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**DUCASSE AND CHANEL :
A MARRIAGE MADE IN.... JAPAN**

by

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Overview

Ginza Street, Tokyo, December 4th, 2004. An outstanding restaurant named 'Beige' is being opened on the top two floors of a brand new building. It is a joint venture between Alain Ducasse and Chanel. Both companies are known for their luxurious products, their French *savoir-vivre*, and their creative talents. Both have a very distinctive in-house culture and high standards. Alain Ducasse's project manager, Stéphane Bellon, tells the story of the meeting between the two partners, their hopes for this restaurant, and the way in which this project took shape. Conflicts did occur, notably between the vision of a luxurious and aesthetic product and the necessary operating constraints of the restaurant business. Quite apart from this project, Stéphane Bellon tells how the Alain Ducasse Group established the 'know-how' for restaurant design and the organisation for culinary creation.

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TALK : Stéphane BELLON

December 4th, 2004. Ginza Street, Tokyo ; perhaps the most expensive street in the world. On the top floor of a brand new building, an exceptional restaurant, 'Beige', is being opened. It is a joint venture between Alain Ducasse and Chanel, two prestigious companies : two brand names which are well-known in the world of luxury goods, French *savoir-vivre*, and creative talent. They are both steeped in a culture of high standards values.

This talk describes the story of this project that I managed, highlighting the way in which questions relating to artistic creation were handled.

The Alain Ducasse Group

Alain Ducasse, like many famous chefs, is no longer slaving away over a hot stove. He is a modern chef. Today he is a creator and a visionary, a manager and a disseminator of knowledge. He no longer cooks, but he is still involved in each recipe. He gives inspiration ; he tastes every dish. There is not one accompaniment, one condiment, one dessert on the menu of each of the twenty-one restaurants in the world that he manages which he has not tasted, rubber-stamped and analysed in terms of its taste, presentation and cost. He gives his opinion about a dish, or adjusts it or rejects it.

The restaurant business : a wide variety of activities

The Alain Ducasse group has three sectors : restaurants, hotels, and the spread of knowledge.

The restaurant business is the heart of our profession. Alain Ducasse manages three restaurants himself, the pride of the group. He has a privileged, exclusive relationship with the head chef in each of these three restaurants. Whenever there is a change in the menu, a problem with a client or a member of staff, he becomes personally involved. Unlike his other restaurants, he does not delegate the management to a corporate chef, in other words, an intermediary between himself and the restaurant. This is why, once a week or once a fortnight, he is in New York in his whites in the kitchen.

The 'Louis XV' restaurant in Monaco, in the Hôtel de Paris, is where the group started. All the staff and all the famous chefs, notably David Bellin, the chef at 'Beige', have been there at some time or another in their careers. The cuisine here is Mediterranean : it is especially inspirational for Alain Ducasse. He arrived here in 1987. He had already obtained a Michelin star for his restaurant 'Le Juana' at Juan-les-Pins and he set himself a target of achieving three stars in three years. He reached his goal in two-and-a-half years in 1989. He was just thirty-three years old.

After 2000, we opened two other 'gastronomic' restaurants ; 'Alain Ducasse at the Plaza Athénée' (ADPA) in Paris, and 'Alain Ducasse at the Essex House', in New York. These restaurants are the flagships of the group and the cost of an average meal is about three hundred Euros per head.

The other restaurants, which we refer to as the "brand" restaurants and carry the Alain Ducasse brand, are divided up into three categories : the contemporary ones, the classic ones and the traditional ones. Such classification as in 'gastronomic' restaurants is not the way in which Alain Ducasse's sees them, since he considers that each restaurant is unique. All the same, this classification is essential in helping us to present the services which we offer to partners or potential clients, and also to important or luxury hotels.

One of our contemporary restaurants is 'Bar & Bœuf', a Michelin-starred, seasonal restaurant in Monaco, with one hundred and ten covers and where the average cost of a meal is approximately one hundred Euros. It has a menu based on two choices : sea bass and beef as food, and the Chardonnay and Syrah grape varieties as the wine. 'Mix', in Las Vegas, is our

largest restaurant with two hundred and fifty covers in the main dining room and the same number in the bar area. It occupies one thousand square metres, employs one hundred and sixty-eight people and has a turnover of one hundred and fifty thousand dollars. The 'Spoon' restaurants are contemporary, transparent and multi-ethnic. They exist in seven cities and each has its own identity, designer, and decor. The 'Spoon' in Gstaad is a three-hundred-year-old chalet ; the 'Intercontinental' (formerly the 'Regent') is on the seafront in Hong Kong ; 'Spoon Food & Wine' is a modern restaurant situated in a discreet street in Paris between the Champs-Élysées and Avenue Montaigne ; and the London 'Spoon' is located in a hotel designed by Starck.

Among the classic restaurants, there is the 'Relais du Parc' in Paris. This restaurant is a tribute to Alain Ducasse and Joël Robuchon, the two chefs who made this place famous. The brasserie menu includes five dishes created by Alain Ducasse and four dishes created by Joël Robuchon.

We opened 'Benoit' in Tokyo on September 1st, 2005. It is a very chic bistro, situated in the Aoyama district. We already had 'Beige' in Ginza where older Japanese diners (forty to sixty year olds) come to spend astronomic amounts of money in the nearby luxury boutiques. Today, we have 'Benoit', located in a district which is a mixture of luxury shops, new designers, and avant-garde boutiques aimed at a younger population (twenty to forty year olds). It is a young, modern, original and trendy area. This is where our client, an important real estate company quoted on the Tokyo stock exchange, asked us to open a restaurant in a totally see-through, eleven-story building made from glass and steel. The client had seen our other restaurants, notably the avant-garde 'Spoon' restaurants in Paris and Hong Kong, as well as 'Mix', and wanted something similar. Alain Ducasse suggested an idea to them : he wanted to surprise the diner as he came out of the lift, with a restaurant in complete contrast to the district in which it was situated, neither trendy nor ephemeral, but timeless, like a restaurant in France ! Parts of the restaurant were made in France (such as the woodwork, the curtains, the wall-paper, the Versailles parquet floors, and the ceramics) by the best French craftsmen, before being put together in Tokyo. "*People who come into this restaurant,*" said Ducasse "*will feel it has been there for a century and a half.*" This was his vision for 'Benoit', a year-and-a-half before the 'Beige' project began.

Next, we have three traditional restaurants where the average meal costs between fifty and one hundred and ten Euros. They are 'Aux Lyonnais' in Paris, 'Iparla' in the Basque country and 'Benoit' in Paris. As it happens, we had bought 'Benoit' (Paris) in April 2005, at a time when we had spent a year trying to think of a name for our Japanese restaurant. The name allowed us to keep a tie with France. It was an indirect reference.

Finally, we have two restaurant concepts which bring gastronomy to a more accessible level for more people. This is in keeping with Alain Ducasse's almost political vision that people should be able to eat well, in pleasant surroundings, with good, authentic food, for between five and five hundred Euros. At 'be' (boulangéricier : a bread-cum-grocer's shop) there are sandwiches for four Euros twenty, The dessert restaurant 'Tamaris', which was opened in Beirut in October 2004, sells most of the desserts of the Alain Ducasse Group, including those served at the gastronomic restaurants.

The hotel business and the spread of knowledge

The Alain Ducasse group has two other areas of activity. Firstly, the hotel business. Alain Ducasse is the president and owner of a chain of five hundred and twenty three hotels in France, ranging from comfortable guest houses to luxurious residences (the 'Châteaux & Hôtels de France') the aim of which is to promote, market and sell its hotel rooms using a centralised reservation service. All these hotels have a good restaurant. The group also has five inns : 'La Bastide de Moustiers', 'Hostellerie de l'Abbaye de La Celle' in Provence, 'Ostapé' in the French Basque country, 'Andana' in Italie, and the 'Domaine des Andéols' in the Luberon.

The spreading of knowledge is our third activity. For knowledge related to the art of cooking, we have a publishing company, LEC, which publishes the collection 'The Grands livres (focussing on cooking, pastry making and desserts, bistros and brasseries). We are very enthusiastic about the training we offer in our two schools in Paris and the Paris area ; one for professionals and the other for private individuals.

Speaking more generally, the desire to transmit knowledge is always present in all our activities as the group continues to grow. I am in charge of this activity which can be translated into formal actions which occupy us every day and which aim to help us learn from our mistakes and our successes. After the opening of each restaurant, we write down the errors which we should not have made and the main reasons for our success.

The bride was in... 'Beige'

Chanel has always been extremely careful in terms of diversification. Entering the catering sector in Paris was difficult to imagine. It was done in Japan, with 'Beige'.

Richard Collasse was in at the beginning of the project. He had been living in Japan for twenty-five years. He had been a major factor behind the importation of the luxury goods model and French *savoir-faire*, mainly for Chanel. Richard Collasse comes from the south-east of France and his brother is a restaurateur. He lived in Provence, spent a great part of his life in the restaurant business and appreciates gourmet food. When Chanel decided to reconstruct¹ a building on Ginza Street, he said to himself that if ever Chanel were to have a restaurant there one day, it should be there, on the top floor, and it should be a collaboration with Alain Ducasse and no-one else. That was three years ago.

Bridges between cultures

During the first year the two groups got to know each other. Initially, on an informal basis, and then later we 'built bridges' in an increasingly formal way. Alain Ducasse met the Wertheimer family who own Chanel. We discussed how the two groups would come together, our respective perceptions about the French luxury goods industry, our ambitions for excellence, and at the same time our various sources of inspiration and creation. It was also necessary for the creators who had to work together such as Alain Ducasse, Richard Collasse, Peter Marino (the architect and interior decorator), Dominique Moncourtois (the cosmetics director), Jacques Polge, (Chanel's 'nose'), and Bernard Brault (the artistic director) to get to know each other and to test their common features.

Accompanied by the head pastry cook, the person in charge of tableware, the future chef of the restaurant and the corporate chef, we visited Mademoiselle Chanel's apartment, saw the Chanel jeweller's shop in the Place Vendôme, and went to the cosmetic studio with Dominique Moncourtois, to see, feel and understand how powders and lipsticks are made, how the colours are assembled, how the packaging is designed, and so on. For our part, we took the Chanel collaborators to our kitchens to show them how we garnish a plate, the precision necessary to cook a dish, how we choose the tableware, and so on. There were many meetings and conversations over a year-and-a-half to get to know each other. And this was even before we had started to talk business and to discuss contractual questions.

The organisation behind the 'Beige' project

The management of this restaurant was our first joint venture. Different parts were shared equally between Chanel and ourselves. This method seemed to us to be the only way to proceed with 'Beige' because we were going to create a brand which would involve the expertise and knowledge of each of the two groups, and it was essential that we respect the natural prerogatives of each other.

¹ A building existed already, but studies showed that it was better to demolish it and rebuild another in its place.

At Chanel, there was just one person who led the project down to its finest details. Every morning, over an eighteen-month period, Richard Collasse took stock of the situation either by telephone or by email, collecting information about work progress on the site, the pre-planning, the budget, the choice of employees and so on. He was surrounded by a team working on the creative side, entrepreneurs and a local project manager. Nevertheless he was directly involved in every detail, at every stage.

For our part, we were a team made up of a project manager (myself), and eight other people. A project manager for Japan, a Frenchman who had been living in Japan for fifteen years and who understood the culture very well, helped us get across certain messages, and helped us to understand the Japanese mentality and to look for products. Apart from him, our organisation followed the pattern which exists at the heart of the group from the point of view of creativity. The group constitutes the corporate chef, Didier Elena, the chef at 'Alain Ducasse at the Essex House' who worked for a year on the project devising the savoury menu with help from Alain Ducasse ; David Bellin, who was going to be the future chef of 'Beige' ; Nicolas Berger, the corporate head pastry cook who was based at the 'Plaza-Athénée' and who supervises all the pastries and cakes in the group; Gérard Margeon, the corporate sommelier; as well as the people in charge of human resources, communication, tableware and administration. Apart from managing this team, I was also in charge of co-ordinating people in the project who were not part of our group, in other words the people from Chanel, as well as Peter Marino (the interior architect), the local architect and the kitchen designer.

'Beige's' philosophy : four objectives

What did we want to do with this restaurant ? There was one mutual objective which can be expressed in four principles. Firstly, 'Beige' had to be unique. It was a unique concept – we had created a restaurant with Chanel, and we would not create another one – in a unique place. It is in a ten-story building. The first three floors are sales rooms for Chanel products. The fourth floor is a cultural floor where piano concerts, fashion parades and displays of works by young artists and creators can take place. The remaining floors are occupied by administrative offices. 'Beige' occupies the top floor. Everything was devised by capitalising on our experience in creating restaurants, but without wanting to design elements which would be reproduced elsewhere. In 'Beige', each room would be unique, and its value lies in this uniqueness.

The second objective was that we wanted a contemporary, French restaurant. Thirdly, this had to be a restaurant for the Japanese market. Not an embassy or an example of French *savoir-faire*, but a restaurant which should above all please the Japanese. Today, 96 % of our clientele is Japanese, and only 1.5 % French. This target was part of the restaurant's economic *raison d'être*. We were extremely careful about the size of the portions, the seasoning, not to use products which the Japanese cook better than us, the choice of the place mats, the lighting, the background music, and different ways of presentation. Our leitmotiv was "is this going to please the Japanese ?"

Finally, we aimed for excellence. From the start, we had very high expectations.

The throes of marriage

It was essential that the each group's prerogatives in terms of creation were clearly defined in the a contract. Who would make the decision regarding the interior architecture ? This was put in writing. Finally, Chanel had the veto regarding the decoration and the interior architecture ; Alain Ducasse had the veto for the food, the pastries and cakes and the wines.

The interior architecture : the atmosphere of a fashion show

Ordinarily, for our restaurants, we choose the interior architect. For 'Beige', even if we could have refused, it was Chanel who chose Peter Marino. He creates fabulous boutiques for Chanel, but he had never designed a restaurant before. For us it was a challenge. Working

with Richard Collasse, Chanel had imagined the atmosphere at 'Beige' to be similar to a fashion show. We could just see it : the waitresses would come out of the kitchen, step onto a catwalk and walk to the tables with the help of ramps...

Steps, ramps, catwalks... People like us, who manage restaurants, find these sorts of ideas rather alarming : waitresses as models, beautiful Africans, Japanese, Koreans, Americans, Brazilians, Danes, all 1.83 metres tall, capable of walking down a catwalk, serving and talking about wine...

This was the original vision with which we had started working in 2003. From this, we had tried to emphasise the constraints inherent in the business while still trying to preserve the Chanel influence.

On the outside, the building was covered with a gigantic screen, which was designed before we arrived and which displayed fashion shows or advertised the group's products. This would mean that in the restaurant the diners would constantly have flashing lights in front of the windows. The Alain Ducasse teams had to explain to the engineers, Peter Marino and the designer of this screen (which was probably one of the most expensive of its kind in the world), that this did not correspond to Alain Ducasse's idea of the restaurant business, even though we appreciated that we had to revamp and improve the concept of French gastronomy. Following such discussions, the commercial screen no longer covers the two floors of the restaurant.

Finally, we managed to make a compromise which is still a rather complex matter from the restaurateur's point of view. The dining room is on two floors. There are two steps between the two levels. It is very restrictive for serving purposes but we agreed not to dispute this in view of the height of the ceiling and the superb panorama which this slight overhang gives.

The constraints of functionality

In the restaurant, the world of Chanel can be found in the decoration based on tweed, marble and wood, in gold, off-white, beige and black all set in very simple lighting. Alain Ducasse voiced his opinion about a number of points including the chairs and the lighting. Peter Marino wanted the seating to use materials close to tweed and which formed the 'C' of Chanel when viewed from above. We had to work to find a balance between the aesthetic side and the functional side since the chairs had to be easily handled by the waiters. There were many long work sessions between us in order to decide on a chair on which one could sit comfortably. Furthermore, we did not want people to feel as if they were in a Chanel boutique and that the diners' Chanel suits blended into the tweed of the chairs. We wanted to avoid going too far into the luxury side.

For the lighting, we had learnt from our experience in New York that a ceiling height of nine metres and a sober design called for a bit of warmth and the need to change the dimensions. Alain Ducasse suggested breaking the monotone ceiling and replacing it with a coffered ceiling. The place had to be magical.

As far as the tableware was concerned, we had to reach a balance between the desire to design luxury products and the inherent constraints related to their use. In an area where Chanel had the veto, we worked with Peter Marino. He looked for tableware in the most beautiful boutiques, particularly in New York. However, his project did not take onboard what our experience had taught us. For example, he wanted to use a linen which had a large amount of openwork and was very delicate, but we knew that linen should be woven in a certain way, and that sometimes a small amount of cotton should be added, and that tests should be carried out on the linen so that it should not shrink when washed.

Therefore, in areas in which we were not the leader, we brought the knowledge we had acquired from our previous experience to the creations which were being proposed. For example, we have in-depth knowledge of stationery because the opening of a restaurant

involves the design of forty-seven stationery products : the lunch menu, the lunch wine list, the lunch gâteaux menu, the VIP menu, small bags, the box for macaroons, the paper for printing the bill, the paper which encloses the bill, and so on. Our *savoir-faire* in this area is written down in a book which specifies the requirements for each of these products. These things are quite obvious but one does not necessarily know them if one has never opened a restaurant before. For 'Beige', the collaboration of the *savoir-faire* which we brought, together with Chanel's desire to make a luxury product, resulted in work which lasted a year-and-a-half.

The creation of the menu

For the cuisine, Alain Ducasse's specifications were extremely clear. It had to be contemporary, French cuisine, elegant but accessible, devoid of any auras, distinctive in its daring and humorous touch, and with a hint of Japanese influences. Contemporary : the terminology is important since one might expect us to produce either classic or experimental cuisine. On the one hand, Alain Ducasse wanted to revamp the image of French cuisine in Tokyo which was still associated with all the clichés dating back from before the *nouvelle cuisine* era : these included rich sauces, large portions, creamy and heavy desserts, the use of a great deal of butter, tails and bow-ties, pedestal tables, carving meats in front of the diner, decanting wine at the table, and so on. This is how the Japanese imagine French cuisine and this is what they are looking for. Alain Ducasse did not want to follow this tradition as everyone expected him to. He did not want to try out experimental, unstructured cuisine either, even though it could please the public, despite having called in Didier Eléna, one of the inventors of Spoon who had experience in multi-ethnic and unstructured cuisine, to help on this project. A happy medium was found : a contemporary, French cuisine with a little Japanese influence. The best French products – such as Brittany lobsters, and Bresse poultry – and the best local products – venison from Ezo, beef from Wagyu, scallops from Nemuro – were to be used and cooked according to French techniques, presented in the form of portions suited to Japanese taste.

This cuisine had to be presented in an extremely short and seasonal menu, because when it comes to menus, the Japanese do not like being presented with many choices.

Impertinence and luxury

The last point concerns service. We worked with Karl Lagerfeld to help us destroy certain preconceived ideas and so-called 'sacred' auras about particular products. We wanted elegant and relaxed service. Karl Lagerfeld made us cardigans, trainers, short-sleeved shirts and unstructured collars. This was in strict contrast to our other restaurant in Tokyo, 'Benoit', where the waiters wore ties and waistcoats. Here again, the desire was to create something unique, French and luxurious. This both surprised and disconcerted people since it was new in its genre. However, it was French and completely in the spirit of Chanel : a touch of impertinence, as Mademoiselle Chanel would have wanted, and of elegance.

DISCUSSION

Question : *How did you choose the name 'Beige' ?*

Stéphane Bellon : We had to find a name which the Japanese understood and which was acceptable to both the Alain Ducasse Group and the Chanel Group. Clearly, we had to avoid any clichés or ant trite names. It was a laborious process. We worked with a consultant for a year to find it. At one point, we considered the name 'Collection' and various puns, sometimes inane. We wanted something light, a scent, a colour. In the end, we opted for one of Coco Chanel's three signature colours.

A Sino-French marriage

Q. : *The aestheticism of cuisine - its refined and delicate side - is something typically Japanese. It may even come from Japan. Having said that, what do the Japanese expect of a French restaurant ?*

S.B. : In Japan, aesthetics and refinement can also be found in areas which are close to the kitchen, such as the service and in the way in which one decorates the table. For Alain Ducasse, as for all the other great chefs, a dish is a painting. But a painting where one can see from the products represented that it is French.

There is a perfect example which illustrates the meeting between the Japanese and the French namely the composition of the cheese board at 'Beige'. A board has separate containers ; the cheese is presented in the form of small portions, or even bite-size portions, to preserve different tastes, the authenticity and the shapes. There is a small accompaniment for each person such as a morello cherry marmalade as a sweet-and-sour contrast for the mature *Comté* ; a black olive tapenade with a hint of basil for the *Saint Maure* ; a *Sauternes* jelly with small raisins with nutty aromas for the *Fourme d'Ambert* ; and finally a black truffle and stewed pears for the *Coulommiers*. I am not sure that we would have created such a cheese board in France.

Conflicting egos

Q. : *All the creators who took part in these projects certainly have huge egos. You have talked about compromises but not about conflicts.*

S. B. : My role was to make sure there were compromises. However, it was sometimes difficult. At Ducasse, we tend to work in different teams. At Chanel, when new creations are unveiled, this happens at a show - this is how it is done for fashion collections. For the presentation show of the table linen at 2.30pm in the rue Cambon in Paris (Chanel's headquarters), no-one knew anything about it beforehand. However, when you have to explain to a creator from the prestigious house of Chanel during one of these shows where he is presenting his creations exclusively, that the table linen or the paper to be used for a menu is not quite right and that we are vetoing it, the situation becomes rather delicate.

We managed to put a stop to these shows in the interest of teamwork.

There were clashes concerning the tableware and the catwalk. We constantly had to remind everyone of the operational side of a restaurant. Conversely, they also had their opinions about the menu and the choice of the staff, and we did not always agree with them. However, I think that these disagreements stimulated creativity since the end result reflected our high standards.

Working on one's own without restrictions, as sometimes happens, is not nearly as stimulating.

Learning from experience

Q. : *How did you integrate, and benefit from the knowledge you gained from previous experiences ?*

S. B. : We opened 'Benoit' on September 1st, 2005. Today, two people from my team are working practically full-time on writing up reports of how we created this restaurant. This work is very important to the company : it is a real luxury to be able to devote to the restaurant which has just opened two people working full-time to write reports, in a context where we could equally well put them to work on restaurants which are due to open in the future. They are actually in the process of writing up all the information on the cooking, the tableware and the recipes from the financial, human and technical aspects.

With 'Beige', we made a glaring error : we had the refrigeration systems made in France to allow the ice-creams to be on the same level as the pastries. We had connection and maintenance problems when we installed the systems in Japan. When we created 'Benoit', we designed the wine cellars in France, and we made provisions for all the ventilation and all the vents so that the cold air system would be directly connected. We will never design the refrigeration system in France again. We have written this down. We will subcontract it to a local manufacturer.

A non-chef in a chef's world

Q. : *You do not come from the world of cooking and so you have not had your apprenticeship in this field. How did you join the group and become accepted ?*

S. B. : I had nine interviews over two years before I was taken on. This was three years ago. The group started growing internationally and I was able to join when the number of restaurants which were being opened and needed to be managed was going to be too much for Ducasse by himself. Alain Ducasse was very clear about this : he gave me a three-month trial period.

When I arrived, I took on work from several other people. In the beginning, it was difficult and the fact that I did not know how to cook was a huge handicap. Furthermore, I had ten years' experience in group catering behind me : not only could I not cook, but I was also the ugly duckling, the runt. I was used to canteens ! However, as I had the role of co-ordinator or project manager and I had to manage difficult situations and introduce work methods, I think that I managed to help all the teams.

The creator and creative organisation

Q. : *Alain Ducasse is a creator who became an entrepreneur. He delegates a great deal. However, he also tastes all the dishes, is very attentive to what is happening, and draws up very precise specifications. The main difficulty is making sure that his company produces his creations. To achieve this, one has to be capable of explaining and writing down what one wants to do. How does Alain Ducasse manage to convey his vision to his teams ? For example, in the case of 'Beige', you described it in a certain number of terms such as contemporary, elegant, and transparent. Is this really meaningful and how does one convey these words on a menu ?*

S. B. : The chef gives the broad outline, but each person adds his individual touch. For example, in the group there are numerous ways of preparing wok-fried tuna *à la plancha* with sautéed vegetables. The chef directs : vegetables clearly presented, precise cooking '*à la plancha*' and a sauce on the side.

The spirit remains the same because we all share the same heritage and culture, because we have all spent time in Monaco and worked with the chef. This heritage is also written down. If Alain Ducasse wrote it down, it is for him, so he can leave a mark not only for the general public but also for his chefs. Often he says to us "*Look at the Grand livre de cuisine, page so-and-so, and you will understand exactly what I mean*".

Having said that, the creation, fortunately or unfortunately does not always work like that. The situations when Alain Ducasse is at his most creative is when he is travelling, when he has some time to relax, in an aeroplane, or when he is visiting a craftsman, or when he takes the time to taste a particular product. When he is in Tokyo for a week, he always manages to make time to discover a product or a technique. He discovers a great deal by himself, alone. Ultimately, when he is in a small group, he will give a new direction.

For 'Beige's' desserts menu, Alain Ducasse wanted to show the product at its best and to isolate and magnify each aroma. Didier Elena designed a strawberry gateau with three distinct elements : a sausage-shaped portion of ice-cream, a small, crispy tart and a strawberry marmalade. This seemed to correspond perfectly to the given directions : a clear creation where the product was shown off to the best effect, with no special concoctions, and no sauce which covered everything ; a very well-known French product. When Alain Ducasse tasted it, we realised that we had interpreted his vision incorrectly. The unstructured side was a mistake. In a single dessert, we should have created both crispiness and smoothness, as well as something cold and something hot.

Similarly, the pastry chef made both a cooked and an uncooked fig with a hint of olive oil. When we presented it, Alain Ducasse tasted it 'blind'. He noticed the olive oil which was barely perceptible. We had just opened 'Benoit' which served food with a very Mediterranean flavour. The pastry cook got a battering : Ducasse made it clear that olive oil was reserved for dishes at 'Benoit', and that at the 'Plaza-Athénée' everyone knew that we were not to use olive oil or tomatoes. These items are strictly for the 'Louis XV' restaurant in Monaco : it is written in stone.

Alain Ducasse creates products from what is available whether it is good or bad, because this allows him to say what he wants and what he does not want. He knows exactly where he is going. He delivers clear messages in a patriarchal manner when he is with small groups and he redirects us when we make mistakes, regardless of whether it is a particular dish, or a book, stationery or tableware.

Q. : *Does this very organised system of delegation not ensure the continuity of the Alain Ducasse cuisine ?*

It must be very inhibiting for Christophe Moret, the chef at the 'Plaza Athénée', not to have the right to use olive oil or tomatoes. Moreover, as far as gastronomic critics are concerned, he is not the chef but Alain Ducasse. How is it possible to prevent such a system from restricting creativity and resulting in a purely academic form of cooking ?

S. B. : I do not think that the Alain Ducasse group is interested in creation for creation's sake, nor for experimenting. We cook for our clients, not for us. Techniques are a by-product of our creativity. However, innovation for us is not simply innovation for innovation's sake nor is it a desire to indulge in experimental, demonstration cooking or cooking shows. Its aim is to produce contemporary cooking which meets the expectations of our clients.

In terms of creation, the broad outlines have already been written but there is plenty of scope for interpretation : this is left to each chef's individual inclination.

Alain Ducasse encourages his chefs to make suggestions.

Q. : *Are the chefs not tempted to leave and set up their own restaurants ?*

S. B. : Yes, that happens. Comings and goings are part of the life of our group. Alain Ducasse encourages his chefs to travel around, to go to see what other people are doing and to learn from other experiences when they feel the need. He respects their decisions. It is not because they leave the group that the ties are broken : Alain Ducasse stays by their side. He is often on the telephone talking to his former chefs.

He knows where everyone is and what sort of cuisine he is doing. He will go and visit people who have moved round the world when he travels in order to talk with them, discover new things, be inspired and stay in touch with them.

Often they come back. Sylvain Portay, one of Alain Ducasse's oldest collaborators, went to San Francisco for ten years to set up his own restaurant. Today, he is the corporate chef at 'Mix' and 'Benoit'. Alain Ducasse likes that.

Presentation of the speaker :

Stéphane Bellon : graduate (1993) of HEC (*Hautes Etudes Commerciales* business school). He worked in the strategy and marketing department for the American subsidiary of Sodexo in Boston from 1993 to 1995. He was then associate manager of an SME (small and medium-sized enterprise) dealing in food vending machines in Nice from 1995 to 1999. He became managing director of Selecta Benelux and was a member of the management committee at Compass Belgique (group and commercial catering) in Brussels from 1999 to 2002. He has been the director of development for the catering arm of the Alain Ducasse Group in Paris since September 2002.

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