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## Escoffier: Britain's first master chef

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BBC Food

**He may not be a household name but Frenchman Georges Auguste Escoffier changed the face of British cuisine - only he did so more than 100 years ago.**

"Escoffier put a love of great food at the heart of modern Britain," says French chef Michel Roux Jr.

"He revolutionised the professional kitchen and brought glamour and drama into the dining room."

The chef pays homage to one of his greatest food heroes in the BBC Four programme [The First Master Chef: Michel Roux on Escoffier](#).

Born in France in 1846, Escoffier introduced French haute cuisine to some of London's finest hotels, such as the Savoy, the Carlton and the Ritz.

His cookbook, *Le Guide Culinaire*, is still considered the go to cookery manual for many chefs today.

Just how did the son of a Provençal blacksmith change the face of British cuisine?

### Kitchen hygiene

"At the beginning of Escoffier's career, cooking was not a profession held in high esteem," writes Escoffier's protege, Eugène Herbodeau in his 1955 biography of the chef.

#### Make it like the master



[Accomplish peach melba with raspberry coulis](#)

[Complement game with a chasseur sauce](#)

[Rustle up chicken liver parfait on Melba toast](#)

"This was partly to the laxity which could so easily creep in and also to the rigorous conditions of work."

But Escoffier helped transform 19th Century kitchens into respectable places to work.

He banned smoking and drinking and even asked a French doctor to develop a healthy barley drink to relieve the unbearable heat of the kitchen.

"The hat and the neckerchief was introduced to prevent sweat drops from dropping into the preparation," says Michel Escoffier, great-grandson of Escoffier.

Most importantly, Escoffier brought a sense of calm and order to the kitchen, explains Mr Escoffier Jr.



Drinking and smoking was commonplace for chefs working in kitchens in 1865

"When he was very annoyed at someone he would actually walk out of the kitchen and then come back and then explain what made him angry without having to shout."

#### Find out more



Watch [The First Master Chef: Michel Roux on Escoffier](#) on BBC Four at 21:00 GMT

Perhaps one of Escoffier's greatest contributions was the sense of pride he brought to cuisine, explains Michel Roux who cites Escoffier as a key influence in the day-to-day running of his French restaurant Le Gavroche in London.

"He was also trying to make a better life for us chefs," says Mr Roux.

Escoffier always looked out for the welfare of his staff, explains Mr Escoffier Jr who is President of the [Auguste Escoffier Foundation](#) and museum in Southern France.

"He wanted everyone to come out and look like somebody.

"And if the young cooks couldn't afford a pair of trousers he would even buy them for them."

#### Brigade system

On arrival in England in 1890, Escoffier partnered up with Swiss hotelier Cesar Ritz and became head chef of the Savoy hotel.

Maintaining a well-organised kitchen was key for Escoffier who could be managing up to 60 or 80 members of staff at any one time.



Auguste Escoffier would tour his kitchen to check every detail before service

"To guarantee a room full of individual diners could get what they want when they wanted, he created a whole new way of organising the professional kitchen," says Mr Roux Jr.

"The brigade system."

Although technology may have modernised the process today, the principle is still the same.

**“ He developed a whole new way of organising the professional kitchen”**

Michel Roux Jr French chef and owner of Le Gavroche restaurant

Food orders taken by waiting staff are immediately put through to the kitchen, where the head chef calls them out to his different teams.

"The rush hour is not the signal for a rush of words," was a familiar Escoffier phrase, writes Mr Herbodeau.

He even replaced the word "l'aboyeur", meaning the person who "barked" the food orders, with "annonceur" or the announcer.

Much like the division of labour in car manufacture, Escoffier divided up his kitchen staff into specialist groups or "parties". One to prepare sauces, one for fish, starters, soups, pastries and so on.

The aim was to cut down on waiting times and to ensure that food was served efficiently at exactly the right temperature.

"We expect the food to arrive at the table at the same time, regardless of what we order," says Mr Roux.

"They come to the table because there is a system and that system is down to Escoffier."

#### Culinary reform

"Surtout, faites simples." "Above all, keep it simple" is one Escoffier's famous maxims.

He realised that haute cuisine must take into account the basic rules of nutrition, and refused to garnish dishes with excessive trimmings that were difficult for people to digest.





Auguste Escoffier believed every aspect of a dish was equally as important

"His first concern was the pleasure and comfort of the customer," writes Mr Herbodeau.

He wanted his food to be light and savoury, made only with the freshest ingredients.

"La sauce fait passer le poisson," is another classic Escoffier phrase, writes Mr Herbodeau. In other words, the fish should not be inferior to the sauce that accompanies it.

Escoffier was the first to bring stock cubes to Britain. He abolished the practice of boiling meat or preparing it in flour.

Instead, he developed sauces and stocks such as 'le fond de veau clair' using meat extracts that were easier to digest and more nutritious.

"He made it his duty to serve rapidly a nourishing meal which lost nothing of its artistry or quality in being stripped of its former trimmings," writes Mr Herbodeau.

#### Bespoke menus

When it came to composing a balanced menu, Escoffier always strove for perfection.

"The setting-up of a presentable menu is rarely accomplished without lengthy labour and much thought, and for all that the result is not always to my satisfaction," Escoffier is reported as saying in Mr Herbodeau's book.



Escoffier took great care to compose well-balanced menus such as this one from the Savoy in 1895

Despite his concerns, Escoffier succeeded in crafting menus with a subtler balance of flavours, to replace Britain's heavily laden banquets of roasts, puddings and pies.

His menus would also reflect the individual needs of his diners, explains Mr Roux Jr.

"He would manage his customer's whole meal asking for their preferences and budget.

"He would then create an entire set menu for them."

For a dinner held at the Carlton hotel, London for the Japanese Embassy and Japanese bank officials, Escoffier famously created a "Japanese Salad".

Served with fresh fruit and cream heaped into the heart of a lettuce, the dish was a great success.

During his time at the Carlton in 1889, Escoffier was also the first to offer an à la carte menu in Britain.

His kitchens were so efficient that he could cater for up to 500 people at a time.

He also took great pride in the presentation of his food on paper, explains Mr Roux Jr.

"Escoffier's menus were always written in French, he felt English made his dishes sound unattractive.

"He felt he was holding these new diners hands as he led them to the greatest heights of gastronomy."

#### Dining in style

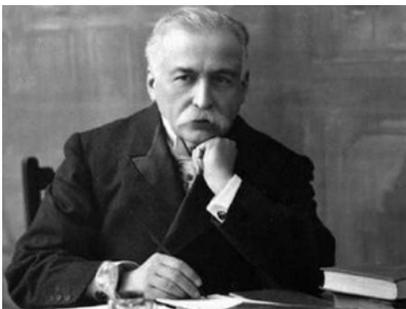


Lady de Grey was thought to be the first lady to dine in public at the Savoy

But Escoffier not only revolutionised the way British cuisine was cooked, he also helped change dining culture.

Prior to Escoffier there was not really a dining scene in England, explains historian Kate Williams.

#### Escoffier's signature desserts



**Pêche Melba** - Inspired by a performance of Lohengrin, starring Australian opera singer Nellie Melba, Escoffier designed a peaches and cream dessert served in an ice sculpted swan

**Bombe Néro** - A gourmet dessert made from sponge, caramel, ice cream and chocolate truffles that are coated in meringue, baked in the oven and served with a little meringue cup of flaming rum on the top

**Fraises Sarah** - A dish of strawberries, pineapple and Curaçao sorbet inspired by French actress Sarah Bernhardt, who was reputed to be Escoffier's lover

"Everything was done at home," she says.

"If you saw a woman on her own in a restaurant in Victorian times, she was fair game and she was there for custom."

But Cesar Ritz and Escoffier changed dining conventions by turning the Savoy into a feminine and respectable place.

"It was somewhere that ladies could go without fear of being bothered or the suggestion that they might be issuing some kind of invitation."

Lady de Grey, considered to be a key trendsetter in 19th Century London society, was one of the first women to have a lunch party at the Savoy.

"Once she'd done it, everyone else had to join in... suddenly the Savoy became incredibly popular for ladies, for couples, people on their own.

"The British dining culture was born."

Escoffier's legacy endures to this day not only because he turned chefs into cooks, says Mr Roux Jr but also because he changed eaters into diners.

"Britain today is a nation of true food lovers, for that I believe we owe a huge debt of gratitude to Auguste Escoffier."

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