



Kitchen Crusades

Sharon Stephenson joins the quest for cooking perfection at Wellington's Le Cordon Bleu culinary school

If you are what you cook then I'm a scallop and leek tart with saffron and caper vinaigrette, roasted ratatouille Provençal, and an impressive-looking strawberry charlotte.

I'm at the only New Zealand outpost of the French culinary school Le Cordon Bleu (LCB), which opened in downtown Wellington in 2012. Most of the time the four gleaming test kitchens are used by full-time students who pay handsomely to whisk, blend and bake their way to a three-year degree in either cuisine or patisserie. Today, however, LCB is holding a food

camp, a two-day intensive course that provides 13 of us with a backstage pass to the LCB student experience.

We're a mixed bunch: there are dentists, an accountant, recruitment consultant, nanny and, this being the capital, a clutch of public servants. Although most are locals, others have made a culinary pilgrimage from Auckland, Hamilton and Palmerston North to be here. All but one is female, including a mother and daughter having a bonding weekend. What we have in common is a love of good food and a desire to improve our skills at arguably one of the world's most

prestigious cooking schools.

We meet at the school on Saturday at 8.45am; it's a time I'm not overly familiar with, but there's a lot to get through. We begin with a trip to Moore Wilson's, the food emporium beloved by Wellingtonians, where we take our taste buds on tour. We select ingredients for today's meal: plump red, yellow and purple tomatoes, salad leaves and fresh horseradish. Former LCB Chef de Cuisine, Adam Newell (who has since left to open Zibbibo restaurant), explains that the hunting and gathering of ingredients is just as important as what we do with them.

About Le Cordon Bleu

Founded in Paris in 1895 by journalist and publisher Marthe Distel, the French cooking school is now owned by André Cointreau, a descendant of the Cointreau dynasty (whose business has merged with Rémy Martin). There are now over 50 Le Cordon Bleu schools in 23 countries.

Back at HQ, we watch Newell coax pine nuts and raisins into stuffing and butterfly a leg of lamb with a few deft slashes of his knife, before we're let loose in the kitchen. It isn't long before we're slicing eggplant and browning stock with the words "Yes, Chef" and "No, Chef" rolling off our tongues.

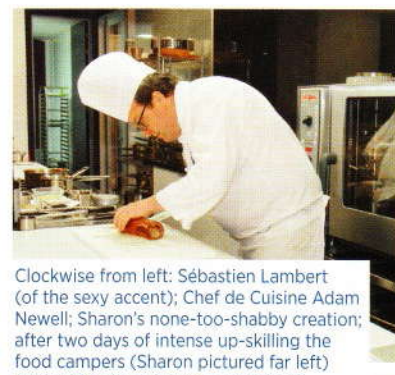
Being more of a 'that'll do' kind of cook, I'm finding it difficult to make the mental somersault to the LCB way, where the religion of perfection is widely practised. This means dicing the capsicums and zucchini in perfectly square 5mm cubes and shredding the leeks thinly: "Are you making a rustic stew?" asks Chef Newell with a smile when he sees what's on my chopping board.

I also hadn't expected the level of friendly competitiveness in the room, but thankfully students can go at their own pace. After a few hours, I've managed to produce a two-course meal that wouldn't win me many points on *MasterChef* but which hubby and I later enjoy over a glass of well-deserved wine.

It's another early start on Sunday, but today we're learning how to do interesting things with eggs, sugar and cream. After caffeine-loading, we watch Chef de Pâtisserie/Technical Director and French import Sébastien Lambert demonstrate the four steps to making and assembling a charlotte aux fraises (strawberry charlotte, to you and me). These include piping the delicate ladyfinger biscuit base and lining, as well as making the mousse and meringue filling and the delectable crème anglaise accompaniment.

Chef Lambert makes it look easy and, with a French accent barely dimmed by six years in New Zealand, has the sexiest way of saying "cake" and "half", which I could listen to all day.

After a quick lunch, we move upstairs to the custom-built patisserie



Clockwise from left: Sébastien Lambert (of the sexy accent); Chef de Cuisine Adam Newell; Sharon's none-too-shabby creation; after two days of intense up-skilling the food campers (Sharon pictured far left) show off their charlottes aux fraises.



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kitchen where we spend the afternoon tearing through flour and sugar faster than should be allowed by law.

I am the only one of the group who has never used a piping bag and, while my biscuit base has the potential to turn into the culinary version of the Titanic, I manage to produce a cake that, to the untrained eye, looks pretty impressive. I am, however, pathetically grateful for the monogrammed LCB ribbon that wraps around the cake and helps to hide a multitude of sins. Friends who later help to demolish

this calorific wonder are certainly none the wiser.

To say I was the weakest link in this culinary journey is to wallow in understatement, but I can't remember a weekend when I had so much fun. I picked up all manner of tips and tricks, from how to ripen brie and the proper way to fold in egg whites, to the best brand of vanilla paste and olive oil. Even more importantly, I discovered that:

- 1) I'm not cut out to be a chef or work in a commercial kitchen. Ever.
- 2) It's really tiring standing on concrete all day.
- 3) My level of incompetence with a piping bag is the stuff legends are made of, and...
- 4) I now have an extra layer of padding around my middle that should carry the label "Made by Le Cordon Bleu".

THERE ARE PLANS TO HOLD ANOTHER TWO-DAY LCB FOOD CAMP IN 2015. FOR FURTHER DETAILS, VISIT LECORDONBLEU.CO.NZ.