how to produce restaurant-quality food from galley kitchens. The chefs are surprisingly open about the challenges



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of producing sumptuous breakfasts, lunches and dinners daily to guests that have high expectations. *"It's hard to compete with the quality produced by a restaurant that has 25 chefs in the kitchen working on each diner's meal,"* says one chef.

Another points out that the owners themselves often provide some respite.

"Luckily for me, my owners don't want Michelin-starred cuisine every night," he says. *"Last summer, I cooked chicken and chips three times in just one week."*

Meanwhile, two antipodean chefs are busy chatting about sous-vide cooking on the other side of the kitchen. Jaded by years of witnessing subtle one-upmanship at culinary events, I'm surprised by the camaraderie amongst the chefs. I find their amiable openness striking.

After lunch, I leave the chefs making raspberry coulis and chocolate-filled cakes with the promise that I'll return the next day to see the final results. On my way out, I take the chance to meander upstairs into the yachts' staterooms: all dark wood paneling and rich, rather British-looking upholstery. I find myself bumping into a Manet painting and a gold chess

set on a green-and-white marble checkerboard before opening a door to find a walnut-inlaid walk-in cupboard for several hundred wine glasses. I step off the yacht blinking into the sunlight.

The next afternoon, I arrive to find the completed desserts in the upstairs dining room bordered by Velazquez still lifes. The table is chock-a-block with sweet confections from small cakes to *verrines* and tarts.

I ask the chefs what they have learnt from their two-day program. They talk about new recipes and new techniques. They talk about the presentation and preparation of each recipe and about how to transfer a large dessert into a small canapé. As they speak, I hear the same word repeated through their conversation: *"alone"*. Above and beyond the new recipes and techniques, I realize that Ducasse Education provides these onboard hermits with the chance to meet and exchange ideas with other onboard chefs like themselves. Already for that reason alone, these chefs will go home happy.

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