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Beaucoup de Bocuse

As France's original celebrity chef, Paul Bocuse built a Michelin-starred culinary empire and established the most prestigious cooking competition in the world. And yet, one goal still eludes him. Now he's turned to America's top chefs to help make it a reality even if it means breaking from his own haute traditions



GRAND AMBITION | 'I am ready to plan the future now,' says the 86-year-old Bocuse, seen here in the kitchen of his restaurant in Lyon, France.

opened so many restaurants that city officials named a market after him. In the fashion of Donald Trump, he became famous just for being himself. He showed that chefs could be as rich as their owners and the guests they're serving. And even as his empire grew, he never altered his persona. "He might fly around the world on private jets, but he's always the same Paul from Lyon," says Jerome Bocuse, his son.

But for all Paul Bocuse has obtained, there is one thing the 86-year-old wants very badly and still does not have. Jerome has listened to his father talk about it for more than two decades. It has become something of an obsession. "His wish," Jerome says, "is for an American to win the Bocuse d'Or."

THE BOCUSE D'OR IS THE MOST PRESTIGIOUS cooking competition in the world. Held in Lyon every two years (and falling this year at the end of January), the contest is a chance for chefs from around the globe to make a name for themselves. While there is an official cooking Olympics in Germany, chefs refer to the Bocuse d'Or as the real Olympics of high cuisine. "It has no competition really," says Priscilla Ferguson, professor of sociology at Columbia and author of *Accounting for Taste: The Triumph of French Cuisine*. Unlike reality shows such as *Top Chef* and *Iron Chef America*, there are no commercial breaks. The food is whipped up on stage in front of a live audience over five and a half grueling hours. The winning creations must be masterpieces, exploding with flavor and inspiring awe with their artistry.

THE CHEF ATE TOO MUCH. Decades of tasting Bresse chicken—cooked in a pig's bladder and served in a cream and egg-yolk sauce his famed black truffle and foie gras soup, his seared foie gras and puff pastries had clogged Paul Bocuse's arteries. On doctor's orders, the grande chef of France would be splayed out in the operating room much like the hare à la royale rabbits he'd carved table-side for so many years. When Bocuse was a boy, growing up in the kitchens of Lyon, a triple bypass was hardly the routine operation it is now. Still, having your chest sliced open is enough for any man to take stock of his years.

Bocuse's achievements are legendary. L'Auberge du Pont de Collonges, his flagship restaurant in Lyon, has maintained its three Michelin-starred ranking for more than four decades, longer than any restaurant on the planet. Bocuse also has pedigree. Not only does he represent the fourth generation in a family of chefs that served up recipes once prepared for the French monarchy, he also left home as a young man to study under the fabled Fernand Point, considered the founding father of modern French cooking. Back then, one of Bocuse's duties was to uncork a bottle of Dom Pérignon every morning and serve Point his customary first glass of champagne. From his position in the kitchen, where he prepared dishes for celebrities like Rita Hayworth, the seeds of higher ambition were planted.

Bocuse's other genius as a chef has been to combine that ambition with an insatiable entrepreneurial spirit. Chefs like to say Bocuse was the first "to step out of the kitchen," meaning he parlayed his charm into brand power, then parlayed that brand power into a lucrative culinary empire. In Lyon, Bocuse

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Photography by Matthieu Salvaing

The event started off as a gimmick. In the late '80s, organizers for the SIRHA food and restaurant show, hoping to draw bigger crowds, approached Bocuse about lending his name to a live cooking contest. Bocuse's connections were such that he had no trouble persuading premier chefs around the world to start organizations in their own countries to select and support contestants. "He'd be good at Chicago precinct politics," Ferguson says, calling Bocuse "an arm-twister of mega proportions."

Bocuse believed competing chefs ought to embody the pillar of classic French cooking: perfection. As a young apprentice in Point's kitchen, Bocuse developed an appreciation for the days of preparation behind a recipe like Bresse poulet and the years required to master it. Another secret to this level of haute French cuisine is the efficiency of the cooking staff, known as the brigade. French chefs have turned their kitchens into military operations, training apprentices the way war

generals do: through fear. In Point's kitchen, if the chef saw a plate with a nick in the rim, he would wait for a waiter to reach for it, then grab the dish and let it drop, shattering it to pieces.

For his contest, Bocuse wanted chefs to strive for the same level of devotion to craft. Bocuse and organizers revealed the type of meat and fish used in the competition more than a year in advance, giving a chef ample time to create a vision and master its execution.

In competition, the Americans struggled. While most competitors over the years have been trained in classic French techniques, the unfussiness of American cooking was at odds with the precision the Bocuse judges (all chefs) were looking for. The molecular gastronomy craze has also led to Willy Wonka cuisine, food that looks like one thing but tastes like another a further departure from classic French cooking.

Beyond differences in philosophy, the main problem for American contestants was organization and money. The winning teams mostly from France, Norway or Sweden—had developed foundations that supported training and coaching a chef for months. In contrast, Americans complained that they had to raise money themselves while training and working their shifts. They were competing on raw talent alone, which wasn't enough to get on the podium in Lyon. In two decades, the highest any American had placed was sixth.

Paul Bocuse had a special affinity for the Americans. Fighting the Nazis during World War II, he'd been shot in the chest and given a transfusion of American blood. As a gesture of appreciation, Bocuse flies an American flag outside his flagship restaurant. The chef-impresario also understands that the U.S. is the biggest media market in the world, and the best way for the Bocuse d'Or to tap into it is for an American chef to succeed in the competition. And if the Americans couldn't develop the right kind of organization to support and train a chef, Bocuse would do it himself.

THE TRIPLE BYPASS was a success. In the six years since the operation, Bocuse has enacted a kind of global-domination strategy. To the East, he's licensed out his name to eight brasseries in Japan. To the West, he's transferred ownership of Les Chefs de France at Epcot Center to Jerome and opened Monsieur Paul there, while another new restaurant with the Bocuse name opened at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York.

Since his recovery, Bocuse feels younger, reborn. "Tout nouveau," he tells me from his restaurant in Lyon, adding a one-liner that makes the translator laugh. "He says, 'I'm ready to plan the future now!'" For him, that future has revolved around the cooking competition that bears his name.

"He came to me and said, 'I need for you to do two things,'" recalls chef Daniel Boulud. "First, he says, 'I want you to run the American team [for Bocuse d'Or]. The second, he says, 'I want you to get Thomas Keller to be the president!'"

Boulud's reaction was instinctive. "Oui, chef," he said, echoing words he'd uttered the first time he'd met Bocuse, more than four decades earlier, as a chef's apprentice in Lyon. Though Boulud was concerned about funding, he was confident his connections and clientele could raise hundreds of thousands of dollars for the cause. The real challenge would be getting Keller to sign on.

Keller is, arguably, the most high-profile chef in The U.S. the only restaurateur to run a pair of three-Michelin-starred restaurants, The French Laundry and Per Se, simultaneously. Like Bocuse and Boulud, Keller also has a knack for branding and empire building, but his style is soft and understated. Unlike Bocuse and Boulud, his name is not found on any of his restaurants. And Keller is a true Francophile, with an outsider's appreciation for its culinary traditions, as handed down by maestros like Point and Bocuse.

When they discussed the idea, Boulud was shrewd enough not to give Keller a hard sell. Instead, he told him to expect a call. When the phone rang, on the other end of the line, in Lyon, was Bocuse. After hearing the old chef's frail voice, Keller's response was the same as Boulud's had been. "Oui, chef," he said.

So far, however, the dream team of Boulud and Keller has produced mixed results. While the superstar chefs have helped raise more than \$4 million since they got involved, the return on those donations has been modest. In 2009 their first year running the effort together the chef sent to Lyon to represent America was Timothy Hollingsworth, a Keller protégé who was reluctant to compete and submitted his application late. Hollingsworth put up a decent showing, finishing sixth, tying the American best. Realizing the next chef would need more time to train, the American team sponsored a paid sabbatical for James Kent, then sous chef at Eleven Madison Park. But Kent seemed intimidated by his superstar mentors (who brought on advisors like Grant Achatz, Tom Colicchio and others). He placed tenth.

The Americans wondered if their chances might improve by sending a chef experienced in cooking competitions, somebody accustomed to the long preparation the Bocuse d'Or requires. And then there were the contest rules, which some felt left them at a disadvantage. This year would be different: The chef and his fellow contest organizers decided to change the format of the competition, resulting in a controversial departure from Bocuse's original vision. The new rules, arguably designed to level the playing field, call for the kind of spontaneity found in restaurants and on popular televised cooking shows. This year, chefs were told the meat selection (Irish beef) six months before the competition, as opposed to a year, and the fish two months ahead of time. Chefs will be judged on a new criteria: incorporating elements of their country's cuisine into their creations. They will also be thrown a new challenge creating garnishes purchased at market the morning prior to the contest.

While some coaches and chefs applaud the improvisation the new rules will bring to the event, traditionalists worry they will undercut the precision of the cuisine, as once espoused by Bocuse himself. "I was disappointed," says Peter Jelksäter, coach of Sweden, which has landed silver medals in 2011 and 2009. With all the new rules, chefs will be compelled to be more creative, he feels. "Many of the chefs that compete in this competition are trying to reach the levels of Paul Bocuse, and they come so close to perfection because they are able to train for such a long time. They can really tear the ingredients apart. That's what takes the competition out of the everyday kitchen."

Jakob de Neergaard, president of the Danish team that won the gold medal in 2011, says that many European countries were wary of Bocuse meddling with the American team. "When you think about it, you begin to say, 'What the hell is going on here?'" But in the end, Neergaard believes Bocuse's wish won't help the Americans. "It's all about taste," he says from Copenhagen. "I just hope the Americans found the guy with the right taste—and let him train until he bleeds to death."

EIGHTY FOUR DAYS, 13 hours, 34 minutes and three seconds to go," says Richard Rosendale, this year's American contestant. We're standing in the war room, which is also in the bunker, built by the federal government as a secret fallout shelter for Congress in the event of a nuclear war. The bunker is hidden in plain sight at The Greenbrier, the resort in West Virginia where Rosendale works as executive chef and oversees its culinary apprenticeship program. Prepping for the Bocuse d'Or from behind Cold War-era, 30-ton steel- blast doors makes for a cute story line in the windup to Lyon, but the real significance of the bunker is the kitchen Rosendale has built here a to-the-inch replica of the space in Lyon where he and his commis, Corey Siegel, a recent Greenbrier grad, will cook. Rosendale installed a new floor, among countless other purchases. "There's \$150,000 in here, at least," he says.

The war room is down the hall. Inside, there's a countdown clock above his computer (password: goingforgold) and pinups of winning platters from previous years; covert pictures snapped of 2011 winner Rasmus Kofoed ("Look, I can see that he's using the mats on his heater that's smart, no slipping"); and a calendar mapping out his training schedule from now until January 29, the day the competition begins.

For Rosendale, who grew up in blue-collar Uniontown, Pennsylvania, official birthplace of the Big Mac, the journey to the Bocuse d'Or has been a long one. An aggressive kid, he was always getting into fights, and his grades suffered. For pocket money, he started bussing plates and made his debut in the kitchen when another cook called in sick. He found the focus and speed of the kitchen a peaceful way to channel his youthful anger. After completing two 3-year apprenticeships, Rosendale found another outlet for his fighting spirit: cooking competitions. He liked the intensity and found that they pushed him to learn new skills under pressure, not to mention promoting his abilities to other chefs around the world. He went on to compete in more than 40, winning and placing in several. But the big contest that's always eluded him has been the Bocuse d'Or. "The biggest ego trip in cooking," he says.

After placing second in the runoffs in 2009, Rosendale didn't leave much to chance during the qualifiers last summer. Inspired by the shape of his children's Mr. Potato Head toy, Rosendale repurposed the plastic head as a mold, stuffed it with chicken meat, layered rows of cornbread stuffing (light in color) and winter truffle butter (dark in color), and wrapped the entire creation in chicken skin. Out of the oven, the dish looked like a perfectly roasted chicken, but when sliced into, another dimension was revealed: The chicken had stripes—of truffle butter and cornbread—like the hide of a zebra. "A lot of what the judges are looking for is that 'wow factor,'" he says.

Secrecy for a contest of this scale is critical. The blueprints for Rosendale's platters are all mapped out on boards, but he turns them over so I can't see them. After some coaxing, he confesses that one of his garnishes will be a souped-up carrot. "It tastes more like a carrot than a carrot does." For the meat, he's imported and customized a mini-barbecue from Japan to sear the Irish beef. He may dust it with horseradish chips, and he's also toying with a potato dumpling concept.

For practice sessions, Rosendale has created a Bocuse d'Or simulator. Before he and Siegel start their five-and-a-half-hour prep run, he puts a CD in the sound system and turns up the volume. The album is a compilation of audience noise recorded during previous contests: the cacophonous blare of cowbells from the Swiss team; the Mexicans' mariachi band; and the pulsing Euro beats of the event's deejay. In the bunker, Rosendale feels like he's cooking off in Lyon.

In a final act of hyper organization, he, Siegel and coach Gavin Kaysen decide to travel to France three months ahead of the competition. The mission: Testing out rental vans to make sure they're big enough to hold his equipment.

During the trip, the Americans are invited to Bocuse's restaurant for an honorary lunch, and when they arrive, the chef is waiting out front dressed in his cooking whites. He shows them the kitchen, then poses for pictures before seating them. At the table, Siegel notices how audaciously Bocuse brands himself. When menus are passed around, he sees that the photo on the front is of him posing with Bocuse only minutes earlier. Somehow, the restaurant has already printed the image on the menu, which Bocuse has signed. The Bocuse name is everywhere: lining the rim of the bowl of soup; the soup spoon, used to ladle his famed black truffle and foie gras soup served at \$100 per bowl is stamped with his initials.

Three hours later, the group is delirious, drugged with a hypnotic cocktail of truffles, duck liver, champagne, wine, unpasteurized cheese and petits fours. From the kitchen, Bocuse emerges once again to a round of applause and to pose for final pictures with the Americans. Before leaving, Bocuse gives Siegel a gift: a hard-shell cover imprinted with his signature for a smartphone—a new Bocuse product.

Bocuse also gives him a warning. Before sending the team home, he grips young Siegel's arm, mutters something in French and makes a gesture with his hand. His finger is out. His hand looks like a gun. Not understanding French, Siegel turns to Kaysen and asks him to translate. Kaysen laughs at the old chef's line. "He says you better make it onto the podium or else he's going to shoot you."

The Mouthwatering World of Bocuse

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