

Guy Savoy and Vanilla de Tahiti Buzz

Written by Margaret Kemp

Like all great chefs Guy Savoy (** Michelin – 19/20 Gault Millau +++) with more awards than you can shake a fragrant vanilla stick at, appreciates and demands the best products. And, talking vanilla Savoy discovered the best in the world, it arrived by post from Tahiti last year grabbed by Savoy's chef patissier, because the envelope had a fragrant aroma. "When I looked at it and rubbed it on my hand I knew it was going to be the best, I immediately made a vanilla ice cream and, as there was only an e-mail address, I got on line immediately and ordered", says Savoy's chef patissier Hugues Pouget. And Pouget knows quality when he sees it, being Champion de France des Desserts 2003.

"It's perfect for blending into so many dishes, not just desserts and ice creams", says Savoy. And word gets round, one by one all the superchefs are tapping into the vanilla syndrome: Robuchon, Senderens, Ducasse, Passard and Co. using at least 3 kilos a year.



But just where did the Vanilla come from so romantically in that little envelope? Meet Alain Abel a handsome ex-male nurse from Toulon who was working in a hospital in Tahiti, at the other end of the world. In Paris last week to taste the lunch that Guy Savoy and his team had created, based on his fragrant shiny black pods, Abel explains.

"I was visiting Uturoa on the tiny isle of Raiatea and wandering along the high street was fascinated by the aroma of vanilla coming from a tiny boutique. Without realising it I had stumbled on Jeanne Chane the most powerful and savvy person in the Tahitian vanilla trade: "The Vanilla Queen".

Jeanne, of Chinese origin, was born on the island. She welcomed me into her shop told me she had been in vanilla all her life. Admiral Ferdinand-Alphonse Hamelin apparently brought the first vanilla plants in 1848 and it has been cultivated here since 1880. Jacques Chirac enjoyed a tender Tete de Veau à la vanille on a visited to Tahiti in 1993 and, in 1995, Madame Chane was awarded the prestigious Chevalier de l'Ordre du Mérite Agricole for services to vanilla.

Something clicked inside me as I sat at the feet of this incredible woman, that day my life changed: it was the start of my life in vanilla”.

Abel, who says his medical training was no use at all in his new life, linked up with two partners, Michel Bissol and Yannick Wong, to buy La Vanillere, a plantation located in a beautiful valley, a short boat ride from Bora-Bora, with amazing volcanic outcroppings as a backdrop. We gathered up the wild vanilla vines growing behind the property, and were helped by Jeanne, who adopted me as her spiritual son, voila!”

To-day La Vanillere is flourishing on this paradise island, there are four large green houses and many fascinated visitors. The plants grow in long, narrow beds bordered with cement, gravel walkways for drainage. “It’s like wine, the answer is in the soil, le terroir. We are totally organic and make our own compost. It takes fourteen months for the first orchids to flower on the vanilla plants, the pollination is a meticulous process, all done by hand”, explains Abel. This year, because of weather conditions they only expect to harvest 5 or 6 tonnes. The price in Europe is about 230€-270€ per kilo for shiny, fat, flexible sun dried, hand picked, perfumed pods that have a floral fragrance and fruity taste.

So Guy Savoy’s lunch “Vanilla de Tahiti” kicked off (he’s a rugby man, remember?) with a glass of Champagne Guy Savoy, perhaps a distant taste of vanilla, certainly in the tiny porcelain pot of gazpacho, vanilla powder on the side, and mini- vanilla stuffed tomato. Salmon was lightly steamed with jus “vanilla-reglisse” and brochette of legumes. We drank Condrieu “Cuvee de Breze” 2005 Louis Cheze. The main was pavé of beef, carottes confites aux moutardes and a tiny shiny cabbage stuffed with vanilla flavoured beef entrails, went well with the Virgile 2001 Coteaux du Languedoc.



Now we get to Hugues and his pudds. Sublime: first, three tasters of crème anglaise made with different vanillas, then a cloud of millefeuille the layers filled with vanilla cream. The

secret, according to Hugues is to start making the pate- feuill te five days before, and fold it daily! Yes, well think I'll let Hugues deal with that, I could never get a result approaching his, and don't write and tell me to buy frozen, my freezer is not connected, my contribution to the eco-system, please note Mr Gore.

To finish, a quenelle of Marron-Chataigne from Piedmont, Hazlenut on a soft biscuit base, hot madeleines, vanilla macaroons and vanilla marshmallows. Washed down with Passito de Pantelleria 2003 Ben Ry .

“There's a lot of secrets to producing good vanilla, you need passion, patience and humility, I learn something new every day”, admits Abel. “But I'm not going to tell you any secrets”, he grins. Savoy is thrilled, wants Abel to consider producing “Grands Crus” vanilla. “Just as they do with Bordeaux”.

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Shut Saturday lunch, Sunday & Monday

Average spend 170 + wine

Valet Parking

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