

FRENCH LESSONS

There's more to Versailles than its palace, including a rich food culture that visitors can delve into during cooking classes with a Cordon Bleu-trained chef.

BY LOIS YASAY

It's only 11 a.m. in the leafy Paris suburb of Versailles, and we are already an hour into making lunch. My job is to clean the scallops ever so gently before skewering them on thyme branches to be seared in fragrant butter. Natalie, the student beside me, is absorbed in picking only the best leaves of baby spinach and removing the hard stems. The greens will be served with a red-wine vinaigrette alongside the scallops.

And that's just the entrée.

I have signed up for a half-day culinary workshop with Patricia Boussaroque at her atelier inside a renovated 18th-century townhouse, just a stroll from the gates of Versailles' famous palace. She's the antithesis of what you'd expect from a French chef, a blonde woman with laughing eyes, a welcoming double-kiss, and a pink apron tied around her waist—twice, of course. That's probably the first thing they teach you at the Cordon Bleu.

The main dish of *bavette aux échalotes confites* (flank steak with caramelized shallots) takes much longer to prepare than I imagined. We simmer prime cuts of beef with spices in *vinaigre de xérès*, a wine vinegar made from sherry, for nearly an hour. I cannot hide my consternation when Boussaroque pounds the cooked meat into a metal strainer to squeeze out the juice, throwing the liquid away. When she catches my look, she explains, "It was only to make the sauce."

As an accompaniment, we make the crisp potato puffs known as *pommes dauphine*. This starts off with a mixture of mashed potatoes and savory pastry cream, which we pour into a pastry bag, before shaping them into dumplings to be deep-fried. And for dessert, Boussaroque announces that we are making mille-feuille, a complex, multilayered puff pastry sandwiching glistening drops of vanilla-flavored crème mousseline enlivened by the tang of rum from the French West Indies.



Toque of the Town
Above: Patricia Boussaroque at Versailles' Notre-Dame Market. Top: Seared scallops with baby spinach, one of the dishes taught by the chef. Opposite: A Cordon Bleu-anointed pâtissier, Boussaroque also knows how to make a mean macaron.

I'm surprised to learn that Boussaroque wasn't always a chef. After 20 years of working at a large company, she left her comfortable job as a human resources manager to follow her passion by studying cuisine and patisserie at Le Cordon Bleu in Paris. Patricia graduated with top marks in 2009, but did not proceed to work at a restaurant as most of her peers have done. Instead, she opened a cooking school in her hometown, just opposite Versailles' Notre-Dame Market, where she could procure her ingredients from the best artisans and producers each day.

Naturally, Boussaroque's workshops begin with a guided tour of the market. She effortlessly navigates the maze of open-air stalls and 19th-century buildings like any local resident, but the relationships she has fostered with many of the vendors are truly personal. Below the soaring stone archways of a covered market hall, Garry Guette is her source for the freshest fruits and vegetables, and it's where I find the

largest and most succulent box of raspberries I've ever seen. "French cooking is often not just about the flavors," Boussaroque says, "It's also about tasting with your eyes."

Her *fromagier* at Le Gall offers her the finest cheese selection, alongside suggestions for what to pair with her menus and wine. I am soon introduced to Comté, a French cheese made from unpasteurized cow's milk that tastes slightly sweet. It's become my favorite ever since.

While Boussaroque is on a first-name basis with the fishmongers at L'Espadon, she considers Véronique of the upscale grocer Olives et Temptations a personal friend. Véronique's *épicerie* stocks indulgent ingredients such as vanilla pods and *sucre casson*, the large-grained sugar that's essential for making chouquettes.

With another day to spare in Versailles, I decide to join one of Boussaroque's pastry classes, where I learn of the seemingly negligible but often crucial techniques in French cooking, like putting the dough or cream into a cooling apparatus to rest before baking. Or slamming a tray filled with macaron batter a few times on the table to release air bubbles. Over the course of these workshops, Boussaroque often exclaims "Délicatement!" as we mix creams or work with pastries. Instead of overworking the batter, we must delicately put air into the mixture.

And yet, the most memorable part of my experience goes beyond tasting a freshly baked meringue or honing my culinary skills. What remains with me is Boussaroque's excitement, an unchanging constant in each of the classes she conducts.

"My dream," she says, "is to show people the pleasure of cooking with only the best ingredients, giving them new ideas and allowing them to discover new flavor combinations. What drives me is the joy of coming together around a meal cooked with love." ☺



L'atelier Cuisine De Patricia, 4 Rue André Chénier, Versailles, France; 33-1/7142-8242; lateliercuisine.depatricia.com; classes from US\$67 per person.



SINGAPORE STAR

Royal Plaza on Scotts is a classic urban retreat, with comfort and convenience in equal measure.

Superbly located in the heart of Singapore's premier shopping belt and just a three-minute walk from the nearest MRT station, Royal Plaza on Scotts provides a welcoming haven for holidaymakers and business travelers alike. Whether you wish to browse the boutiques and restaurants on nearby Orchard Road, or take the family on a day trip to Sentosa, the hotel's strategic position ensures that your precious time in the Lion City is well spent.

Royal Plaza on Scotts is also well-equipped for the 21st-century luxury nomad. Staying connected and up-to-date is a cinch, as all room categories come with unlimited high-speed Wi-Fi access for multiple devices, alongside a wealth of news and cable channels.

If an exclusive experience is what you're after, booking a Royal Club Premiere room allows you to check in at the 15th-floor Royal Club Lounge. Here, complimentary breakfast, afternoon tea, and evening cocktails are served in a quiet, intimate setting that offers views of the surrounding skyline. Naturally, that same sense of style and relaxation extends to the guest quarters. Tastefully furnished with comfort in mind, each Royal Club Premiere room features a Dream Bed by Simmons with a selection of pillows and a 400-thread-count duvet, a Nespresso gourmet coffee machine, and luxury toiletries to help you unwind after a long day of exploration.

For more information, visit royalplaza.com.sg

