

Anything but basic

By Saxon Henry



This page and opposite page The culinary and dining scenes at Alain Ducasse au Plaza Athénée in Paris

Get personal with the world's most famous chef, Alain Ducasse



It's been said that if you can't take the heat, you should stay out of the kitchen. There's not a foodie alive who would say that to renowned French chef Alain Ducasse, who has been awarded three Michelin stars and oversees an A-list of restaurants. No city gets more of his attention than Paris, of course, and his eponymous gastronomical outpost in the Hotel Plaza Athénée recently witnessed the unveiling of the culinary god's new cooking program, "Back to Basics."

Working with head chef Christophe Saintagne and head pastry chef Nicolas Berger, Ducasse has fashioned a four-pronged approach toward his new concept of creating the simplest of dishes from the best products, which he selects only in-season and at the peak of freshness. In the tradition of truly great French cuisine, the new menu focuses on flavor with a capital "F," and includes dishes highlighted by rare table settings, meticulous service and haute couture décor. Who among us doesn't love a fashion plate?

"Going back to basics means refusing to demonstrate virtuosity for virtuosity's sake in the kitchen," says Ducasse, who opened Alain Ducasse au Plaza Athénée to rave reviews in 2000. "Cooking is not about displaying technique, but about paying homage to the flavor of the product. Comparing and contrasting so-called 'noble' and 'common' products is wrong: the only categories of food are the exceptional and the rest."

Ducasse's approach is best summed up as "one product, one garnish," resulting in an authentic taste devoid of superfluous ingredients or lab-inspired effects. Langoustine *tartare* is prepared in a snap with only lime juice, and salt and pepper to accentuate the flavors of the ocean. Filet of beef is tied and inserted with slivers of bacon and truffle, then seared to concentrate its juices before being roasted to perfection. The key to the success of his vision is sourcing only the best ingredients from farmers, ranchers and fishmongers



Above [Christophe Saintagne](#) (left) and [Alain Ducasse](#) (right) working in the restaurant kitchen
Right Coffee time at [Alain Ducasse au Plaza Athénée](#)



who are passionate about selling in-season to assure remarkable quality. For instance, game birds are only served in early autumn, and venison and wild boar only at the cusp of winter.

As part of a full *à la carte* menu each season, the “Back to Basics” concept highlights three dishes based on the finest French cuisine. Among the most recent ingredients selected by Ducasse are bergamot and limequat from Bénédicte and Michel Bachès at the foot of the Pyrenees, and shallow-water scallops from Alain Rigault in Grandcamp-Maisy. Superb wines are chosen by executive head sommelier Gérard Margeon to accompany each course. Table settings that heighten the sense of drama emerging from the kitchen include silver-gilt “Monthéile” by Pulforcat cutlery, “Volute” porcelain and marble butter dishes by Pierre Tachon and MD Crystal wine glasses, which give the fine pours Ducasse demands their due.

The décor at Alain Ducasse au Plaza Athénée, designed by über-hot French designer Patrick Jouin, is part and parcel of the experience. Let us just say, Ducasse and Jouin are a match made in experiential heaven!