



Ambassador's Activities

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

at the ceremony to present Raymond Blanc

with the insignia of *Chevalier* in the *Ordre national de la Légion d'honneur*

and of *Chevalier* in the *Ordre du Mérite agricole*

London, 27 June 2013

Cher Raymond Blanc,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It's a great honour and a huge pleasure for my wife and me to be your host here this evening and to present my friend Raymond Blanc – in the presence of his family, friends and colleagues – with the insignia of *Chevalier* in the *Ordre national de la Légion d'honneur*. This, the highest French distinction, created by Napoléon Bonaparte in 1802, recognizes outstanding services rendered by citizens to the French nation. It's another nod to history, soon after a major media outlet portrayed you on its front cover as Napoléon at the Battle of Arcola, but carrying a baguette instead of a sabre! Exceptionally, *cher* Raymond Blanc, today you will also be receiving the insignia of *Chevalier* in the very fine ministerial *Ordre du Mérite agricole*. This order was created in 1883 by Jules Méline, a great figure of the Third Republic and then Agriculture Minister. It recognizes all those who have served agriculture, whether it be through farming or, like you, through their expertise in industries linked to it.

It's high time these services were recognized by France, because Britain beat us to it: Her Majesty The Queen honoured you in 2008 with the Order of the British Empire. This clearly shows that you're a very special Frenchman, no doubt the best-known ambassador for our country over here! For the past 40 years you've been living in the United Kingdom, and perhaps the reason why the British appreciate you so much is because everything about you is so French: your cuisine, your affability and even – as the British might say with generous lashings of affection – your English!

Today, in awarding you a decoration that does justice to your career, I feel like saying – to use one of your favourite expressions, which has always punctuated your culinary demonstrations

– “*Voilà*”. *Voilà* a new crowning achievement, the most glorious achievement in your already impressive list of prizes, awards and Michelin stars.

Let me retrace the atypical, exceptional – perhaps I should say epic – career that saw you go from being a *commis de rang* at the age of 20 to becoming one of the world’s greatest French chefs. You were born on 19 November 1949 in Besançon, and your passion for cooking very soon became clear. From the earliest age, you felt truly at home in the kitchen: for you, the kitchen is the heart of the home, the place where you could watch your mother – whom you affectionately called “Maman Blanc” – cooking the chickens and rabbits you’d prepared beforehand for the pot.

Outside the house, you thrived in the woods of Franche-Comté, and while the other children played football, you’d run through the meadows to pick mushrooms, asparagus, wild berries and flowers, which you’d take back to your mother’s kitchen. They’d embellish the maternal dishes, which were your first – delicious! – encounter with the art you would practise to this day.

The art you discovered was a generous art. Very soon, you were amazed by the pleasure others took in restaurants, just as you yourself delighted in eating high-quality dishes at your mother’s house. So you said to yourself, quite simply: “I too want to give people this pleasure.” Since your childhood, the kitchen has been a place of sharing, because the meal is prepared together and enjoyed by the whole family. You thus learned the pleasure of sharing good things with people who are dear to you.

By becoming such a remarkable chef, by constantly offering this gift for the pleasure of all those who step inside your restaurants, you've vastly broadened your family circle and kitchen space, to the point where they've acquired the dimensions of a country – or rather two, because it's also French gastronomy that you offer our British friends in each meal. It's not enough to love cooking to be a good chef, because one rarely cooks alone; one must want to offer other people what one can do best, and no doubt achieve greater satisfaction from others' pleasure than from one's own. *Cher* Raymond Blanc, I believe you embody a cuisine that is synonymous with a passion for sharing and the perpetual quest for excellence.

But let's go back to Besançon: how far you've travelled since your first post as *commis de rang* at the Nouvel Hôtel in 1969! And I don't just mean in miles or kilometres: how many rungs you've climbed in the ruthless hierarchy of the restaurant trade! In 1972, you left your native Franche-Comté and its frogs' legs to become a “frog” among the English. Crossing the Channel proved to be a springboard for you: when the chef at the Rose Revived in Newbridge fell ill, you left your job as a waiter to replace him, and it was doubtless no accident that, two years later, the restaurant entered the “Michelin Guide”. You then became chef de rang in Germany.

A major turning point then occurred in your career: you became *chef de rang* at La Sorbonne restaurant in Oxford. So began a great love story with that most profoundly English city, a symbol of this country's elite. I don't know whether, in 1975, the young man from Franche-Comté, with a French accent you could cut with a kitchen knife, could have imagined what a giant page in culinary history he was going to write in Oxford. But actually it's neither here nor there: you stayed in the city and succeeded. In 1976, still in Oxford, you became chef at the Bleu Blanc Rouge restaurant.

You then continued your rise, and *voilà*, in 1977 you opened your own establishment as Chef Patron at Les Quat' Saisons, nestling amid the winding roads and verdant countryside to be found around Oxford, dotted with picturesque cottages. Very soon, the stars were raining down: *voilà*, after just one year, a star from the "Egon Ronay Guide", which later named it restaurant of the year. The years went by and the stars multiplied; *voilà* two stars from the "AA Guide" in 1979, with two from the "Michelin Guide" joining them in 1983. There's no denying it: your every undertaking was crowned with success. No sooner had you created Blanc Restaurants in 1984 than the new Manoir aux Quat' Saisons earned two stars from the "Michelin" – before it had even opened!

And that's not all: in 1996, thanks to Le Petit Blanc Brasserie – still in Oxford but this time in the colourful, lively Jericho district – you managed to get yourself ranked in the top 10 restaurants in the United Kingdom, still through simple, popular cuisine. It was another turning point in your career, and so began your real conquest of England. After Oxford, you headed north, opening Le Petit Blanc Brasseries in Cheltenham, Birmingham and Manchester. Renamed "Brasseries Blanc", the restaurants continue to spread throughout the UK: you took over establishments in Chichester, Oxford, Winchester, London and Milton Keynes in 2006, then opened new brasseries in Leeds, Bristol and Portsmouth in 2007, 2008 and 2009. You founded a veritable empire of French restaurants!

But you didn't succumb to the profit motive, because your gastronomical standards, *cher* Raymond Blanc, remain ruthlessly high: always surrounded by a team of professionals, you make it your duty to serve high-quality dishes made from the freshest produce and at the best price, in order to make the Brasseries Blanc the finest brasseries in Britain.

Cher Raymond Blanc, it might be imagined that you owe your success to one of those “cooking secrets” associated with certain chefs, or a “trick” that marks your dishes out from those of common mortals... But I don’t think it’s anything to do with that. As you say yourself, there are no secrets, and there are never more than two ingredients in your dishes: the essential work of the chef and good produce. And concern for good produce is the hallmark of Raymond Blanc’s cuisine. Fresh produce, of high quality and in season! The French produce you introduce and cherish! The UK produce you promote! Always being able to adapt one’s cuisine to the season: that’s the main lesson from the success of your *Manoir aux Quat’ Saisons*.

You’re also happy to share that lesson both with the generations of apprentices you’ve trained – who have become disciples – and with the general public. It may be paradoxical, but you’re an autodidact enamoured of teaching, and what you learned alone you’ve been keen to share as widely as possible, and in multiple ways: in 1991 you created the Raymond Blanc Cookery School at the *Manoir aux Quat’ Saisons*, welcoming passionate amateurs and professional chefs. You also share your expertise by appearing on countless cookery programmes on television and radio, and the articles about you are legion and always very positive. At the risk of making a few enemies, I’ll even say you’re the best-known French businessman in the UK!

I think I can say, taking you as an example, that a chef’s profession isn’t just any old profession. It isn’t a job where you don your chef’s hat for the working day and then hang it up and go home. It’s about living a lifelong passion, a crazy obsession, and everyone knows that genius and madness are always closely linked! So I’d like to pay tribute today not only to

the professional career path you've taken, but the human one, because if one word alone had to sum you up, it would have to be "generosity" – one of the finest qualities there is, and one which you embody superbly.

And here's yet more proof of this generosity that defines you so well: you're ambassador for the British NGO Action Against Hunger and a contributor to a large number of charities such as Seesaw, Hospitality Action, Oxford Inspires, the Children's Food Festival and the Henley Food Festival; you were also a sponsor of the initiative Pedal for Yorkshire 2010, to raise money to fight cancer, and you constantly donate meals, overnight stays and cookery courses as auction or raffle prizes for countless charity projects!

You're also constantly spreading your country's influence in the UK. You're an engine of our economic diplomacy and "soft power". As an eminent member of the Franco-British Chamber of Commerce and Industry and of the National Committee of French Foreign Trade Advisors, you're behind many initiatives to promote what's best about our country in the luxury, culture, creativity, fashion and craft sectors. Gastronomy is your rallying cry! And we're proud that UNESCO included "the gastronomic meal of the French" on its world heritage list in 2010. The fact that French gastronomy is solidly established in the UK is thanks to you and so many other great names, all of them your friends. You're a veritable combine harvester of initiatives, a powerhouse constantly generating new projects. Your influence extends as far as the Queen's kitchen!

And while we're talking of the Royal Family, here's a little story I picked up: the Queen Mother, after frequently making orders from you for her receptions, one day honoured you with her presence at the Manoir aux Quat' Saisons – accompanied by some 50 friends!

Apparently, at the end of the meal, there was an incident that could have spoilt everything. Out of curiosity, she asked what your greatest success had been. Caught up in the emotion of the moment, you answered that once, after a successful meal at the Manoir, you'd managed to get 200 Britons to sing the Marseillaise. The Queen Mother's entourage froze: your frank, spontaneous reply could doubtless have been interpreted in different ways... But your talent prevailed and the Queen Mother was won over. She stood up and – to everyone's surprise – sang a few bars of the Marseillaise herself! As the story shows, you prove in your everyday work what a tremendous French ambassador you are!

In the *Ordre de la Légion d'honneur*, your name will be added to those of illustrious chefs of whom France is proud, because they have promoted her and raised her profile. It will be added to Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, whom Napoléon himself decorated, and Auguste Escoffier, who, like you, cooked for the British Royal Family and who said, "Good cuisine is the foundation of true happiness". Today, the French Republic, through me, pays tribute to the great figure you are: an outstanding creator, entrepreneur, advocate and mentor.

Raymond Blanc, au nom du Président de la République, et en vertu des pouvoirs qui nous sont conférés, nous vous faisons Chevalier dans l'Ordre national de la Légion d'honneur. Au nom du ministre de l'Agriculture, et en vertu des pouvoirs qui nous sont conférés, nous vous faisons Chevalier dans l'Ordre du Mérite Agricole./.