



World CLASS

*Local chef answers
London calling to learn
in the best kitchen on earth*

BY JULIANNE WILL
PHOTOGRAPHY BY NEAL BRUNS

It's a rare organization that can compel someone to sacrifice family time, take leave of his job and buy a seat on an international flight just for the opportunity to toil weeks on end without pay.

In fact, it really doesn't work at all—unless the organization happens to have been voted Best Restaurant in the World in 2005.

Opposite page: In his kitchen at Joseph Decuis, Aaron Butts prepares seared ahi tuna with black and white sesame seeds.

The Fat Duck was. And it went on to place second in the world in 2006 and 2007. Yet most people still just nod blankly when they hear of the high-end London restaurant.

Joseph Decuis owners Pete and Alice Eshelman are not most people. They are constantly seeking to raise the bar in their own world-class restaurant in Roanoke, and they took note of the institution famous for its red-cabbage-with-grain-mustard ice cream and other daring concoctions. They stopped by The Fat Duck on a trip overseas.

It being a Monday, the restaurant was closed, so they had to settle for its sister pub, The Hinds Head. But they returned to the States with a stack of Chef Heston Blumenthal's book, "In Search of Perfection," and the nugget of an idea:

What if Joseph Decuis Head Chef Aaron Butts could serve a tour of duty with The Fat Duck's army of volunteers?

"People come from all over to work there, for free. They are at the point that they rely on [these] stagiers to keep the restaurant running day to day," Butts explained. He would be somewhat of a grunt with the rest, a far cry from his role leading the kitchen and crafting exquisite creations at Joseph Decuis. But there's that No. 1 in the world thing...

"I was excited at the opportunity to travel abroad and work at one of the world's best restaurants," Butts said. "So I sent an e-mail to the head chef's assistant and waited for a reply."

Apparently they liked what they saw. Never pressed for a formal application or resume, Butts got word that he had been chosen; he would jump the pond in April. "I sharpened my knives and left the restaurant in the very capable hands of my chefs."

No flash in this pan

When Butts arrived at the modest London guesthouse that would be his home for the next month, he set off on foot to scope out his surroundings. He discovered that despite its world fame, The Fat Duck is rather humble in appearance.

"Once I got to the tiny village of Bray, I walked down the main road and found Heston's pub, The Hinds Head. But no sign of The Fat Duck," Butts said. "I walked a while more, only to come to what seemed to be the end of the town, and I still had

not seen this world-famous restaurant. So I walked back down the way I had come and finally found it: very inconspicuous, almost hiding. Just a sign hanging outside with a fork, knife and spoon made in the shape of a duck's attributes—the beak, the feather and the webbed foot. I took some pictures and went back to my room.”

He would need some rest for his dive into the simmering melting pot that was The Fat Duck prep kitchen.

Into the fire

New stagiers start at The Fat Duck every week; they come and go all the time. Each must commit to at least a month's service, and no lodging, airfare or pay is provided. When Butts arrived, there were about 10 stagiers from all over the world: New York, Spain, Canada, California, Italy, Sweden, Finland, Iowa.

The kitchen in the restaurant itself is too small to accommodate such a crowd, so each stagier gets one day a week and spends the rest in the prep kitchen across the street. Butts' first day was long: 7:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. “I started the day doing the most tedious tasks I've ever done in my life,” he said. He chopped vegetables into endless perfect cubes for hours—first for the 47 guests at lunch and then again for dinner, when 47 more guests would enjoy the exact same menu.

“It's hard being the new guy,” Butts said. “You don't know where anything is or where anything goes. You don't know how they do certain things. It could be the simplest of things like mopping the floor, and they do it a different way. So you have to ask a lot of questions to avoid doing something wrong.” The variety of thick accents from around the globe only added to the initial confusion and exhaustion.

Within days, though, everything had settled into a routine; in fact, it didn't take long for chopping vegetables into perfect cubes to become downright monotonous. Butts finally got a turn at the amuse bouche station in the restaurant. Even better, he was permitted to move to the pastries station for his last week and a half, making ice creams and sorbets.

“I had a great time in pastries,” Butts said. “I got to actually cook something that was going to be served at the restaurant, not just one guy doing a step in a series of steps. I got to make the frozen treats from scratch, churn them every day before every service and deliver them to the pastry chefs at the restaurant. It was very gratifying. I even gave up my last day in the restaurant so that I could stay in pastries, I liked it so much.”



From top to bottom: Beets provide the color for Aaron Butts' beet risotto, topped with parsley juice and artistically presented on a square plate. The dish is part of a tasting menu.

The biggest surprise? Few surprises

The Fat Duck promises nothing in the way of formal training for stagiers. “You learn as much as you can by sticking your head into anything and everything you are interested in,” Butts said. “You need to ask the questions if you want the answers.”

He did absorb some wisdom as he peeled piles of asparagus.

“I learned a lot of little tricks—things that add up to create a nice-looking dish and a great-tasting component. I learned that you can do anything to food; it has no boundaries, as long as it's palatable. I gained a renewed sense of attention to detail and the quality of raw ingredients. I learned new cooking techniques and new ways to store food. I actually learned more than I thought I did.”

He learned that the restaurant relies heavily on a staff of young cooks working there for free to put food on the table every day. There are times, around the holidays and such, when the wheels nearly come off without free labor. Butts was surprised to discover, too, that few are from England; most stagiers are imported from other countries.

Another surprise? While being No. 1 in the world does mean free labor; it does not mean pretentious perfection.

“The restaurant has such a reputation,” Butts said of The Fat Duck. “I expected it to be more streamlined, stainless steel everywhere, tall chef hats, test tubes, very serious. But it really was more laid back, friendly, young chefs, no hats, real cooking, some crappy equipment alongside state-of-the-art.”

He returned to Fort Wayne with a reignited sense of inspiration. He carried back a few ideas about menu items, but the experience has more fired his imagination for process, precision and potential.

“It's made me more dedicated to my work. I work longer hours, I think about work more—really, it's made me obsessive with cooking, more than I was,” Butts said. “My other chefs can attest: I've been much more strict on certain aspects of the restaurant.”

“I've always had great attention to detail, but now it has been heightened to a new level. The whole experience has already made me a better chef and manager. I'm striving to be an integral part of a team that has the goal of being one of the best restaurants in the world. Now, I really think we can do it.” ■



A Sense of Good Taste

Nitro-scrambled egg and bacon ice cream. Mango and Douglas fir puree. Salmon poached with liquorice. Oak moss. Heston Blumenthal's tasting menu at The Fat Duck in London is two parts fusion cuisine, one part what's on sale at Menards.

The world-renowned chef has a well-articulated philosophy (and even longer biography) on his Web site exploring the dynamic interplay between taste and all the other senses. He waxes poetic about perception the way a philosophy professor might, considering how science and emotion affect the experience of food.

All well and good, you might say. But is it just so much oddly flavored hooley?

Before you say yes, consider this: Have you ever found yourself chewing faster in a hustle-bustle environment or with fast-paced music? How does standing next to a very full garbage can on a hot summer day change the taste of your icy pop? Do you feel squeamish about eating a hot dog that has a slightly green tint?

Color, texture, smell, appearance, environmental sounds: All influence taste. McDonald's knows it, hence its décor. Blumenthal has a slew of data that backs up his philosophy. He also has a lab kitchen where he can experiment with food to influence the sensory experience and, hence, the taste.

One result is the nitro-scrambled bacon and egg ice cream everyone likes to make faces about. Yet we all know the first bite of anything is the best; after a bit, your taste experience is dulled. The scent is not as new and fresh, and the tongue senses less after it adapts to the temperature. Blumenthal thought flavor bursts would be an interesting way to counteract the loss of sensation.

Joseph Decuis head Chef Aaron Butts had a chance to experience the phenomenon during his stint in the world-famous kitchen. He describes a process that begins with farm-fresh eggs. They poke a hole in each end of the egg and blow into one end, discarding the yolk and egg white that come out the other. They sterilize the shell, then use a syringe to fill it with a custard base, sealing both holes. The server presents the diner with a half-dozen of the eggs in a custom Fat Duck carton, then breaks them into a container of liquid nitrogen and stirs until the custard freezes into an ice cream. The server scoops it onto a plate with caramelized brioche French toast, sweet bacon and tomato jam. In this way, the flavors really do make sense together.

Another dish out of Blumenthal's lab kitchen is the “Sound of the Sea.” The ingredients are unusual enough: three kinds of seaweed, abalone, cockles, razor clams, seaside foam

and edible sand, drizzled with ponzu sauce. One day, Butts “dived in,” so to speak.

“The dish has a lot of components, but everything works well together, very fresh tastes,” Butts said. The food, however, is just one part of the experience.

“Here's where it gets cool,” Butts said. “Three minutes before the food goes to the table, a server brings tiny iPods to every guest. After a short tutorial, the guests ‘plug in’ and listen to an oceanscape of sorts, waves crashing, seagulls and a gentle ocean breeze. Then the food comes. It's sensory overload. I tried it, and it was great. You close your eyes, you take a bite, and instantly you're at the coast digging your feet in the sand.”

So how many exotic flavors will wash up on the shores of Joseph Decuis? Already, the menu represents a departure from the ordinary. Dishes such as the Hoisin Duck Salad, a savory balance of petite Asian mesclun, haricots verts, duck confit, salted edamame, ponzu-hoisin vinaigrette and crispy onions are not your average Midwestern buffet fare. Diners seeking the more exotic can even take part in Butts' Chef's Tasting, a seven-course tour for the taste buds.

Still, Joseph Decuis is in Roanoke, more than three hours from the exotic restaurants of Chicago. What can the market bear?

“We walk a fine line at Joseph Decuis,” Butts said. “There are customers who just want a nice thick steak and some potatoes and veggies, and there are others who want to be surprised with over-the-top dishes. We strive to cater to both. I will never make the menu so cutting-edge with experimental dishes, unheard-of flavors and unlikely combinations that no one will want to come except for a select few. I like the fact that we can do a seven-course chef's tasting menu for one table, serve a 16-ounce Kobe ribeye to a gentleman at the bar and make a plate of chicken strips for a 4-year-old girl dining with her family.”

“I don't know what won't work until I try it. Although I don't think sardine on toast sorbet is gonna fly.”

Butts is experimenting a lot with ice creams and sorbets right now, adding surprising flavors. He was very satisfied with a trial run of basil ice cream. And his new pineapple-lemon balm “snow,” far lighter than a typical sorbet, is a dead ringer for the first fluffy downfall of the season. (Though it is yellow...) Customers aren't plunging their feet into ice buckets or wearing scarves at the table just yet, but Butts is only getting started.

Photo above of Nitro Green Tea & Lime Ice Cream taken by Jose Lopez de Zubiria and courtesy of The Fat Duck.