



PRESS RELEASE

Press contact : Jacky G. Lesellier CONM CMA

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French connection that knows how to make dough
Giles MacDonogh meets a pâtissier-cum-traiteur who is plying his trade in England rather than in his native France

Jacky Lesellier's company Bagatelle does all three. Which is odd. In France they say that a good pâtissier is a bad baker, and vice versa. The living dough needs a different, pragmatic approach to "dead" pastry. Still, Lesellier does well. He is a Frenchman, of course, but one who chooses to live in London, and that can only be good news in the notable absence of local talent.

Lesellier did not start off in the kitchen - he began his working life at sea in the French navy. He ended up a warrant officer seconded to the diplomatic service, doing stints in Scandinavia and the east Asia.

He left his ship in Singapore and started a club to supply anything from petrol to spirits to diplomats and others on overseas postings. When this trade came to an end three years later, he was temporarily stuck.

He thought back to his roots in Normandy and the family baking business and contacted the Parisian pâtissier Gustave Lenôtre. In 1980 he created the first French bakery in south-east Asia. By the time he left in 1984 there were two shops, a restaurant and five in-store bakeries.

Two years in the US proved a fiasco when the government refused to grant work permits for his team of eager bakers and pâtissiers. His daughter was at school in England and in 1988 he began sniffing at the English market. He found: Industrial bread, worse cakes, and a desperate need for good bakery in top hôtels and restaurants. America's loss was England's gain.

In July 1989, as Britain entered recession, two Frenchmen, two Germans, a Swiss, a Spaniard, an American and an Englishman took advantage of a Business Expansion Scheme, and Jacky Lesellier was launched. In one respect their conclusions were depressing: they decided that London was not ripe for quality high streets bakeries and turned their attention to supplying the city's too tables instead.

"The English confuse warmth with quality. For the time being they are happy with the deep frozen, half-baked baguettes they buy from the supermarket." Bagatelle has just one retail outlet, and that is in South Kensington; "Frog Valley", as Lesellier calls the little French ghetto around the Lycée. If you want his "Lenôtre-style" tarte au citron, his chewy pain de campagne, his terrines and prepared dishes, you will have to go there. The bakery business started with an order from Philip Britten at the Capital Hotel for the 100 white and brown rolls. Now they make 30,000 a night, produce 48 varieties of bread and 115 other products. His vans deliver three times a day to the top hotels and restaurants, from the Connaught to Marco Pierre White.

Yet everything is still prepared on the premises. There

are no short cuts and no additives. In spite of 130 employees, most of whom are French, operating from a gloomy industrial estate in Park Royal off London's North Circular road, Lesellier insists that his operation is "artisanal". Craftsmanship coupled with the right machinery allows him to produce column without compromising quality.

When I asked him why he continued to employ so many French people, even to answer the telephone, he smiled: "the French are better dealing with chefs." His business as a traiteur is chiefly used by offices, although he is doing a little work for the Waitrose supermarket chain. Looking through his catalogue I was reminded of the superiority of French receptions. Here were all the treats I remembered: loaves deconstructed and reassembled as sandwiches; ducks which had been chopped into cubes and put back together again so that they could be consumed on toothpicks. It made a change from industrial cheddar and tinned pineapple. I went for a tour of the works with him. As we progressed though the departments we saluted its Gallic denizens, pushing a hand out here, shaking another there. He showed me how he limits the yeast to improve the weight of his dough; the long "proving" of his different bread. Dough must rest. There are no pauses in the industrial process.

In another room they were making butter and almond croissants. In a third, bread was baked "in the basket" for the Hilton. In a fourth, a pâtissier was putting the final touches to a patch of apple crumbles for Eurostar.

THE BAGATELLE
CONCEPT Ltd

704-711 Tudor Estate

Abbey Road

London NW10 7UW

Tel : 020 8453 8000

Fax : 020 8453 8001

Order Department

Tel : 020 8453 8025

Fax : 020 8453 8026

BAGATELLE
BOUTIQUE

44 Harrington Road

London SW7 3NB

Tel : 020 7581 1551

Fax : 020 7591 0517



P R E S S R E L E A S E

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Lesellier supplies the bread and cakes for trains leaving Waterloo.

He pokes his nose into everything. Recently he found his staff buying chicken breasts to make "chicken supremes". "What do you mean," he asked in astonishment. "You don't know how to remove a fillet?" Now they buy whole birds and the carcasses go into the stock pot. We sat down to a 500 calorie lunch (I assumed the glass of claret was not included in the tally). Lesellier is much concerned with health - his own and other people's - and his developing a dietetic range of three course meals. French and German breads, he says only very occasionally include fat. Cheap English and American bread is full of it. He thinks fat must be responsible for the "wheat allergy" you hear about these days: "In France and Germany they never have wheat allergies." Not so the US: "If you don't have these allergies, you are not a good American."

With Lesellier's help, Britons may just keep cool.

Bagatelle, tel: 0181-453-8000. The Bagatelle Boutique is at 44 Harrington Road, London SW7, tel: 0171-581-1551

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