

The Grand Life

an Interview with Jean-Jacques Granet

By Ellen Anderson Posted Feb 26, 2009 2:05 PM



It was the aroma from a neighborhood pastry shop that eventually changed the life of a young boy in Marseille. Jean-Jacques Granet began working in that pastry shop at age 16. Five years later, he received his Pastry Chef certification from the Culinary Arts School in Nice. He began working in Aix-en-Provence at Riederer Patisserie under the tutelage of M.O.F. Phillip Segond. His next stop was working with Michelin Star chef Jean-Marc Banzo in Aix-en-Provence and then with Jacques Chibois at GrayD'Albion in Cannes. From Cannes, he traveled across the Atlantic Ocean landing in Argentina where Jean Jacques' became the Executive Pastry Chef for the Intercontinental Hotel in Buenos Aires. He went on from here to Caracas, Venezuela, where he oversaw the staff for three restaurants and banquet operations at the Tamanaco Hotel. In 2001, Jean-Jacques Granet left South American and traveled to the north landing a prestigious position as the Executive Pastry Chef at the Mansion at MGM Grand in Las Vegas. Moving up the ladder, in 2002, he became Executive Pastry chef for the entire resort. He career

was now moving in a new and exciting direction, not only as a chef, but managing 50 employees, and overseeing pastry for eight restaurant and banquet operations for 7,000 guests. He is currently the Assistant Executive Pastry Chef at the MGM Grand Las Vegas in charge of pastry operation at the resort's ten fine dining and six casual restaurants.

I spoke to Jean Jaques Granet about his career and his thoughts on the world of pastry.

When in your career did you have that "wow" moment where you say to yourself, this is what I want to do for the rest of my life?

At the beginning of Culinary School in France my first year, you learn the front of the house and the back of the house. The second year I chose to be in the kitchen in the back of the house. The third year they were offering only pastry. When I did my third year in pastry, I thought, this is what I want to do and I KNEW I would work in this field.

I read you consider yourself a World Pastry Chef, rather than a French Pastry Chef.

I have a background of a French Pastry Chef. I went to Argentina and Venezuela, to South America where I learned a lot. I learned the diversity, to work with the people of a different background, different language, [with] different opinions of pastry. So I consider myself a world wide Pastry Chef. I learned so much from other people.

How do you manage the challenge of making all the high volume and high end desserts at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas?

We train for it. We always train them on the floor on what they do. We have 40 bakers. MGM is the biggest hotel in the world. If you don't have the employees well trained, if you don't trust and you don't delegate to your assistants, you cannot do anything.

What is your daily schedule managing all that work?

When I do less than 10 hours, I am very active. Normally, it is always around 12 hours. Starting with a pre-shift meeting. We talk about what is to happen for the day, what is going to happen in the week with our employees. We have a small meeting with our staff to make sure everybody is aware. We take lunch. At 2:00 we have another meeting, check with the banquet manager, check with all the chefs. After that we come back and work again with our employees and we have to set up for parties. We have to work through all the outlets so it is a crazy day. It is a busy day. It would be, I would say, 30% time spent in the office, 40% time in meeting and walking through, and 30% in the field teaching or creating new recipes.

When you are hiring new employees at the MGM Grand, what do you look for in a young pastry chef? What type of skills is important? What type of personality?

We don't have a type of personality. We want people who come with a big smile, background. We try to go more with students who are very motivated with a good knowledge from school. We want someone who walks in with a big smiling face and says "I want to work for you guys." That is the kind of people we are looking for.

That's great! You want to work with somebody who is excited about pastry and happy.

Right, that is the main thing. People coming in just looking for a job, we are not going to hire them.

In your past, have you had any kitchen disasters that still haunt you?

I did once. It was just after my three years of school in France. I worked in a small restaurant in the City of Nice. I was twenty-one. I was just by myself with one helper. After one week of working, on a Saturday night, there was a wedding and I had to do wedding cake. Our pastry shop was under the restaurant, you have like steps that go up to the restaurant and the steps were turning around the corner. So I did my wedding cake, three tiers and when I lift my cake to go up, I realized I cannot go through the stairs because the top of the cake was touching the roof. So I decided to tilt the cake and it went down. It was a big disaster and my boss at the time, said "oh don't worry, we are fine, we have time." I was quick.

Have you changed your style of pastry through the years?

I think yes. You have to adapt yourself for the new techniques and what the people like.

What new ingredients do you like right now?

We like to go with all organic and natural products because people are looking for that. We are always looking for new products coming from a small farm, very fresh. Like a new chocolate we just found coming from Colombia. It is cheaper than a European chocolate and better. The company works in the mountains of Colombia and they are an organic product, they are certified.

What is the name of it?

The name of the company is Cordillera. It is a new one, totally new. A pastry Chef on the east coast, French guy, just gave me the name, very good, very tasty, a lot of coffee.

What is your favorite pairing for chocolate?

I would say a port wine, an old vintage port wine.

In Pastry, what is your favorite ingredient to pair with chocolate?

Citrus, like lemon or orange, I love that. I just did it for Christmas, for my wife, to surprise her, a Bouche de Noels with chocolate and lemon. When I told her "yeah I did a Bouché de Noel with lemon and chocolate" she said "wow what a disaster." and I was hoping it would be good. When she tried it she said "wow that is incredible!"

I have never tried lemon and chocolate.

It's great, it's exceptional. Actually, it was milk chocolate, so the sweetness of the milk with the acidity of lemon was a perfect combination.

If you had one last dessert to order in your life, what would you order?

Hmmmm. I would say.... Hmmmm.

It's your birthday, tell me what you want?

Apple pie from my grandma.

Really, how did she make it?

She was doing an apple pie with a sweet dough, kind of a croissant, putting very thin sliced apple on top, and putting a lot of butter, it was so creamy, it was the best, and I never, ever was able to do the same.

What is your favorite Ethnic food?

I like a lot of Asian food. With my wife we like to eat Japanese and we also like Indian. We try about everything, but we go more often for Asian.

What are three things you always have in your refrigerator?

Ah, butter, organic butter, also eggs, and a bottle of wine.

And lastly where is your favorite city in the world to eat?

I love New York; it is the greatest eating town!