

Apprentice

DANIEL BOULUD LABORED UNDER AN EXACTING MASTER — THEN BECAME ONE, GATHERING AND TRAINING TALENTED

YOUNG CHEFS UNDER HIS WING. THIRTY-SIX-YEAR-OLD RICCARDO BERTOLINO, EXECUTIVE CHEF AT MAISON BOULUD

AT THE RITZ-CARLTON MONTREAL, IS ONE SUCH CHEF, WHO'S ARTFULLY PAYING HOMAGE TO HIS SUPERSTAR MENTOR.



one of the world's most celebrated chefs for more than two decades, but he's never forgotten his mentors. A farmer's son from the tiny French village of Saint-Pierre-de-Chandieu, Boulud started his first apprenticeship at the age of 14 under Gérard Nandron at the two-Michelin-starred restaurant Nandron in Lyon. "I learned how to peel every vegetable and fillet every fish," says Boulud, 61. And he remembers the taste of a foie gras- and black truffle-stuffed pheasant prepared by Nandron like it was yesterday's dinner. "He roasted it in juniper butter, with cabbage, salsify root and a chunk of country bacon," he recalls fondly. "It was my first taste of real cuisine."

Boulud went on to work with a string of legendary French chefs — Georges Blanc, Roger Vergé and Michel Guérard — all of whom helped shape him into the master he is today. The fact that these men could be demanding, at times harsh, was par for the course: In the firmly hierarchical tradition of French culinary training, an apprentice was expected to defer to his superiors no matter the task. "Building the ego has never been part of the game" is how Boulud put it in his 2003 book, "Letters to a Young Chef," a slim, advice-packed volume that has become a must-read for aspiring chefs. When working for Guérard, an infamous perfectionist renowned for his exhilaratingly light, ingredient-driven take on nouvelle cuisine, writes Boulud, there was no room for error. If a cook missed one step in a recipe that called for 35 ingredients, Guérard knew instantly. "And you would be dead meat," he says.

These days, as the chef-owner of the two-Michelin-starred Daniel on New York's Upper East Side and owner of 16 other restaurants



#### SAVOIR FLAIR

Clockwise from far left: fresh baguettes; creative cocktails serve as an extension of the innovative menu; figues et pignons — a speculoos biscuit with pine nut crémeux, fig and porto purée, figs roasted in argan oil, fig leaf ice cream, pine cone syrup and caramel tuile; Chef-owner Daniel Boulud (left) with Executive Chef Riccardo Bertolino.



around the world bearing his name, Boulud has the opportunity to play mentor to scores of young chefs in his own gleaming kitchens. "We'll take a young, talented kid under our wings, and in five to seven years we can make them a chef de cuisine," he asserts. "But they need to be disciplined and committed, willing to work their way through every station to our standards. One must have patience in order to succeed." Riccardo Bertolino, the 36-year-old executive chef of Maison Boulud at the Ritz-Carlton Montreal, is the latest talent to emerge from the storied Boulud kitchens.

Now entering his fifth year at the helm of the modern French restaurant, the Italian-born chef is turning out some of the best food in Quebec. Diners can order a sea bass roasted in parchment with artichokes and fennel, as refined and classic as anything you'd find at Daniel, or a knockout loin of roast venison with root vegetables and crisp chestnuts, amplified by the smokiness of a Mexican mole-tinged jus. Patrons swoon over the seafood platters brimming with oysters, snow crab and sea urchin, accompanied by a delicate dashi gelée, as well as Bertolino's expert hand with pasta. "This a city where people are very sophisticated about their food and appreciate the fact that we are using the very best ingredients," says Bertolino. "Freshness, seasoning, balance, acidity; this is what we are always thinking about." And he credits his near-decade working with Boulud for getting him to the top of his game. Maison Boulud is the fifth Boulud restaurant he's cooked in since arriving in North America. "I guess you could say I survived Boulud Boot Camp," he says with a laugh.



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Bertolino

says it was

his father,



a toy merchant, who first instilled in him a love of food. “My dad loved to cook,” he says, “and he took his food very seriously.” While Bertolino and his siblings grew up in Bologna, their table was heavily influenced by the rustic, vibrant cuisine of his father’s native Sicily: sardines with spaghetti, eggplant caponata, and for Easter, whole roasted baby lamb or goat. “We even ate the cervello — you know, the brains,” says Bertolino with a laugh. “That was the one thing I never liked.”

At age 14, the same age Boulud was when he entered Nandron’s kitchen, Bertolino enrolled in a local culinary school. “I was eager to become independent,” he says. “I liked the idea that as a chef I could master a skill and see the world.” After graduation Bertolino worked in a series of restaurants throughout Italy before landing in London, where he found a position at the well-regarded Brunello. A couple of years later in Paris he joined the team of the Hotel Meurice, a three-Michelin-starred restaurant. The formal French training he received at the Meurice is what helped him land his dream post: a position at Daniel in New York. “I knew Daniel Boulud was one of the top chefs in America,” he says. “I was so nervous on my first night!” he recalls. “Not only was my English not very good, but the pace was like nothing I had ever experienced. At the Meurice we did 45 covers in a night, maximum. But at Daniel that night, we did 310.”

“I remember that Riccardo seemed scared to be in America,” says Boulud with a chuckle. “It was a big restaurant for him, and there was a lot to absorb. But I could tell immediately he was a young man with talent and discipline. So all those barriers were nothing.” Bertolino worked as chef de partie at Daniel for a year and a half, after which he was moved up to the position of sous-chef at DBGB Kitchen and Bar, the chef’s tavern-style eatery in Downtown Manhattan, and then executive sous-chef at the casually elegant Café Boulud on New York’s Upper East Side. In 2011 the rising chef got his first experience working in Asia, completing a six-month stint in Singapore as executive sous-chef of db Bistro Moderne Singapore. “To be in such a totally new environment, shopping Asian markets, managing a local staff, serving a different clientele ... it was thrilling,” says Bertolino.

And Boulud had still more in mind for Bertolino. In 2012 the young chef arrived in Quebec for the opening of Maison Boulud in the newly restored Ritz-Carlton Montreal; it was his first time taking on the lead position of executive chef. “I knew he was ready,” says Boulud. “He had worked in almost every position in my restaurants, working with both big brigades and smaller ones, developing his cooking as well as his management skills,” he says. Moreover, says the chef, “Riccardo knows what I like.” There’s an elusive quality Boulud calls “the story of the



**KITCHEN CONFIDENTIAL**  
Clockwise from top: A server at Maison Boulud; chefs at work in the kitchen; crabe et couteaux — Dungeness crab, razor clams, kinmedai sashimi, sea urchin, dashi jelly and avocado.



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dish,” and every chef working for him knows its importance. “I always say that every dish, no matter how creative, needs to convey its identity; it needs a head and a tail, if you will.” This shared sensibility is crucial, as Boulud visits Quebec only a few times a year. It is Bertolino who devises the menus, manages the kitchen staff and, of course, cooks.

“Sometimes Riccardo and I will laugh together at what trendy restaurants will do these days,” says Boulud. “I know he’s not going to assemble a bunch of things on a plate and call it cooking.”

Naturally, Bertolino himself now has protégés of his own. And just as he trained under Daniel Boulud, his talented executive sous-chef, Antoine Baillargeon, is learning from him. Baillargeon, a Quebec native, had spent a year in Paris at Michel Troisgros and several years in top Vancouver kitchens when he was hired as Maison Boulud’s chef de partie. “To work for a famous chef like Daniel Boulud, and to train with an experienced chef like Riccardo Bertolino, was a really good opportunity,” says Baillargeon, who is nearing his five-year mark with the restaurant.

Maison Boulud is at its core a French restaurant, built on the foundations of classic French cuisine. But in recent years Bertolino has evolved the menu to reflect more of his own background, turning out creations like saffron risotto with marrow and chanterelles or lobster with potato gnocchi and mushroom emulsion. “Getting the pasta to Chef Riccardo’s standards took the most time,” says Baillargeon with a laugh. “I had worked with fresh pasta before, but here the pasta is at another level. Chef Riccardo watches how we roll it, cut it, sauce it and time it so it arrives at the table perfectly.” And if the pasta is not prepared to Bertolino’s standards, he doesn’t hesitate to send it back. “I’ve learned not to take it personally,” says Baillargeon.

After all, trial by fire was how Bertolino learned from Boulud, and how Boulud himself learned as a 14-year-old back in Lyon. “Work with a master,” urges Boulud in “Letters to a Young Chef.” “Learn to think like the master. And one day the master will have the confidence to ask you to move his work forward. When this happens, you are on your way to being your own master.” ♦