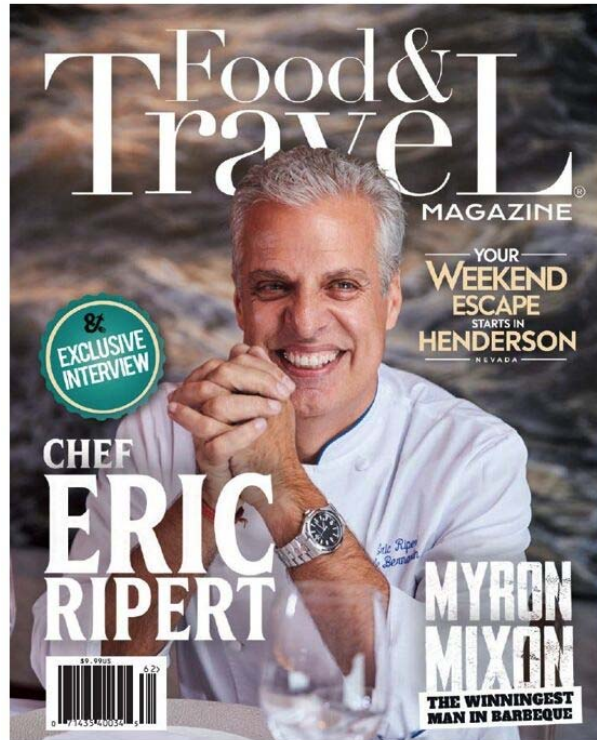




From Ocean to Plate: Chef Eric Ripert and the Art of Fish at Le Bernardin
by: Margie Goldsmith

Eric Ripert is the chef and co-owner of the three-Michelin-starred New York City restaurant Le Bernardin, considered the premier restaurant in the world. The renowned chef is also the author of nine cookbooks, has made multiple guest appearances on *Top Chef*, *Anthony Bourdain: A Cook's Tour*, and *Anthony Bourdain: No Reservations*, among others. He was also the host of *Avec Eric*, a culinary TV series that earned two Daytime Emmy® Awards.

Born in Antibes, as a very young child his family moved from France to Andorra, a small country between Spain and France. Ripert's mother, who worked during the day, would rise before dawn each morning and create three extravagant meals for the family, instilling in Eric a passion for food.

Since 1995, Eric Ripert has been the chef and co-owner of the three-Michelin-starred Le Bernardin, a restaurant celebrated globally for Chef Ripert's exquisite seafood. Chef Ripert is equally passionate about City Harvest, a non-profit which distributes meals to New Yorkers in need, on which he serves as vice chairman of the board and has supported for 30 years. I caught up with the indomitable chef at Le Bernardin in New York City.

When you were five years old, you knew you wanted to be a great chef. How did you know so early what you wanted to do in life?

Both my mother from Italy and grandmother from Provence were very good cooks, and I was allowed to be in the kitchen with them but not allowed to touch anything. They let me try the food and go with them to the markets. Also, at a very young age my parents took me to fine dining restaurants, and I was fascinated by that world and immediately saw myself as becoming the chef, being in a restaurant with a big team,

creating my vision, and having all the equipment I needed to create this experience for the clients. That was really my dream.

At 15, you left home for culinary school in Perpignan. Three years later, you moved to Paris and cooked at La Tour d'Argent. How does a culinary school graduate get to cook in France's finest restaurant?

So, I graduated and sent my résumé to 18 three-star Michelin restaurants and didn't get an answer. Then I went after all the two-star Michelin restaurants and received just one answer. They said, "We don't have a job." At the end of the summer, La Tour d'Argent told me they had a position for a *commis* [the bottom of the hierarchy in the kitchen]. So, at 17, I started working at La Tour d'Argent.

What was the most important thing you learned?

I learned discipline, I learned cleanliness, I learned humility, because you are really challenged. I learned the basics of cooking, and I was exposed to a lot of different techniques and products, and that was essential in my career. I think it's essential for anyone in our industry to have the maximum exposure when young, when you have access to all that and have the humility to take all those dirty jobs in the kitchen. It's basically the base of the pyramid that brings you to the top.

You next became a cook at the three-Michelin-starred Jamin, left to serve in the military, then returned as chef poissonnière under Chef Joël Robuchon. What was the most important thing he taught you?

Robuchon, considered the best chef in the world, taught me discipline. He pushed the envelope and was searching for perfection every day, knowing he would never achieve it. That was the biggest lesson he taught me other than learning more techniques and learning his disciplined cooking style.

What is it like to be a poissonnière?

It's a very challenging and difficult station because seafood is so delicate. You have to be a great technician. You learn the craft of making sauce and how to be extremely precise, because if you cook a steak, one minute doesn't really make a difference, but if you cook a piece of fish, one more minute makes it overcooked.

So, do you prefer cooking fish rather than meat or fowl?

When you cook meat, it's a very sensual experience, but when you cook seafood, it's a very precise experience. I like both but prefer the precision of the fish station, which requires tremendous discipline mastering the techniques to the highest level.

I've heard you describe yourself as an angry chef. When were you an angry chef?

I was an angry chef when I was very young in those kitchens in Europe. At the time, it was the culture of the kitchen. I was very abusive -- never physical, but I screamed and had tantrums and threw plates on the floor -- huge mistakes, and at a very young age. After a few months, I was miserable, my team was miserable, and we were losing all our talent in the kitchen. I changed completely, and that was more than 30-something

years ago. I'm very proud today to allow young people to blossom the way they want to blossom.

You moved to New York, worked briefly for David Bouley, and since 1985 you've been the chef and co-owner of Le Bernardin, where your specialty is seafood. How did you make seafood so famous?

When I came, Le Bernardin was already famous for seafood. I brought influences from the south of France, where I was born, and Spain, where I grew up; and I brought influences from other countries and continents because I love to travel. I brought that which I call “smart fusion” because it's not forced, it's like a natural fusion of influences coming from my own experiences.

What's your most important impact on Le Bernardin?

I think it is to create a mantra that says the fish is the star of the plate, so you create a style to go with that plate, to elevate the fish to the next level. The fish is not part of something else. We do everything to elevate the fish because we are a seafood restaurant. Halibut is very different than tuna, which is very different than lobster, which is very different than scallops. We customize all our efforts to elevate the product so that each fish is elevated differently because of its taste and texture.

What's the worst thing that one can do when cooking seafood?

If the fish is not very fresh when you buy it and if you don't know how to recognize it, as soon as you cook it your house is going to be very, very fishy, smelling bad. The first mistake is not to know when the fish is fresh. The second mistake, most of the time, is overcooking the fish. The third

mistake is overcomplicating the fish, which means the fish will be lost in between everything, and you won't taste the fish the way you should be tasting it.

What is the best dish that you ever made?

(laughs) I don't know. We have a signature dish that's a carpaccio of tuna with a guava-toasted baguette. That is probably the most significant signature dish that I have created. When I took it off the menu, people were seriously angry. I don't necessarily want to be remembered for that dish, but they think so, unfortunately.

When you're eating out in a foreign place, how do you like to eat?

Fine dining? Michelin-starred? Casual?

I go everywhere. I eat casual. I go to fine dining restaurants. If Michelin is in the country, I may go, but in many countries, Michelin doesn't exist or doesn't really have an imprint. I listen to the locals, from eating on the side of the road, to the market, to a restaurant in a corner of the street somewhere, to potentially fine dining. But it's never eating at a buffet in a hotel.

So, you are a practicing Buddhist. How did you become a Buddhist?

I became a Buddhist in the early '90s because the Dalai Lama received the Nobel Peace Prize and I was amazed by his acceptance speech. I kept reading it and then I started to buy his books. Then I started going to his teachings when he was in New York. Then I started to have other teachers, and I slowly became a serious practitioner.

In 2006, you opened Blue by Eric Ripert in the Ritz-Carlton Grand Cayman. What made you decide to do this and how often do you get there?

I go three or four times a year. They asked if I was interested. I didn't know Grand Cayman and said I wasn't very excited about opening another restaurant; I was very happy with Le Bernardin. I went there and they tricked me because they picked me up at the airport, put me on a boat with a case of champagne. We went to swim with the stingrays, drank the champagne, and they showed me the project, which was under construction. And then I asked them where I was signing. (laughs)

When did you first get involved with City Harvest? And why is it so important to you?

Workers and families have to choose between the rent and kids going to school, and they have to sacrifice food, so City Harvest is a huge deal in New York City. As you know, 1.5 million people make less than \$75,000 a year. And City Harvest has an amazing mission because they rescue food that will go into the garbage. They rescue perfectly fresh and delicious food and deliver it. I think it's fantastic to have such a mission. Last year, they delivered 86 million pounds of food to New Yorkers in need. I want to be involved with City Harvest because we make such a difference in our community.

You are by no means a fat chef. How do you stay so fit?

I'm very disciplined. In our industry, the danger is temptation. With the older generation, a lot of chefs indulged too much in food and alcohol. My generation observed them, and we knew that's not good. I believe people

in the kitchen are more conscientious today that you cannot abuse your body and not be disciplined and then perform well at the level you want to perform. Also, in terms of health, you cannot age properly and not have health issues. My lifestyle is very simple and disciplined. I walk from my house through Central Park to Le Bernardin every morning. I walk the stairs on the floors between the offices and the kitchen. Every morning, I do push-ups and sit-ups, and some weights.

What do you want your legacy to be?

I never thought about my legacy. I don't do things for legacy, but I have my mantra -- one for the future and one for myself. My mantra is: be yourself and do the right thing. And by following that direction, I'm creating my own legacy.