

# The Anatomy of Success

By Naomi Barry in Paris



## Does the Third Star Make a Difference?



Eric Frechon is now seven months into his dizzying position as France's latest 3-star Michelin chef. For the first five months — instead of exuberance and excitement — he had been feeling uneasy and unsure, worried that the people who normally patronize 3-star restaurants wouldn't accept his style of cooking.

"Tell me what you eat and I will tell you who you are," observed Brillat-Savarin nearly two centuries ago. These days it is hard to tell. Paris has gone fusion. The edges are blurred and you can't judge by the plate who is who any more.

But with Frechon's ascension, an unexpected group of old-standard gastronomes began to reappear. Word was buzzed around in private circles that the great traditional cuisine of France was back. You could find it in the restaurant of the Hotel Bristol where the tall rangy Frechon had bucked the so-called contemporary trends and was applying his impeccable techniques to dishes of "le terroir", an untranslatable term which the excellent news commentator Roger Cohen defines as "a combination of soil, hearth and tradition that links most French people to a particular place".

Frechon serves mackerel in a white wine sauce. He first tasted something similar in the farmhouse kitchen of his grandmother in Normandy. In his boyhood, tete de veau (the head of a calf, lovingly prepared) was the pride of the town's local bistro. In a tribute to the patrimony of the nation's taste buds, Frechon recently treated his Parisian swells to a Pig in its glorious entirety from head to foot, not forgetting the snout.

He boned the trotters, stuffed them with a delectable farce and wrapped the now refined delicacies in cabbage leaves. He grilled the breast. He sandwiched a blood sausage between two large slices of potato and pan fried the frivolity in butter. He poached the snout and twirled it in butter. He poached the ears in bouillon before crisping them a la plancha. Julia Child would have been enchanted.

Clients of the Bristol went into a Proust syndrom and started remembering where they came from three or four generations ago. The pay off has been reservations running 10 to 12 days in advance. Guests are predominantly Parisian and foreign visitors are trying hard to wangle reservations while they are still in town. The latter, however, are more likely to choose milk-fed lamb over pig's trotter.

Frechon joined me in the hotel's spacious bar area for a coffee. Since he was wearing his white chef's jacket with the tricolor stripes at the collar, he was easily recognized. A number of well wishers passed by,

shook his hand or kissed him on both cheeks. He took the congratulations good naturedly but in a low key manner.

The bar was busier than I had ever seen it, proving the drawing power of a star chef for the hotel. Hitherto I had found it elegant but staid. Now there there seemed to be an animated mix of stage personalities, CEO's, loners going over reports, well dressed people intent on their conversations. One couldn't put one's finger on it, but the atmosphere suggested the halcyon days when France was everybody's favorite country.

Fifty Five members of the Club des Cent, the prestigious gastronomic society, were just leaving after a lunch to which they had brought their own bottles of wine to test and voice their opinions. Frechon had executed a menu for them around a "poularde", prepared in a manner genuinely "terroir". Among other dishes, he flattered their experienced palates with an unusual treatment of red snapper stuffed with eggplant caviar teased with hints of cumin and coriander.

"No I didn't smoke the eggplant but left it natural. Red snapper is too delicate for that kind of competition," he said.

In keeping with his way with deceptive simplicities, Frechon amused the group with a froth of haddock (a homely fish) bordered by a mousseline of cauliflower and a gelee of red onions. Dessert was Wild Strawberries. One doesn't do anything with wild strawberries. Just leave them alone and eat them as soon as possible after picking.

Across the street from the Bristol is the Elysees Palace. The President has made the trip several times from the Palace to the palatial hotel for repeats on Frechon's Macaroni Farci, another example of a simple ingredient given a Cinderella treatment. The chef stuffs fat tubes of plain old Macaroni with a royal farce of artichoke, truffles and foie gras. The whole is then gratineed with a generous dosage of fine old Parmesan.

Also nearby across the street is the residence of the American Ambassador, H.E. Charles H. Rivkin. Frechon hopes that the newly arrived Ambassador will come one day to his dining room and asked if I would invite him.

Since the Ambassador recently hosted a private showing of "Julie and Julia" several 10 days before its general release in Paris, the gossip around town is that he must be a gourmet, a supposition that has endeared him to the American community. If he does cross the street I hope he tries the chicken in a pig's bladder, a "tour de force" that would have had Balzac, Dumas and the other literary Heavy Forks penning chapters in praise.

Signed  
Naomi Barry