

AMUSE-BOUCHE

Class Action. Alain Ducasse is here to help you lift your culinary game

A TRANCHE OF WILD SEA BASS WITH green-pea-and-rocket emulsion and *mousserons des prés* mushrooms sounds more like a three-star Michelin meal than a cookery-class assignment. But it's exactly the kind of fastidiously prepared yet surprisingly uncomplicated dish that features on the haute cuisine course at celebrity chef Alain Ducasse's new l'Ecole de Cuisine in Paris.

Pupils work like commis chefs, learning how to brunoise-cut courgettes into perfect tiny cubes to maximize flavor. They make a stock with pea pods (which pureed and served with ricotta makes an instant summer soup). There's detailed instruction on using up leftovers (sea-bass trimmings are transformed into a tartare with lime, coconut milk and chili) and on how to finish an emulsion sauce without it curdling (it involves using cream whipped over ice). Students then get to sit and eat the spoils of their labor.

The chef-tutors have all worked at restaurants within Ducasse's international empire: *chef des chefs* Romain Corbière is from Le Louis XV in Monaco. They willingly pass on insider tips (like crisping *bellota* ham in a dry pan and using the fat to cook

chanterelles to scatter over risotto). What's especially fascinating is the realization that, at the top echelons, it's all about using the very best ingredients at the zenith of their season, using every part of them, and paying fanatical attention to the details.

Not all the courses—either half- or full-day, with a maximum of 12 per class—are for aspiring Michelin chefs. The school caters for two different levels: experienced and beginner, and offers subjects from “traditional cuisine” to “pastry-making.” Neither is Ducasse particularly concerned about luring customers through the door in these cash-strapped times. “People need a hobby, and cooking is a way to forget your worries,” he says. “It's about the joy of giving yourself and others pleasure.”

Located in the chic 16th arrondissement, l'Ecole de Cuisine is stylish in the extreme. Its four vast ultra-contemporary kitchens named Piment, Cèpe, Olive and Truffe are full of covetable culinary kit. Many of the more esoteric gadgets used, plus Ducasse truffle oil, are for sale in the boutique, but dealing with kitchen envy is beyond the curriculum. See www.ecolecuisine-alainducasse.com for more. —BY SUDI PIGOTT



Not a lot of carbon here *The lodge takes great pains to be green*

CHECK IN

Lake Break

FLANKED BY VOLCANOES and colorful Maya villages, Guatemala's Atitlan is one of the most striking lakes in the world, and there are few better places to lap up the views than Laguna Lodge, a 10-minute boat ride—but a world away—from the Western Highlands tourist town Panajachel.

Hewn from a mixture of volcanic stone, wood and palm, the property is as much a showcase for indigenous crafts as it is a sanctuary for conscientious globe-trotters. Local adobe art adorns the walls of its seven suites (priced from \$225 a night), bed runners are woven by the women of a nearby village, and furnishings are antique and hand-carved.

Conservation measures are laudably thorough: materials are recycled or derived from sustainable sources, hot water is solar-powered, energy-saving devices are used and community projects supported. The cuisine served in the Zotz restaurant is vegetarian—and inventive enough to appease the most ardent of carnivores, with ingredients sourced either from the on-site gardens or local farmers.

If that all sounds too earnest, it isn't really. Loafing is judiciously encouraged with a strategic scattering of hammocks, books and board games among the various sundecks and thatched-roofed *palapas* (pavilions), and massages are ministered en suite. If you're feeling active, a cornucopia of outdoor pursuits and cultural jaunts to indigenous villages and coffee plantations await. The ace up Laguna's sleeve, however, is its own 100-acre (40 hectare) nature reserve. Rising from the lake edge up through large cliffs to ancient ceremonial rocks and tropical dry forest, it's pure Maya magic. See www.lagunalodgeatitlan.com.

—BY JINI REDDY

Hungry for knowledge

Eager students pick up tips from the great man himself



FROM LEFT: PHILIPPE PETIT; BUENDE VISION

FROM TOP: JOHN HAY; LONELY PLANET IMAGES; JOHN WARBURTON; LEE PHOTOGRAPHY; ALAMY; COURTESY BLUE SAFARI