How to run Le Bernardin

5 Sep 2012 by Nick Lander

We are delighted to publish this extract from Nick's new book The Art of the Restaurateur*, which featured on the cover of last week's* Economist*, no less. It's a series of profiles of 20 of the world's leading restaurateurs (as opposed to chefs) together with concrete examples of how to run a successful restaurant. On Monday we'll announce a special offer for those who'd like to order a copy of the book at a discounted price.*

Maguy Le Coze has been the smiling, authoritative and glamorous restaurateur behind the success of the celebrated fish restaurant Le Bernardin since it first opened in Paris in 1972, alongside her late brother Gilbert, who was then in the kitchen. Today Le Bernardin holds the highest accolades: three Michelin stars, four stars from the New York Times and a reputation for being one of New York's most renowned venues for a power lunch. She was the driving force behind their move to New York, where Le Bernardin opened on 28 January 1986 on West 51st Street, and where it continues to prosper today. She handled the sale of the site of their former Paris restaurant in 1988, and she became the bedrock of the business after Gilbert's untimely death in 1994 - ably assisted ever since, she would be the first to say, by Eric Ripert, her executive chef and business partner.

These basic details give only the briefest insight into the emotional turmoil that has engulfed Le Coze's life as a restaurateur over the past four decades. After a morning spent in the lounge of the Hotel Lutetia in her beloved Paris talking about her life in restaurants on both sides of the Atlantic, Le Coze remarked that it had been almost like talking to a psychiatrist, 'but without the pain'. For anyone embarking on a career as a restaurateur and wanting to reach the very top it is, she says, a very long journey: 'Nothing comes overnight.'

Yet despite the considerable distance she has travelled, Le Coze still remains firmly connected to the family hotel she grew up in, the Hôtel de Rhuys in Port-Navalo on the southern coast of Brittany, north-west France, half of which is her holiday home today. Here she first came into close contact with the sea, the leitmotif of Le Bernardin, where her grandfather was once a fisherman. The name Le Bernardin originates in part from a song, 'Les Moines de Saint-Bernardin', that her father used to sing to her and her brother when they were children.

Life in the family hotel in the early 1950s was extremely hard, Le Coze recalled. From the time they were thirteen, Gilbert was in the kitchen with his father, while Maguy (which is the Breton version of the name Margaret) worked at the reception desk and waited at tables with her mother. These tough years brought Gilbert and Maguy to make a pact: first to escape from Brittany to the lights of Paris as soon as Maguy turned 18, and second to always work together.

In 1972 Gilbert and Maguy opened their first restaurant, the original Le Bernardin on the Quai de la Tournelle, close to the banks of the River Seine in Paris. Backed by their own savings and contributions from friends, an uncle, their parents and the bank, they converted a former shop inexpensively into a restaurant that could seat twenty-five. The food was very simple, very plain, with the focus entirely on the fish. At the same time, the growing influence of nouvelle cuisine, then sweeping through French kitchens, made experimentation much easier.

In 1976 Le Bernadin received its first Michelin star, in 1981 it moved to a much larger site in the rue Troyon, and in 1982 it received its second Michelin star. The plusher location near the Champs-Élysées began to attract a more international clientèle. James Beard, the celebrated American food writer, and Johnny Apple, a leading New York Times journalist and renowned gourmand, came to eat at Le Bernardin and praised it, and it was then that the idea of opening in New York began to germinate in Le Coze's mind.

Gilbert was completely opposed to such a move, a stand reinforced by a flying visit to New York in 1983, where he found an absence of top-quality fresh fish. On top of this, he spoke not a word of English. Maguy, equally determined, only saw the absence of any other competitors as a major attraction. 'I kept telling Gilbert that there are two of us, one for Paris, the other for New York. I even called him a coward,' she smiled ruefully.

She persevered, with no idea that her dream would be realized so swiftly. In 1985 a friend introduced her to Ben Holloway, the US chairman of Equitable Life, who was responsible for the development of the brand-new Equitable Centre and was looking for three restaurants, one French, one American and one Italian, to animate the ground floor. The

deal was swiftly concluded over a bottle of Dom Pérignon in his flat overlooking the Eiffel Tower.

Le Coze was excited but overawed by her new home. Le Bernardin New York occupies a third of a block - it is 1,110 square metres (12,000 square feet) in total. Gilbert, meanwhile, tried to understand the ins and outs of the New York fish market. Eventually Jerome Brody, the owner of the famous Oyster Bar at Grand Central Station, offered to lend him his fish buyer for two hours at the Fulton Fish Market in the Bronx. After that, Gilbert was on his own.

But while the New York restaurant was immediately successful, there were problems back home. 'We hadn't been to Paris for eight months, we were so preoccupied with New York, and then one day I got a call from a fellow restaurateur telling me that a cheque drawn on Le Bernardin had bounced. I flew back that night, walked into my office and the bookkeeper looked at me as though he had seen a ghost. I dropped my suitcase off at my apartment, went back to the office and he had vanished.' They quickly realized that he had stolen a great deal of money. While they had 'their heads in New York' as she described it, their business in Paris had suffered and so too had their standing in the French press. They decided to sell.

Back in the US, it was the originally reluctant Gilbert who decided they should open two other restaurants in Atlanta and Miami - 'we haven't come all this way to open just one', she recalled him saying - but in 1994, disaster struck. While working out, Gilbert suffered a massive heart attack and died aged forty-nine. This had been the episode I was least looking forward to discussing, but Le Coze sighed and ploughed on. 'Nobody expected Le Bernardin to survive, except me.' She knew she was lucky that Gilbert had taken on Eric Ripert, who had trained with Robuchon and Palladin, and that he had been handing over more and more to him. They needed new ideas and new inspiration, and Ripert had always had these. 'I took a month off, put some colour in my cheeks and said to myself, "the show must go on".'

And so it has, with Ripert, her second chef and business partner by her side, for the past 18 years. They don't always agree, but their guiding rule is that if one partner disagrees, then they simply don't do it. They represent Le Bernardin together: 'we're the soul of the restaurant.' And as a team they jointly supervised a major redesign of Le Bernadin, signing a new lease for the next 15 years with Equitable Life - now, ironically, part of the French company AXA. The refit took 11 months from start to finish, but she is now confident it was the right thing to have done.

Le Coze seems grateful to have enjoyed the various different stages of her career as a restaurateur, despite how hard some of them have been. But most significantly and most satisfyingly of all, she is the only female restaurateur to have run a restaurant at this level for so many years. 'That gives me a great deal of pride.'