

Gulfshore Life

CREATING PARADISE FROM SCRATCH AT BLEU PROVENCE

WHAT IT TAKES, STEP BY STEP, FOR THE ELEGANT NAPLES RESTAURANT TO CRAFT A SPECIAL DINNER STARRING TRUFFLES.

GULFSHORE LIFE, JUNE 2017

BY JANINE ZEITLIN | PHOTOGRAPHY BY ERIK KELLAR

In a trendy blazer and ball cap, truffle salesman Blake Bowdish emerges from a circuitous route through the dining room to the kitchen and into the back office of Bleu Provence, an acknowledged icon in Southwest Florida's fine dining scene. The office holds piles of boxes of the finest wine bottles, a few computers and executive chef Lysielle Cariot on this March morning. She awaits a peek at his latest shipment of black truffles. Bowdish finds a spot for his bounty, a box containing black truffles that typically run from \$525 to \$750 a pound. He excuses himself: "I need to wash my hands. Truffles are like sponges. They absorb everything in the air."

Lysielle opened Bleu Provence in 1999 with her husband, Jacques. A self-taught chef, she began cooking around the age of 22. Forty years later, she's still drawn to create, especially from something as delectable as truffles. It's winter black truffle season in Europe, and that calls for a special: a three-course menu to celebrate this subterranean fungus desired by deep-pocketed gourmands.

Lysielle runs through the accoutrements to her truffle menu: mushrooms and greens they'll order the day before. They buy organic produce from Oakes Farms and Colusa Farms, both in Naples, and eggs from Circle C Farm in Bonita Springs. She prefers Hokkaido scallops from Japan. The foie gras comes from Canada, but not to worry: It's a French company and is made the French way, by force-feeding the goose. Some may perceive it as cruel, but Lysielle finds the product superior.

Upon return, Bowdish slices open a box of truffles that his guys in Miami shipped him overnight. His 5 Diamond Delicacies serves the nation, but the Naples resident delivers truffles to up to 75 restaurants in Southwest Florida in a white SUV he's nicknamed his white truffle. In order to eat the truffles he shaves into his coffee this morning, he has to sell them, too. His SUV is custom-wired for the transport of electric coolers containing his epicurean treats. ("People often ask if I'm transporting organs," he says.)



Appetizer: Foie gras ravioli in truffle and mushroom velouté. Entrée: Pan-seared scallops stuffed with truffle, served with vierge sauce and truffle mashed potatoes. Dessert: Truffle floating island (meringue and crème anglaise).

He extracts a small container lined with brown paper. This particular day, he has black truffles from Marche, Italy. He imports mostly from Europe, never from China. The soil used to grow truffles there is subpar, he says.



Lysielle hovers over the box of Italian truffles.

Despite the shroud of elegance surrounding it, a black truffle is not much to look at. It hinges on ugly, lacking the cute caps and uniformity of grocery store fungi. The bulbous shape and beveled surface gives it the cast of a tiny, malformed brain. Sniff the truffle. That pungent, earthy fragrance may just lead to forgiveness of its homely state; inside is what matters. These truffles are fresh.

Lysielle inhales deeply and sighs. “They’re beautiful.”

To her mother, truffles smelled of poverty. That’s what her family ate to survive in war-torn France. “It’s like being in Maine with only lobster but dreaming of steak,” explains Lysielle, who, on the other hand, feels romance in the truffle. “It’s very sexy. It’s something exciting, expensive and festive.”

For its truffle special, Bleu Provence will order Périgord black truffles because they are from France. They won’t be available until the following week. Before Bowdish heads to his next stop, he promises a fine truffle: “They’re going to be nice. Fresh ones, coming from the day before.”

The Prep

The Périgord truffles have arrived. It’s been a slow trickle of employees clocking in since 2 p.m. Over the next two hours, the team congeals, speaking a blend of French (chef-to-sous chef) and English (front of the house) and Spanish (back of the house).

“Everyone jokes and gets along,” says 27-year-old Pepe Aguilar, who has worked his way from dishwasher to prep cook in six years at the restaurant. “If someone needs help, I help. If I need help, someone helps me.”

The petite executive chef doesn’t cast an intimidating presence in the kitchen. Lysielle is meticulous, but not one to bark orders.

“I’ve worked with French chefs who yell a lot. Lysielle is calm,” says Gaspard Touloupe, 32, the restaurant’s sous chef of four years.



Touloupe worked in southern France, at restaurants in Cannes and St. Tropez, among others, before answering an ad Lysielle posted in France. Touloupe knew Naples. He had visited during his honeymoon. For Lysielle, it’s easier to have a sous chef from France because they share the same culture, recipes and practices in the kitchen. Most of the line and prep cooks are from Mexico and Central America.

In the back of the house, busser Gerardo Garnelo prepares 250 butter and tapenade dishes to be served with the focaccia bread cooling in the kitchen.

Prep cook Rosa Ramirez cooks 20 aluminum foil dishes of meringue to golden perfection. (The trick: a little water in the baking pan.)

Food runner Sadya Varela polishes silverware, as they run through about 1,200 pieces of cutlery on an average night.

Two hostesses review the reservations for 265 people on this Monday evening. Hostesses power the front, says Mia Nelson. “We have to produce the whole evening.” Her job, as she sees it, is securing the future of the restaurant by properly fielding questions, special requests and complaints, all while answering the phones politely even when people call at 7:30, their crunch time, to confirm a reservation two weeks away.

Near the hostesses, servers arrange the tables for larger parties. Waiter Dana Wilson relies on the knowledge of the chefs to determine how he explains items like the truffle menu to patrons. “Otherwise, there’s a disconnect, and you could have food going back.”

He recites a pitch for the truffle menu that proved successful in past: “What we have is a rarity tonight. We are featuring something no one else in Naples is offering.”

The Chefs

Lysielle is dressed for labor in a black T-shirt and comfy white sneakers. She flips through a cookbook of Italian cuisine for the ravioli recipe she prefers. She clears off a small workspace in the prep area. Once forming the dough, she works it by hand for 10 minutes. A small muscle bulges in her forearm, a badge of strength for her long tenure in the kitchen. (For the best results, she says, make the raviolis the night before and refrigerate so they don’t open up when you cook them.)



They’ve already prepared 20 portions of raviolis for dinner this evening. Touloupe is ready to assist. He grates the exterior of a cleaned and brushed truffle. They keep the truffles in a container smaller than a shoebox that stores about \$4,000 worth of Périgord truffles. To be ready for 20 truffle specials this evening, they’ve set aside four truffles costing about \$400 total. He moves onto mixing the vierge sauce, a medley of red peppers, zucchini, chives and parsley, truffle oil and more, for the scallops. Typically, there’s lemon in vierge sauce, but they’ve removed it on the account of the truffle. “Acidity and truffle is not an enemy, but not a friend,” Touloupe says.

While mixing the vierge, he offers a few lessons on truffles:

A fresh truffle should be hard. “If it’s a little soft, don’t buy it,” he suggests. Mold is not a terrible thing on a truffle—just clean it off.

Look for veins inside the truffle. “If you see a truffle, all black all the way, it has been frozen in a bad shape.”

Don't touch them much. They absorb what's on your hands.

Use them quickly; don't let them sit more than three weeks. Time kills truffles. They lose 2 to 3 percent of their weight a day.

Truffle pairs well with eggs and potatoes.

For dessert, use a black truffle rather than a white.

Meanwhile, Lysielle folds generous slices of truffle inside sliced scallops that she then sears. "It needs to be very hot so you can have a nice coloration in the scallop. It needs to be medium-rare in the middle."

She places the scallop atop a cushion of mashed potatoes before spooning the vierge sauce over it. She sprinkles on micro-greens and espelette pepper, a red pepper from French Basque country that she prefers to black pepper. The result is divine, a comically bourgeois word that should be deployed only in the case of a dish this exceptional. It offers a play of textures and flavors and a climax of a soft scallop with the crunch of truffle inside.



The chefs do not skimp on truffle. They do handle it with an aura of respect. Throughout the night, as truffle dishes are ordered, Cariot escorts the black truffle through the kitchen like the fungal jewel that it is.

The Hustle

Go time. There is a clash of flavors and sounds in the kitchen at the height of dinner around 7 p.m. Sea bass sizzles on the grill. An oven timer buzzes. Small machines churn out tickets, orders upon orders. It's a small, enclosed kitchen, but the cooks and food runners are practiced in sharing space and a waltz of anticipating each other. There's not a lot of chitchat. The energy in the air is duty.

A quartet of food runners awaits plates. One tip about being a food runner: Eat before work. A food runner offers this hint before eyeing a glistening serving of truffle fries. "They're really good."

The Dinner

Food runner Sayda Varela kicks open the door from the kitchen. Plates of foie gras ravioli in truffle and mushroom sauce occupy her hands, and she enters the warmly lit restaurant packed with diners in classic Naples attire: blazers, button-down shirts in coastal colors and light cardigans. The murmur of conversation reverberates through the space. Varela navigates the crowd.

"Excuse me."

"Thank you."

"May I, please?"

She follows the skinny red carpet from the kitchen through the dining room near the patio and to the bar before setting a plate before Craig Kobza, a 58-year-old construction company owner and Bleu Provence regular.

When Kobza sat down, he couldn't decide what to order first. He'd been craving the Kobe short ribs, but thought better of it. They might cancel out his arduous bicycle ride.



In Kobza's inertia of indecision, Jacques Cariot, Lysielle's husband, steered him to the truffles. Kobza takes a bite of the ravioli appetizer. "It didn't undershoot the runway. It meets or exceeds the runway."

7:49 p.m.

Varela arrives with the entrée, the scallops.

Kobza puts on his glasses to inspect the colorful dish. He's thinking the red pepper might give it a kick. That's a good thing. He swirls a glass of wine in anticipation before digging in. "It couldn't be nicer."

8:47 p.m.

Finally, it's time for dessert. Kobza spoons the crème anglaise with hunks of truffle over the meringue floating in the sauce. "The whole palette lit up," he says of the meal. "What a treat."

The Aftermath

A sheen of crème anglaise remains on Kobza's white dessert plate. The bartender brings his plate back to the dishwashers. Nearly the end of dinner, dirty plates and silverware are returning in rapid fire. The two dishwashers, their faces dewy with perspiration, scurry to keep up.

This may be the loudest spot of the restaurant, with the clamor of silverware being sorted, the pots clanking against the sink and the rush of water rinsing the plates.

One of the two dishwashers places Kobza's plate into a bin she quickly fills. She nudges the bin onto a conveyer belt that pulls the bin inside the whirring automatic dishwasher. The plate disappears amid a cloud of steam. Thirty seconds later, the plate emerges, slick and clean, ready for the next meal.

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CREATING PARADISE FROM SCRATCH: THE WINE LIST

BEHIND THE SCENES, THE BLUE PROVENCE SOMMELIER COMES UP WITH IDEAL PAIRINGS FOR A MEAL FEATURING TRUFFLES.

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BY JANINE ZEITLIN

Jacques Cariot peruses the wine pairings on the truffle menu on a late morning in the Bleu Provence office. "I see my son's signature here."

Their 36-year-old son, Clement Cariot, is a certified sommelier and a manager at Bleu Provence. Their 31-year-old son, Kevin Cariot, is a manager there, too. Jacques, who owns and runs the restaurant with his wife and executive chef, Lysielle, takes a moment to review his son's work before approving of the pairings. "The idea is to do one plus one equals more than two, and at least not minus something," Jacques says. If they're not paired correctly, it's better to separate the wine and food; they fight.

Over the years, Bleu Provence's food and wines have earned acclaim, including the Grand Award from Wine Spectator.

Jacques estimates about 30 percent of the wine they buy for the retail wine store and restaurant is influenced by customer opinion. "Seventy percent is my hard-headed opinionated mind ... We know what is good."

They know that by visiting the wineries, learning how the grapes are grown and, of course, tasting the wine.

A glance at the truffle menu pairings:

Appetizer: Foie gras ravioli. Pairing: Clos Sainte-Magdeleine Cassis Blanc.

"Ravioli is very Italian Mediterranean," he says. "The Cassis Blanc is grown facing the Mediterranean, a little salty with a Provençal flavor, salty of the mist from the Mediterranean. It stays in the same culture, same aroma and same style. And it's pretty much the same culture. There's no border with culture."

Entrée: Pan seared scallops stuffed with truffle. Pairing: Domaine Louis Michel Chablis Premier Cru Montmain 2014 or Domaine Hauvette Rouge Cornaline Les Baux de Provence 2009.

Both of the wines offer brightness to refresh the palette from the richness of the truffle and the mashed potatoes, he said. "They're going to create different bridges and play different ways, but they're going to have the same success."

Dessert: Truffle floating island. Pairing: Sauternes Roumieu-Lacoste.

The sweet wine is a finisher. The grapes are grown in grainy, limestone soil.

Over the years, the restaurant and store has amassed 3,800 different wines, some of which don't rotate much from storage.

"He doesn't want to sell it," Lysielle adds. "He wants to keep it for himself."

"Other than that," Jacques grins, "we're nice people."

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