

CHEF'S BITES  
ALAIN DUCASSE

# Merchant of happiness

With 18 Michelin stars to his name and many restaurants across the globe, Alain Ducasse has enjoyed a life dedicated to food. At the tenth anniversary celebrations of his restaurant, Spoon des Iles One&Only Le Saint Géran in Mauritius, *Lauren Hills* had an inspiring chat with the master



The beautiful One&Only Le Saint Géran in Mauritius

"I haven't started my career yet," says Alain Ducasse, with a twinkle in his eye, as I mention his achievements as a chef and restaurateur and allude to the many chefs who aspire to be like him. Ever-humble, but with witty humour, Ducasse's soft-spoken demeanour belies a lifetime of wonderful stories, hard work and above all a love of good food.

Ducasse grew up on his parents' farm in south-western France, where his family grew vegetables and raised ducks, geese and turkeys, and from a young age he was drawn to the culinary world. Fascinated by the sights and smells of the kitchen when his grandmother cooked up family dinners using ingredients fresh from the farm. By the age of 12 he knew he wanted to be a chef.

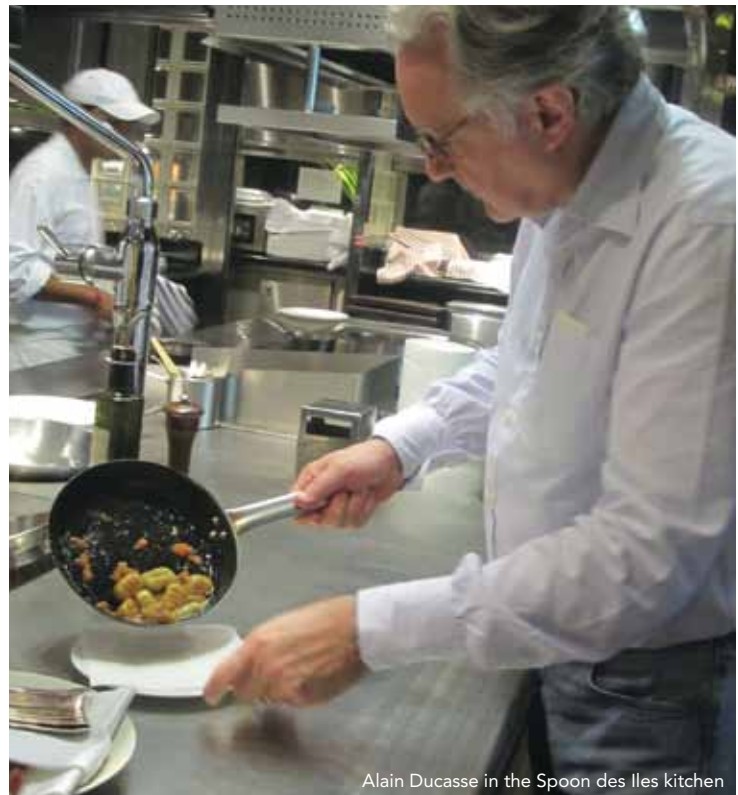
His love of fresh, locally-sourced ingredients has not wavered, and with his mantra of "60 percent ingredients, 40 percent technique", it is clear that his respect for natural ingredients can still be experienced in his restaurants today. At Spoon des Iles, Ducasse and his team have sought out the finest produce from Mauritian soil, using local suppliers before importing goods wherever possible.

"It is very important that every restaurant blends in with its environment. You always source the products from the country itself as much as possible. At the Spoon des Iles Gala Dinner celebration, for instance, the only thing that we imported was the chocolate and the foie gras. Everything else was from Mauritius. In every country, it is the same thing; we research the products and make sure that the restaurant is in harmony with its environment," says Ducasse.

With more than 35 restaurants from Paris to Hong Kong, Ducasse has held three Michelin stars at three different restaurants in the past (in Paris, Manhattan and Monaco), and it has recently been announced that his restaurant Alain Ducasse at The Dorchester in London has just won its third star. Each restaurant has a story to tell, he explains, and it is through the restaurants that Ducasse can tell a story of his own.

"You never know what a restaurant is going to be in two years time, a restaurant blends with its environment and develops into something unique, and each restaurant has its own story. Each chef has learnt the right techniques, and he comes to the restaurant, finds the products and creates. I will direct the chefs to create their own story," says Ducasse.

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Alain Ducasse in the Spoon des Iles kitchen

## CHEF'S BITES ALAIN DUCASSE

### A SPOONFUL OF DUCASSE

The Spoon des Iles tenth anniversary celebrations saw journalists and invited guests gather in Mauritius at the gorgeous One&Only Le Saint Géran to experience the cuisine and meet Ducasse and his team. Spoon des Iles was the first restaurant that Ducasse opened outside Europe and it marks an exciting culinary experience for not only Ducasse and his team, but for visitors to Le Saint Géran Mauritius too. It is Ducasse's only restaurant on the island, and with the unique setting within the legendary resort, it is a very special draw-card for food-lovers.

French chef Romain Meder started working under Ducasse in Paris in 2005 and was promoted to Chef de Cuisine at Spoon des Iles in September 2008. Meder says that he has great respect for Ducasse's emphasis on locally-sourced products, and he explains that while there are guidelines in place, he has all the creative freedom he desires in the Spoon kitchen, and he designs a new menu every three months. He enthuses that the discovery of fresh local produce in Mauritius has pushed his creativity to new levels.

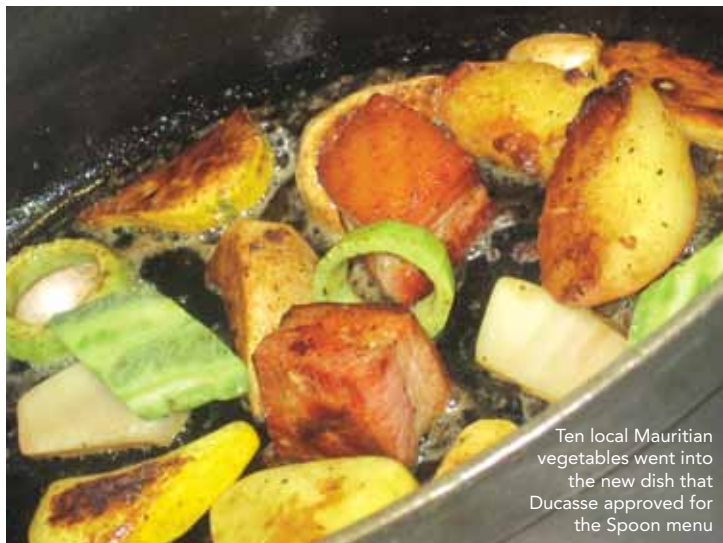
"I discovered a new product in Mauritius, which is a purplish sweet-potato. My two favourite ingredients are potatoes and eggs, because they are so simple to work with and you can create so many different things. I found the same characteristics in the Mauritian sweet-potato. So I could use all the same techniques and create something unique with this Mauritian product," says Meder.

Ducasse's visit to Le Saint Géran was not only for the celebration of ten years of Spoon, it was also a time for Ducasse to interact with Meder and his team, iron out any problems and to approve new dishes for the menu.

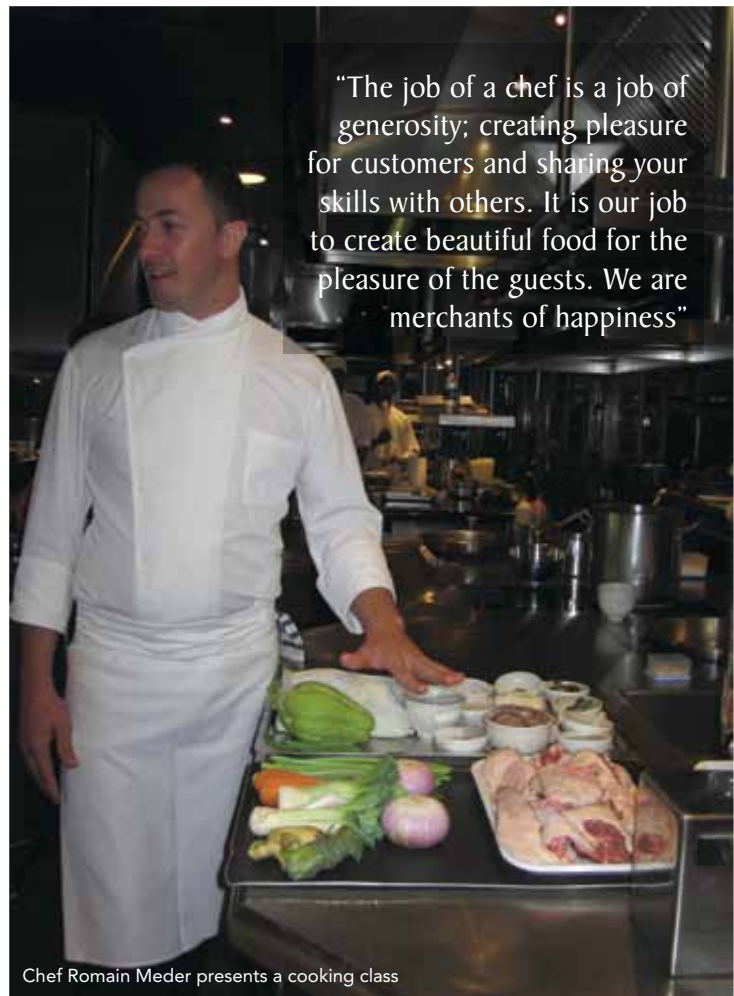
The Spoon kitchen was abuzz as Meder, assisted by Alain Ducasse's corporate chef Christian Julliard, cooked and presented two new dishes for Ducasse. Two other journalists and I were standing in the beautiful, open-plan Zimbabwean black granite kitchen with Ducasse. And as we watched Meder and Julliard hard at work, the respect the chefs had for Ducasse was tangible.

"You need to work more, faster and better," says Ducasse, as he explains what makes a great chef.

"It is the same for everyone, in any profession, and you have to be curious and aware of what is around you, and want to constantly learn more," he continues.



Ten local Mauritian vegetables went into the new dish that Ducasse approved for the Spoon menu



"The job of a chef is a job of generosity; creating pleasure for customers and sharing your skills with others. It is our job to create beautiful food for the pleasure of the guests. We are merchants of happiness"

Chef Romain Meder presents a cooking class

Meder created an exquisite dish that includes ten local Mauritian vegetables in cocotte, with coral fish condiment, coriander pesto and racy jus, as well as another plate of roasted medallions of lamb in a spicy jus, with dry and fresh fruits and stuffed piquillos. Never before have journalists been present while Ducasse samples new dishes for his menu, and although the chefs assure me that having us there eased the pressure, you can feel the tension.

The final moment came when the dishes were complete, and Ducasse sprinkled a touch of black pepper onto his plate and sampled a mouthful. With a quick nod and a smile, the dishes were approved. Relief; and we all tucked in and enjoyed the deliciously-fresh dishes. These two new recipes are now featured on the Spoon des Iles menu.

Ducasse has been applauded by customers and critics alike for maintaining an exceptional standard in his numerous restaurants around the globe, and you can't help but wonder how he manages it. Ducasse says it is down to his trusted team and the ability to pass on knowledge, as well as utilise new ingredients while staying true to the traditional techniques.

"The people who work with me have been with me for a long time. There is a lot of trust and there is a sharing of knowledge and a team spirit. This sharing of knowledge goes down through all the different levels, and there is lots of interaction and exchange. It is really a big family. My corporate chef, Christian Julliard, has been with me for 18 years," says Ducasse.

## THE ENVY OF MANY

Gordon Ramsay, whose restaurant empire and culinary brand is expanding rapidly, has come under a lot of criticism as to whether he can maintain his Michelin-quality without being in the kitchen. Ramsay has vocally aspired to be like Ducasse, and while Ducasse has just gained his third Michelin star in London, Ramsay has lost a star at Claridge's hotel in Mayfair, central London.

"When people point to our expansion and ask me if I can keep food standards high when there are so many restaurants to worry about, Ducasse is the man I point to. If he can do it, so can I. But if I did ever lose a star, I wouldn't start moaning and saying the Guide was s\*\*\*. I'd work my bollocks off to get it back, just like Alain Ducasse did in Monaco," says Ramsay in his autobiography, *Humble Pie*.

Another key to Ducasse's success is the diversity of his team. He explains that he has many different nationalities working for him, and he says that this variety of staff has been vital in growing and developing his business in positive ways.

"In my team there are 55 different nationalities, and that makes such a strong team with so many ideas, and I learn from them too. Diversity is very important; it is the wealth of every business. Respect for each other and respect for the customers is important too. The diversity of my team is quite unique. I will always guide the chefs, but each restaurant has its own team to develop the vision," says Ducasse.

Ducasse has accomplished more than most chefs and restaurateurs could dream of, but he says that he continues to learn and grow every day. Curious about his surroundings and open to new experiences, Ducasse is driven by the joy he creates for the diners at his restaurants, and the skills and knowledge that he passes onto his chefs.

"The job of a chef is a job of generosity; creating pleasure for customers and sharing your skills with others. It is our job to create beautiful food for the pleasure of the guests. We are merchants of happiness," Ducasse concludes.



## *Spoon des Iles*

Founded in 1998, Alain Ducasse chose the breathtaking surroundings of One&Only Le Saint Géran in Mauritius to set up Spoon des Iles, the very first venture abroad for the Spoon Food & Wine restaurant in Paris.

"Mauritian cuisine is prepared by a Creole lady using local products from the market to which is added the flavours in fresh and dried spices. I like this cuisine, tasteful and true, of market gardeners and fisherman. I find in it something of the Mediterranean atmosphere which is so precious to me," said Alain Ducasse when commenting on the cuisine of Mauritius.

There is an emphasis on transparency in the restaurant, with a Zimbabwean black granite kitchen that is open to the diners, modern lighting effects and the use of sleek materials of high technology. The kitchen and dining area comes together seamlessly to offer diners a multi-sensory dining experience.

Open in the evening only, Spoon des Iles is a blend of tradition and modernity. The décor contrasts traditional materials with modern furniture: the 'Opus Romain' tiling sourced from the 17th Century Bougogne Church is juxtaposed by the 'Neoz' couch and bar chairs designed by Philippe Stark.

The dishes at Spoon are influenced by international cuisine, which explores the tastes and flavours of the Indian Ocean, accompanied by a unique selection of 200 wines from all over the world. Spoon des Iles offers multi-ethnic dishes and explores top techniques including induction, steam, spit-roast, wok, grills, pressure cooker. Modern preparation merged with time-honoured traditional techniques is the essence of the food at Spoon.



The natural setting of Le Saint Géran is truly relaxing

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#### CREATE AN ALAIN DUCASSE DESSERT AT HOME

In the Spoon des Iles kitchen with chef de cuisine Romain Meder we created Lapsang Souchong Clear Duck Consommé and the decadent Chocolate Pizza. While the Duck Consommé, created with freshly-made ravioli, was for the very experienced cook, the Chocolate Pizza was definitely something that we can all try at home:

### Chocolate pizza

Chocolate brioche  
50g water  
40g yeast  
1kg flour  
30g salt  
80g caster sugar  
560g egg  
700g butter  
50g cocoa powder

#### Garnish for pizza

100g of cream  
150g dark chocolate  
100g molasses  
50g cocoa powder  
a few cubes of butter

#### METHODS

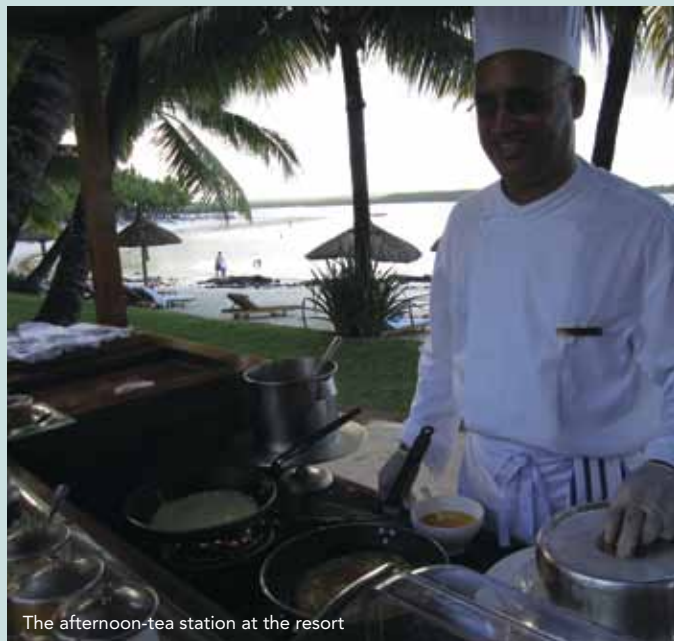
**Chocolate brioche:** Start with flour, yeast, salt, sugar, cocoa, eggs, then water, when the dough is soft, add butter a piece at a time, cover with plastic film and put into the fridge. The dough should be prepared the day before and can be served for 3 to 4 days a 3 to 4 degrees Celsius.

**Garnish for pizza:** Place two tablespoons of molasses and cocoa powder and place cubes of butter on top of the 'pizza' base. Cook at 170 degrees Celsius for 10 mins then add cream and the chopped dark chocolate.

**Progression:** **1** Prepare the chocolate brioche like a pizza with a diameter of 15cm, then leave to rest.  
**2** spread half a tablespoon of cocoa powder, half a spoon of molasses and 5 cubes of butter.  
**3** Cook at 170 degrees Celsius for 10 mins.  
**4** Remove from oven, spread one tablespoon of liquid cream, return to oven for 2 to 3 mins, add 4 to 5 cubes of bitter chocolate and let it melt.



Pieces of dark chocolate finish off the dessert



The afternoon-tea station at the resort

### *One&Only Le Saint Géran*

Under the sway of hundreds of coconut palms lies the beautiful One&Only Le Saint Géran. The resort nestles in the silver white sands of its own private peninsula and is a truly peaceful slice of paradise.

From the moment I set foot into the lobby, greeted by attentive staff, I knew that this was a place for relaxation at its best. In amongst tropical greenery that encapsulates the resort, you will see an array of birdlife and often see a family of ducks waddling past. The greenery subtly merges into the sugary coral-sand beachfront and turquoise waters. The terraced and balconied rooms are almost right on the beach, and it is such a treat to sit on your balcony and enjoy the juicy litchis that have been placed in your room while taking in the view.

The food experiences at Le Saint Géran are luxurious and delicious. La Terrasse restaurant is the all-day-dining restaurant that is situated above and around the pool like an archipelago, which presents a buffet that holds everything you could desire for breakfast.

A personal foodie favourite of mine was the afternoon-tea chef who sets up his portable cooking wagon just in front of the beach; inviting you to sample crêpes with a variety of divine flavours. I tried the passion fruit and mascarpone crêpe on my first afternoon at the resort and I was hooked. And, I rather gluttonously have to admit, had a crêpe for the next three afternoons.

A very pleasant surprise at Le Saint Géran was the fact that Vineet Bhatia's restaurant Rasoi is situated there too. A Michelin-starred Indian chef, I have always loved his restaurant Indego in Dubai and it was magical to try his cuisine in this Island setting. His restaurant has a long peer extending into the Indian Ocean where diners can enjoy a view of striking white Hindu temple across the peninsula. As we enjoyed our dinner there, we saw a swan wander down into the sea for a swim, which was a memorable end to the evening.