

(continued)

In *Le Bernardin Cookbook*, *Chef Ripert demystifies for the home cook the art of choosing and preparing great fish dishes. Here, he shares some thoughts about his profession and passion.*

The top chefs in America are becoming household names. You yourself were recently featured in *People* magazine—how has this culture of celebrity affected you?

Periodically I teach classes at cooking schools, and I typically ask my students what their professional goals are. When someone says, “I want to be the number one chef in America,” I say that’s wrong—they shouldn’t be thinking of being number one, they should be thinking of the food.

My ultimate goal is not to be famous, but to communicate my passion for food, to bring the concepts of good ingredients and preparation to an audience: Everything I’ve done has been in service of that goal. When I first walked into *Le Bernardin*, I had a strong extra sense that it wasn’t just another restaurant where I was going to work. It’s difficult to describe, but it’s been a special place—on every level, not just a job, but an instrument for me to share my passion. The *Le Bernardin Cookbook* furthers that goal in a different way, as does my teaching.

And there are ways in which the celebrity and the media can help those goals, too. The *People* article definitely had an impact on the clientele of *Le Bernardin*. We’ve traditionally attracted businesspeople—people who work in New York, or who are in New York frequently and know the restaurant. But now, through that type of mainstream media, so many more people are aware of us—it’s brought us a broader range of customers, and that, in turn, has expanded our role as educators.

What do you mean by “educators”?

Well, many people who are new to us have relatively uneducated palates—they typically eat fairly unsophisticated food. We want to make these customers comfortable with unfamiliar ingredients, open them up to new culinary experiences.

The great thing is that it’s never too late to learn more about food and wine. I don’t know anyone who liked wine the first time they tried it—and in France, where I was born, we first have it when we’re very young. But as you drink it more, your palate begins to learn, and you taste the subtle flavors—raspberry, chocolate, whatever. The best way to learn about food or wine is to taste, taste, taste. And it’s never too late to learn.

Speaking of teaching and learning, you’re studying Buddhism. How does that impact your professional life?

I’ve always had a passion for cooking, it always came naturally to me. Recently, however, I realized how spiritual an

experience cooking is for me, and how Buddhism helps explore that experience.

We often take for granted the things we eat, because we are so separate from the process. A lobster, a carrot—we take them from nature, from the sea and the earth. These are not to be taken for granted—these are sacred, and the product of our labor is sacred. What chefs do is alchemy—they take these precious ingredients and transform them into something more sublime. And to do justice to the ingredients, we must immerse ourselves in the ingredients, fully immerse ourselves in the process. To me the most important thing—they’re going to put me away for being crazy after this—but the most important thing is to put love into what you do, into your cooking.

It’s an intangible thing, but if you have two tarts, one made by the best baker in the city, and one baked at home, just for you, by someone who cares about you, the second one is going to taste better.

So the people who use *Le Bernardin Cookbook* will be able to cook fish better than you do, if they add lots of love?


Well [laughing]...I’ve had a lot of practice. But we *did* take pains to make the recipes friendly to the home chef. We bought a Magic Chef stove, like someone would have in their home kitchen, and plugged it in here at *Le Bernardin*, and we bought household-quality pots and pans to make the recipes, not the heavy-duty ones that we use in the restaurant.

Lee Ann Cox followed me around the kitchen and wrote the recipes down as I cooked. When I said $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon, she verified that it was $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon and made sure I didn’t cheat on measurements—sometimes I do.

Two months later, she tested the recipes at home with her friends who were inexperienced cooks, to make sure the recipes were clear and workable for the layperson.

In addition to publishing your first cookbook this year and your James Beard Awards, *Le Bernardin* was recently named the top restaurant in New York by readers of *Gourmet* magazine. That sounds about as good as it gets for you and Maguy—what continues to challenge you?

For the restaurant, on a daily basis, our biggest challenge is to continue to improve the quality of the ingredients, to continue to innovate, to not rest on our reputation, but to continue to strive for the best.

On a personal level, I’ve found that lately I’m filled with the energy and desire to communicate, to share my knowledge and passion about food, and I’m looking for new ways to do that. As I mentioned before, I’ve been doing some teaching and, of course, the *Le Bernardin Cookbook* has been a great way to share what I know. 

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