



Raymond Blanc: 'craftsman led by desire'

RAYMOND BLANC IS NO LESS THAN AN ICON FOR FRENCH CUISINE IN GREAT BRITAIN, AND PERHAPS THE WORLD. NICOLAS KOCHAN WENT TO LE MANOIR AUX QUAT' SAISONS, TO HEAR ABOUT HIS LIFE STORY AND HIS EXTRAORDINARY BUSINESS.

Accidental entrepreneur

"I am a craftsman led by desire", Raymond Blanc says. "I became an entrepreneur by accident". Raymond has sound advice for other would-be entrepreneurs. "First accept that you don't know everything. Without humility you will have a rough ride. Get a well-defined business vision, study the art of delegation and don't pretend you are an expert in every field".

Raymond Blanc, European Chef of the Year, 1990, awarded the Ordre de Napoleon, 1991, and an honorary British OBE in 2008, feels privileged to have discovered his metier. "We do something that we enjoy, that replenishes our guests and gives them joy. At Le Manoir anyone can celebrate a special moment. After all, how many do we have in one lifetime?"

He was pushed into his career as England's leading chef by an unfortunate incident at a restaurant in France. When young Raymond naively suggested to his burly, short-tempered head chef that his sauce could do with a touch more salt, the chef whacked him with a frying pan. All hell broke loose.

Just 19 at the time and working at Besançon's excellent Le Palais de la Bière restaurant as a front-of-house greeter, Blanc had broken not only his mandible but also the sacred code of French cuisine: never question the chef.

Exiled to England

Luckily the restaurant management recognised his zeal and recommended him to "Rosemary Revived", a village restaurant in Newbridge, Oxfordshire. Duly "exiled" to England in 1972, Raymond embarked on "an adventure in a strange land of power cuts and vanishing brand names".

Despite his affection for Englishness, Blanc hated

how the upper classes saw culture and good food as their exclusive province. He vowed to change things after tasting an undercooked square slab that masqueraded as fish and chips. Meanwhile the penniless waiter graduated to deputy chef; and in September 1977 he and his then-wife Jenny set up their own restaurant, "Les Quat' Saisons", in Summertown, north Oxford.

To call the venture audacious would be an understatement. "We mortgaged our house, knowing that if we failed we would lose everything. I had only three months experience as head chef, but we worked bloody hard: we put a Gaulois cockerel on the door so there was no mistaking it was French."

Meteoric rise

Within a year "Quat' Saisons" gained a coveted Egon Ronay star. Many hailed it the best restaurant in Britain. Then in 1984 he opened "Le Manoir aux Quat' Saisons", the Great Milton manor that he transformed into a hotel-restaurant with an "ensemble" of seven gardens, each representing a different culture.

Today Raymond is possibly the most recognised Frenchman on these isles, and Manoir has become a byword for culinary excellence. It is the only British country hotel to enjoy two Michelin stars for 19 years on the trot. Manoir runs residential cooking courses and Blanc has taught such luminaries as Marco Pierre White. Besides writing six popular books, he publishes "Seasons" magazine. In 2005 his peers voted him "AA Chef's Chef of the Year". And in 2007 and 2008, a decade after his first foray into television, "Blanc Mange", he spearheaded the cult BBC reality programme, "The Restaurant".



Raymond Blanc

Blanc's ambit also includes the accessibly priced "Le Petit Blanc Brasseries", re-launched in 2006 as "Brasseries Blanc" (now eight in number); and the Oxford patisserie "Maison Blanc", which supplies Harrods with bread and pastries. He even persuaded dons to forego synthetically creamed éclairs in favour of his own: double the cost, half the size, yet entirely authentic. Clearly France's loss is England's gain.

Passion for change

Changing tastes is bound up with Blanc's philosophy of life. He feels that devalued food underpins all current global financial and ecological crises. Demands for instant gratification, he says, have turned food into "a mere commodity whose only values are cheapness and shelf life.

"We thought technology could fix everything – but what sort of world have we left our kids? Half the planet is starving; the other half is obese. We need to reinvent our regions and ask questions about ethics and responsibility. Only then can we foster healthier societies, because a culture of food is by definition a culture of people. After all the word companionship comes from the French for 'sharing bread'!"

Quintessentially French

Born in 1949 in Saône, a village 10km south of Besançon,

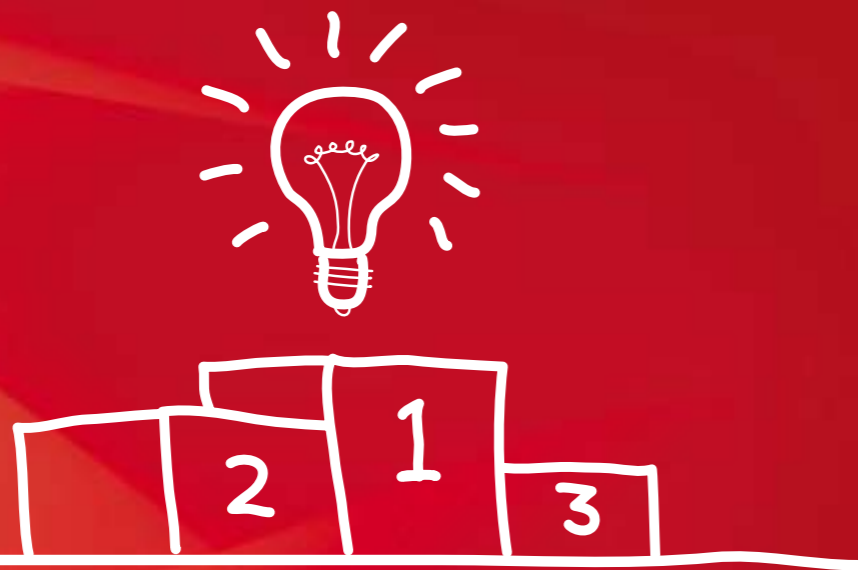
Raymond was one of four brothers and four sisters born to Maurice, a "Communist atheist father" and Anne-Marie, a "guilty Catholic" mother. "I come from a working class background where the table was the hub of family life. The way I deal with people all started there".

Saône is sandwiched between Burgundy and Jura, two of the world's outstanding food and wine regions. Indeed, says Blanc, "France was destined to be a great gastronomic area with its five mountain ranges, five seas and 20 micro-climates."

"A natural hunter-gatherer" from age seven, he sold fruit direct to local restaurants, realising that they would pay five times more than the market. Bizarrely his father made him taste soil, "foul, tannic and acid, yet its billions of flavours and nutrients taught me where food really comes from".

Ultimately Raymond's mother remains his chief inspiration. "Cooking was her department, her art." Nothing was wasted: she would jar and pickle fruit and store them "in the dim light of the basement, with the asparagus, wild mushrooms and smell of the beaten earth". Tellingly, Raymond opens his latest book, "A Taste of My Life", with a mouth-watering description of Maman's summertime specialty, a simple tomato salad. At 87 she still prepares meals for twenty on a Sunday.

Raymond's discovery of his talent took time, however. He became in turn an industrial design student ("geometric



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shapes meant nothing to me"); a nurse in a hospital leukaemia department; even a factory worker, "the most dehumanising thing in my life. You became a number, a shadow." When he alighted upon that Besançon restaurant, "I knew my destiny even though it had taken many roads to get there".

To the manor born?

His ultimate destiny was Le Manoir, a monument to be remembered by, where business sits beside cuisine, food besides a clever idea. "England, more than any other nation, embraces all the world's fashions," says this English cook by default. And few places could have seemed more English than the Great Milton manor house. Raymond admits being "frightened by its daunting façade that suggested vigour and wealth." Yet he could see its charm and potential.

Fortuitously the manor lies on Europe's richest corridor, connecting Oxford to London. "I had little money but I had the name and the reputation, and the idea of seasons that my parents had branded into my heart". Within two years he had given the manor's interior a more feminine aspect to counteract its masculine exterior.

More than anything the proudly "socialist republican Frenchman" wants to demonstrate that "luxury should be for everyone". He insists that children feel at home, that vegetarians are catered for, that Manoir hosts concert evenings and that all visitors are equally valued. Clearly the formula is working, for despite its steep prices, he says, visits have increased by 50% since the recession struck.



Le Manoir aux Quat' Saisons

Atypical chef

"Le Manoir may be a business yet it rests on important values", says Blanc: attention to detail, respect for the humblest objects and blending a French sensibility with English produce. He shares lessons with his 80-strong staff and rejects the view that chefs should be despots who swear and bully on television. "We worked hard to earn respectability through caring and supporting".

No typical chef, Blanc commissions new art and devises themes for hotel suites that draw on his reading and travels. For instance, two giant sculptures of artichokes by the parking lot proclaim "this is a place of art and fun as well as food".

Likewise he keeps abreast of changing demands. "The modern guest is exhausted by the culture of winning at any cost", adds Blanc. "He feels under pressure, so he wants a stress-free place full of soul and detail, without clever tricks, portraits of ancient ancestors looking down disapprovingly, or a waiter endlessly describing the menu when you just want to chat with your friends!" ■

This story was written in conjunction with Lawrence Joffe

Escape from the stresses of everyday life and enjoy a Midweek Break at Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons.

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