

TOP OF THE CLASS

Dish du Jour

VIVACIOUS CHEF SEBASTIEN PIEL SHARES THE SECRETS OF RUSTIC FRENCH HOME-STYLE COOKING WITH BUDDING GALLIC COOKS IN INNER-CITY MELBOURNE.

“I hope you all like butter; we are going to be doing a lot of cooking with butter! Also garlic and onions and wine,” declares Sébastien Piel, smiling broadly at us as we congregate expectantly around his open-plan kitchen, complimentary glasses of Champagne in our hands.

Gathered in a fire-lit corner of a warehouse tucked away in a cobblestoned alley in the Melbourne suburb of Prahran, we’re here to learn how to cook a three-course meal that Sébastien calls “Rustic Fantastic”. It’s the kind of traditional, slow-cooked *repas de fête* (feast) that a family might prepare for a leisurely Sunday lunch at their weekend home in the countryside in Normandy in northern France, where Sébastien was raised.

“You!” he yells dramatically, pointing across the room to one of the few men in the group. “You are going to prepare the mushrooms. Yes, you!” laughs Sébastien when Frank steps forward hesitantly. “Come in, don’t be shy. Here, put on this apron. And don’t worry, everybody is going to cook and everybody is going to watch!”

After a quick demonstration by our exuberant French teacher, Frank is chopping plump brown mushrooms with finesse. Another student is on spring onion duty, with Sébastien generously showing the correct chopping technique once, twice, three times. “*Et voilà!*”

Cooking is in Sébastien’s blood. His father was a chef and restaurateur whose specialities included pâtés, terrines and *saucisson sec* (dry pork sausage). It seemed only natural for Sébastien to follow in his father’s footsteps and become a chef. “We talk about food all the time, me and ‘im,” Sébastien says. “Soon, he will give me ‘is recipes. He has been promising them for a long time!”

Sébastien studied at the renowned Ecole Hôtelière Granville in Normandy for five years, later working for some of the most prestigious restaurants in France and the UK, including La Maison du Danemark in Paris and Le Caprice in London.

When he immigrated to Australia in 2003, he wanted a change and worked as a florist. But he missed cooking and he’d always wanted to teach, so in 2006, he and his wife, Christine, established Dish du Jour.

“I want people to be able to cook beautiful food at home,” says Sébastien, a natural performer whose fun, engaging manner puts everyone at ease. “French food can seem *très compliqué*, but when you have the correct techniques, it’s easy.”

Before long, multiple activities are under way in the kitchen: onions are browning, spinach is sweating in butter, potatoes are being sliced with a mandolin and shiny fillets of trout are being pin-boned.

“Please toss those onions,” says Sébastien, for whom cooking is a multi-sensory, almost instinctive engagement with the food and flavours of his homeland. “They’re going to burn, I can feel it! People think you have to heat onions on high all the time, *mais non!*”

Sébastien knows many culinary secrets and he’s more than happy to share them. “Never add the garlic at the start of cooking,” he advises. “It will burn and you’ll lose all the delicious flavour. Let your vegetables cook first, then put them in.”

Three hours, several bottles of Champagne and multiple hands-on cooking techniques later, we’re sitting around a long wooden table. Sébastien expertly plates up the first course on an eclectic collection of antique crockery, then watches with satisfaction as we “ooh and aah” over the feast we have helped to create.

The entrée is a puff pastry log filled with ocean trout, mushroom and spinach, served with a sauce made from steamed mussels. This light, melt-in-the-mouth masterpiece of texture and flavour whets our appetites for the next course: confit of marinated lamb with baby carrots and beans, bacon and mushroom sauce and *pommes boulangère* (a dish of potatoes baked with onion, garlic, thyme, white wine and stock). The lamb, marinated overnight with herbs and French grey salt and then cooked in duck fat, literally falls off the bone. Its herby oiliness is absorbed by the vegetables and offset by a piquant Muscadet sauce.

Finally, our dessert of individual raspberry crème brûlées are a tangy take on a quintessentially French favourite. The tartness of the raspberry reduction complements the creamy decadence of the dish beautifully. *Bravo, Monsieur!*

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dishdujour.com.



Pin-boning trout fillets. Clockwise from left: whisking the vanilla cream to make crème brûlée; Sébastien and his ocean trout in puff pastry (recipe page 140); pommes boulangère.

OCEAN TROUT IN PUFF PASTRY WITH MUSSEL SAUCE

SERVES 8

Sébastien usually makes his own puff pastry, but for ease and convenience, we've substituted frozen puff pastry sheets.

1 tbs olive oil
60g butter
300g Swiss brown mushrooms, sliced
2 garlic cloves, finely chopped
3 spring onions, thinly sliced
300g baby spinach
6 sheets frozen puff pastry
1 egg, lightly beaten
2kg whole ocean trout, filleted*, skinned, pin-boned

Mussel sauce

50g butter, at room temperature
4 sprigs flat-leaf parsley
3 sprigs thyme
1 bay leaf
1 onion, finely chopped
1 carrot, finely chopped
1 celery stalk, finely chopped
1 garlic clove, finely chopped
2kg pot-ready black mussels*
250ml (1 cup) dry white wine

- 1** Heat oil and 1 tbs butter in a frying pan over medium heat. Add mushrooms and cook, stirring occasionally, for 15 minutes or until softened and liquid has evaporated. Add garlic and cook for 2 minutes or until fragrant. Transfer mixture to a bowl.
- 2** Melt remaining butter, then add onions and cook for 5 minutes or until softened. Add spinach and cook for 1 minute or until just wilted. Season with salt and pepper. Drain, cool, then squeeze spinach to remove liquid.
- 3** Place a sheet of baking paper, slightly longer than the fish fillets, on a large oven tray. Top with 3 pastry sheets, slightly overlapping, to make a rectangle a little longer than the fish fillets. Brush overlapping sections of pastry with egg to seal.
- 4** Place 1 fish fillet in the centre of pastry and season lightly with salt. Top with mushroom

and spinach mixtures, then the second fish fillet, so the thick end is over the thin end of the first fillet. Make a second pastry rectangle with remaining pastry on a separate sheet of baking paper. Brush around pastry filling with egg, top with second pastry rectangle and press edges of pastry together to seal. Refrigerate parcel for at least 1 hour.

5 Preheat a large oven tray to 200C. Brush parcel with egg, then, using baking paper underneath, carefully slide parcel onto the preheated tray. Bake for 30 minutes or until pastry is golden and fish is just cooked.

6 Meanwhile, to make sauce, melt 15g butter in a large pan over medium heat. Add herbs and vegetables to pan and cook for 10 minutes or until vegetables are softened. Increase heat to high, add garlic and cook for 30 seconds.

Add mussels and wine, then cover and cook, shaking pan occasionally, for 3 minutes or until mussels have opened. Remove mussels from sauce and discard any unopened ones. Remove mussels from shells and set aside.

7 Strain sauce into a bowl, then return to pan over high heat. Cook for 5 minutes or until reduced by half. Remove pan from heat. Roughly chop the remaining butter and add, piece by piece, to sauce and stir until smooth. Return mussels to sauce. Slice fish parcel and serve with sauce.

* Ask your fishmonger to fillet the trout for you; you will need 2 x 40cm fillets.

* Pot-ready black mussels, available from most fishmongers, are cleaned and bearded.

French cooking classes around Australia

QLD

JAMES STREET COOKING SCHOOL

Among its diverse range of hands-on cooking classes, you'll find the Modern French Experience. In this twice-monthly class, you'll learn various French techniques while you create a contemporary menu of wonton lasagne of prawn and saffron; slow-cooked duck with cabbage fondue, prosciutto and roasted hazelnuts; and cardamon and calvados caramelised apple. With between 10 and 20 people in each three-hour class, the lesson concludes with wine to match the French feast you have cooked. **James St Markets, Fortitude Valley, Brisbane, (07) 3252 8850, jamesstcookingschool.com.au.**

NSW

PATISSE

Learn the art of classic French desserts under the tutelage of renowned pastry chef Vincent Gadan, who began to hone his craft at the age of 16 in Burgundy. In his hands-on classes, which are held on Tuesdays and Wednesdays from 6pm till 10pm (with a dinner break), you can learn how to create *croquembouche*, soufflé or macarons, or specialise in cake decorating, high-tea treats, pastry, chocolate or dinner-party desserts. By the end of the night, you'll have mastered basic baking skills and have a box of delicious treats to show for your efforts. **PYD Building, 197 Young St, Waterloo, (02) 9690 0665, patisse.com.au.**

Ready to eat: ocean trout in puff pastry with mussel sauce. Clockwise from below: confit of marinated lamb; creating the crisp caramelised top for the crème brûlée; Sébastien shares his knowledge of French technique with the class.

