



# Ambassador's Activities

2012

Distributor: French Embassy in the UK  
- Press and Communications Services -  
58 Knightsbridge, SW1X 7JT London  
E-Mail: [press@ambafrance-uk.org](mailto:press@ambafrance-uk.org)  
Web: [www.ambafrance-uk.org](http://www.ambafrance-uk.org)

---

Speech by *HE* Bernard Emié,  
French Ambassador to the United Kingdom

at the inaugural evening of Le Cordon Bleu's new school

London, 7 February 2012

Ladies and gentlemen,

It's a great pleasure for me to be with you this evening. I'd like to warmly thank M. André Cointreau, who has invited me to inaugurate Le Cordon Bleu's new school with him in London.

Situated in a prestigious area of London still echoing the meandering conversations of the Bloomsbury Group – whose eminent members included the writer Virginia Woolf and the economist John Maynard Keynes – it nonetheless offers a haven of peace, with its quiet courtyard where, as soon as the weather is good, students and visitors leaving the nearby British Museum will be able to come and savour éclairs, pains au chocolat and croissants served at Le Cordon Bleu's new café.

This building is not, however, geared solely to peace and tradition. It's also at the cutting edge of modernity. In this sense the school lives up to its philosophy, which is also that of French gastronomy: marrying the best in innovation with respect for ancestral knowledge.

I was struck by another characteristic in this building's design: the presence on the school roof of a herb garden that will provide Le Cordon Bleu's students with eminently local ingredients! It reminded me of the installation of beehives on the roofs of the Palais Garnier in Paris that supply the new L'Opéra restaurant with honey. I had a vision of Parisian bees migrating across the Channel to come and pollinate the flowers at 15, Bloomington Square, London... It would, I thought, be a fine metaphor for the culinary exchanges between our two countries.

Fortunately, Le Cordon Bleu is forging a more concrete and tangible bond between France and the United Kingdom. But first of all, where does the name originate? Some of you know the answer, of course. It comes from the Ordre des Chevaliers du Saint-Esprit, the Order of the Holy Spirit, a group of high-ranking French lords founded in 1578. Each knight in the order received a Maltese Cross suspended from a broad, sky-blue moiré ribbon or cordon. According to certain sources, the knights took to meeting at a sort of gastronomy club to cultivate the art of fine drinking and dining. Their refined meals became famous, and that's why today, in everyday French, "un cordon bleu" means quite simply an excellent cook.

Living up to its name, L'Ecole du Cordon Bleu, founded in Paris in 1896, quickly became one of the world's most prestigious cookery schools. It opened its first branch in London in 1933, and in 1984, cher M. Cointreau, you took charge of the enterprise and magically transformed it into an ambitious global network of gastronomy schools.

Today, Le Cordon Bleu has more than 40 schools established in about 20 countries and trains 20,000 students of more than 70 different nationalities every year. They go on to become true "ambassadors" of French expertise and art de vivre. I'd like to warmly thank the school you run, cher M. Cointreau, for its contribution to raising the profile of French gastronomy around the world.

As you know, France and gastronomy are inextricably linked. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization provided resounding proof of this at the end of 2010 by including "the gastronomic meal of the French" in the cultural heritage of humanity. This decision was all the more important because it was the first time gastronomy had been declared an intangible "masterpiece" by UNESCO. The 90,000 or so Britons who own

second homes in France and the 10 million who visit France every year also know the wealth of our culinary traditions and our terroirs, from Périgord to Burgundy. French gastronomy is also, of course, well established around the world, particularly in the United Kingdom: it would be enough for me to name Alain Ducasse, Joël Robuchon and Hélène Darroze – all chefs in prestigious London restaurants – to persuade you of it, if that were necessary.

But France doesn't have a monopoly on gastronomy – far from it! Gone are the days when it was fashionable for France to poke fun at the poor quality of British food. This was to overlook the genuine passion for cooking which has taken hold of your country over the past 20 or 30 years. A director of human resources at a major French firm in the UK recently said that one of the things invariably appearing under the “hobbies” section of CVs he receives from British job applicants is...“cooking”. Popular television programmes, including those featuring our great compatriots Albert Roux and Raymond Blanc; countless recipe books; a concern for high-quality organic and locally-sourced ingredients, such as those found, for example, on the stalls of Borough Market; restaurants specializing in British cuisine and, to borrow chef Fergus Henderson's phrase, “nose to tail eating”: all these things point to a UK culinary revolution in full swing. Nowadays the experience of eating out in London is often on a par with eating out in Paris, and with magnificent locations and ambience to match. The international reputation of a restaurant such as Heston Blumenthal's “The Fat Duck”, and the “Guardian” column penned by Yotam Ottolenghi – a former student of Le Cordon Bleu in London – provide further evidence of Britain's new gastronomic zeal.

So to conclude, I'd say that gastronomy is about tradition and cultural diversity, the exchange and fusion of ideas. London's Le Cordon Bleu school contributes a great deal to this. It trains future generations of creative, talented chefs, who

will be able to give their own meaning to the famous words of the French chef and culinary writer, Auguste Escoffier, “Good food is the foundation of genuine happiness”... And this, I am sure, is something which will bring the greatest happiness to us all.