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Oui, the French chefs are coming!

OOH LA LAI By Lai S. Reyes (The Philippine Star) | Updated January 28, 2016 - 12:00am

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ICDE graduates will receive the Disciples Escoffier Culinary Arts medals.

French cuisine is not just about fancy plates of food and elaborate presentation. It's all about mastering basic techniques, layering flavors and understanding the mentality of French dining.

This is what chef Vincent Leroux, program director of the Institut Culinaire Disciples Escoffier (ICDE), a professional institute dedicated to classic French gastronomy, told us over dinner at a Chinese restaurant in Hong Kong.

Chef Leroux just came from the graduation rites of the second graduating class of the Disciples Escoffier Diploma in Culinary Arts, which completed the 540 hours of training by the ICDE in Hong Kong.

"There's a lot of tradition and techniques involved in whipping up a particular French dish," he pointed out.

France has different regions. And each region has its own distinctive cuisine. Each region may treat, say, chicken differently. Burgundy makes *coq au vin* (chicken braised with wine, lardons, mushrooms and garlic), while the Basque region boasts Chicken Basque (stewed chicken and veggies with earthy spices) — it's all about highlighting the main ingredient, building flavors, and yes, traditions.

"And that's what we're trying to impart to our students through the ICDE program, which will soon be available to restaurateurs, budding chefs and culinary students who want to take up advanced French cuisine courses in Manila," enthused chef Leroux.

ICDE was founded by Disciples Escoffier Asia chairman Robert Fontana in Hong Kong in 2014 .

The French Connection

The Institut Culinaire Disciples Escoffier (ICDE) of Hong Kong recently entered into an academic partnership with the Center for Culinary Arts (CCA) Manila for the introduction of French cuisine training in the country.

The six-month Disciples Escoffier Diploma course will be offered at CCA's new Makati City campus this April.

Based on the traditions and heritage of French gastronomy, the core program is deeply rooted in the classic foundation of Auguste Escoffier's *Guide Culinaire*. Originally published in 1903, the cooking manual — touted as the "bible" of French modern cooking — boasts over 5,000 recipes still used every day by chefs

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around the globe.

Filipino students stand to benefit from the extended learning opportunities from the ICDE such as access to world-class facilities, renowned French chef-instructors and other career-building opportunities.

"We'll offer the same curriculum in Manila," notes chef Leroux.

The course requires 540 hours (for non-professionals) to complete, and 260 hours for professionals who — as chef Leroux assumes — have already taken up Basic French Cuisine. Basically, the Disciples Escoffier Diploma complements the basic French culinary course offered by CCA Manila.

In France, it takes two years for a student to get the Certificate Aptitude Professional (CAP).

"At ICDE, you'll get it for only six to nine months. It's faster because we don't teach them general subjects like English, Math or Geography anymore," explained chef Leroux. "We just extract from this diploma course the practical and technical aspect. So it's more on skills training."

According to ICDE COO Benjamin Grenier, the six-month diploma program will open a wide range of opportunities for CCA Manila students.

"It will allow the graduates to network with 25,000 chefs from different countries who are all members of the Disciples Escoffier International, an exclusive network of 25,000 chefs in 26 countries," Grenier added. "They still have to work hard and pay their dues, but they will be able to find work in various restaurants here and abroad, because the diploma is recognized around the world."

So who are qualified to join the ICDE program offered at CCA Makati?

"The program is open to restaurateurs, chefs and young professionals who already have basic culinary training. When they enter the program, they work individually. One station is to one person. It's purely focused on skills training," explained CCA program director Melissa Sison-Oreta.

This early, there has been a very strong interest in the ICDE program in Manila.

"There is already a wait list since there are limited slots available. There will be two sections, and each will have 15 students. Full-time students will go to class thrice a week, while part-time students will attend class twice a week," she added.

ICDE will be bringing in three of its chef-instructors who will handle all culinary classes and programs related to French cuisine.

At CCA Makati, the students will learn not only the art of Advanced French Cuisine, but also the intricacies of running a restaurant, the right amount of taxes to pay, ways of expanding the menu, and new ways of cooking.

"We also teach students values formation," Oreta said. "I always remind our students that a diploma from CCA Manila or from ICDE alone is not enough to ace that job interview. They need to have the right values. That's also what will make them stay on the job and get that promotion they truly deserve."

CCA Manila culinary director chef Sau del Rosario added that ethics and values are prerequisites to being a good chef. "You can't enter the program without these core values. You must really love to cook and passionate about it because that's the only thing you'll be doing at ICDE," he noted.

At the end of the program, students will be assessed and evaluated by French chefs Pierre Barde, Serge Robin and Patrick Monset from the Ministry of Education of France.

"Graduates will not only receive a diploma in ICDE (the Escoffier Grand Diploma in Culinary Arts), but will also get the French Ministry of Education National Diploma in French Cuisine," Grenier enthused.

CCA spent a total of P25 million for its Makati City campus (where the Disciples Escoffier Diploma will be offered), which boasts state-of-the-art classrooms and facilities, including 22 kitchen oven units from Canada and stainless-steel working stations.

Starting this April, ICDE will handle all culinary classes and programs of CCA related to French cuisine.

Practice Makes Perfect

We were invited by CCA Manila to visit the ICDE headquarters at the Towngas Centre in Hong Kong.

Our group arrived just in time for the students' final (practical) exams being administered by the French Ministry of Education.

The students were tasked to prepare three dishes — Florentine Eggs, Sautéed Chicken Hunter-Style, Lemon Meringue Tartlets — in four hours under the scrutinizing eyes of the judges, chefs Serge Robin and Pierre Barde.

"These dishes look simple, but they're very hard to prepare because these involve 16 different techniques," said chef Leroux. "We also have a very strict grading system."

While the students were busy peeling potatoes, the judges were throwing different questions at them. So they had to remain focused and stay sharp to be able to pass the exam.

"We're training them to work under pressure, memorize the techniques and prepare the dishes with love and passion so they won't have a hard time during examinations," Leroux said.

These students underwent rigid training, so everything's a breeze come examination time. "That's also the best way to prepare them for the real (culinary) world."

The same setup can also be expected once the ICDE program starts at CCA Makati.

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Center for Culinary Arts (CCA) Manila program director Melissa Sison-Oreta with (from left) culinary director Sau del Rosario, French chefs Serge Robin and Pierre Barde of the Ministry of Education of France, ICDE founder Robert Fontana, ICDE HK program director Vincet Leroux and ICDE COO Benjamin Grenier

CCA Makati's ICDE program will start on April 18. CCA Makati is at 139 HV dela Costa St., Salcedo Village, Makati City.

For inquiries, call 218-5266 or email talktoccamanila@gmail.com.

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