

Food & Drink

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Alain Ducasse, November 30
The celebrated chef visits Spoon at The InterContinental Hong Kong

Top class Ducasse

One of the most decorated chefs in the world, **Alain Ducasse** talks about fresh produce and his role in his global restaurant empire.

Interview by **Dorothy So**. Photography by **Calvin Sit**

The InterContinental's French restaurant Spoon is normally closed for lunch on weekdays but on this particular Wednesday, we find the floor staff buzzing about in their carefully-ironed suits, arranging sets of silverware on pristine white tablecloths. It's equally harried in the open kitchen where the chefs rush to plate up one last winter menu dish for a photoshoot.

In a split second though, the atmosphere takes a sharp turn. Everyone stops their tasks at hand and turns to the familiar figure who's just walked through the door. It's Alain Ducasse – one of the most celebrated chefs in the industry and the man responsible

for Spoon's conception. Sporting his signature turtle spectacles with his silver hair swept back neatly away from his face, the 55-year-old Frenchman comes off at first like a friendly paternal figure. But he also carries a quietly imposing aura befitting a man who boasts more than 20 restaurants around the globe as well as double digits in the Michelin star department (Spoon was awarded its second star at the beginning of this month).

Having been in the restaurant industry for more than three decades, Ducasse is as much a celebrity as he is a chef. His flagship restaurant Le Louis XV is frequented by the rich and famous

and he's cooked for major events such as Prince Albert of Monaco's royal wedding and the Cannes Film Festival. Despite all this though, Ducasse is not the type to flaunt his accolades and he's quick to play down his relationship with some of his more well-known regulars.

"I cook and serve the same dishes whether you're a normal guest or a VIP," he says. This might sound like a diplomatic statement but the truth of Ducasse's words becomes palpable when one sees how eager he is to avoid the spotlight. It's not that he dislikes attention – after all, he is amiable throughout our photoshoot and poses on cue like a pro. But he becomes visibly

uncomfortable – annoyed even – when he's hounded down by the food paparazzi.

When Ducasse makes an appearance at his Hong Kong restaurant, he makes a clear attempt to keep the spotlight on Philippe Duc – his protégé and current resident executive chef at Spoon. When the two of them are in the kitchen, Ducasse assumes the role of observer, allowing Duc to exercise his skills. Only occasionally does he interrupt and it's generally just a quick, calm mutter to suggest the Spoon chef add more seasoning to the sauce or put a little more olive oil in the pan.

Ducasse's cooking style emulates his personality. It's sophisticated and impressive, but at the same time, it's rooted in an appreciation for the simpler things in life. His penchant for fresh, seasonal produce is a particularly important facet of his culinary style and creates the backbone of many dishes, such as sea bass fillet with artichoke and spring onion (see

Left to right Sea bass with artichoke, spring onion and black truffle; Alain Ducasse and Philippe Duc in the kitchen



Winter recipe

Sea bass fillet, artichoke, spring onion & black truffle

Recipe prepared by Philippe Duc, executive chef of Spoon (see left)

Ingredients (serves 4)

4 x 130g sea bass fillet
8 baby artichokes
12 spring onions
10g butter
2 garlic cloves
2 sprigs thyme
500ml chicken stock
40ml olive oil
Half a lemon
Salt
Ground pepper

Sauce

100g chicken trimmings
200g sea bass bone, rinsed
40g butter
20g brown butter
40g shallots, peeled and chopped
1 garlic clove
1 sprig thyme
100ml white wine
500ml chicken stock
2g black peppercorn
20ml olive oil
20ml balsamic vinegar
10ml truffle juice (optional)
10g black truffle, chopped (optional)

Directions

Prepare and turn artichokes and soak in water with half a lemon. Cut each artichoke in half. Cut the spring onion into 12cm segments. Sear the vegetables separately, both with shallots, thyme and 20ml of olive oil. Season with salt and pepper and hydrate with chicken stock. Cover lid and cook until tender. Glaze and cool in refrigerator.

For the sauce, cut the chicken trimming and fish bones into pieces. Heat olive oil in a cocotte and roast the chicken. Add a little butter to obtain a golden brown colouration, then add shallots, garlic and thyme and sear for a bit. Deglaze with white wine and balsamic vinegar. Add chicken stock and fish bones. Bring to a boil and skim. Add the peppercorn and simmer for 30-45 minutes. Strain the sauce, reduce and whip with butter. Add chopped truffles and truffle juice.

Pan-fry the sea bass with 20ml olive oil. Reheat artichokes and spring onions in a pan with a small amount of olive oil and chicken stock. Slice artichoke into 12 pieces and season. Plate the fish and finish with artichokes and spring onions before serving with sauce on the side.

recipe on right) and his signature veggie-laden Cookpot. And unlike so many other fine-dining chefs, Ducasse is not of the camp that insists on employing only the highest pedigree products exported from Europe. "There is no obligation to use French ingredients just because I [run] a French restaurant," he says, adding that he prefers to source locally. "If a product is beautiful, I will want to use it (regardless of where it comes from)." In fact, his favourite ingredient-shopping destination is not a marché in France but, rather, a small market in Kyoto, Japan, which he calls 'one of the best places to discover high quality produce'.

While Ducasse may be best known as a chef, his accomplishments nowadays are

mostly outside the kitchen. He's pinned down the art of restaurant expansion and his brand – Alain Ducasse Enterprise – covers most major cities across Europe, America and Asia. Early next year, he will add yet another venue to his empire with the opening of his first restaurant in Qatar, which he excitedly calls 'a whole new type of restaurant'. It would be logical to presume that his next step would be to expand further into the developing scene in China but Ducasse shakes his head. "No. One restaurant in Hong Kong is enough," he says, also expressing that he has no interest in the exploding

Mainland market.

What's most impressive about Ducasse's brand is the consistent quality that runs through all the restaurants – no small feat in the

fickle dining industry. He is quick to attribute this global success to his team. "I am confident in all my chefs," he asserts. All of them have worked with him for years (Duc has been with Ducasse for more than a decade) and each are carefully handpicked to preside over a specific venue. The recipe for a winning restaurant then, he quips, is having 'the right chef at the right place at the right time'. It's easier said than done for most – but, for Ducasse, this carefully-honed formula is second nature.

So is Ducasse a chef, a restaurateur or a businessman? It's a little bit of everything and more, he answers. "I decide the next step, I decide the vision. That is my job."

Spoon by Alain Ducasse

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