

So much more than a cookery class...

By [Robert Giorgione](#) on March 26, 2011

Atelier is a word. Actually, Atelier is a French word. It sounds sexy and conjures up some amazing things visually. Essentially, however, when translated into English it simply means a **workshop**. Moreover, I reckon once translated, it tends to lose a little bit of its Gallic *frisson*. But when you really think about it, the very word means something real and tangible. On the other hand, and perhaps more boringly, when workshop is mentioned, a vision of men, working tirelessly on their lathes or banging away on hunks of metal springs to mind. Alternatively, we think about a carpenter crafting something diligently out of a plank of wood with his intricate tools and making it into a wonderful sculpture or piece of furniture. In English, we do not consider using workshop in a culinary sense. It sounds far too clunky and straight-forward. We prefer to keep French words for that, probably due to tradition or because it just sounds much better and enigmatic. Either way, we do get a sense of genuine creativity. To my knowledge, the only chefs who have successfully used the word “**Atelier**” and encapsulate its ethos completely are **Joel Robuchon**, who has a worldwide empire of restaurants and the legendary **Ferran Adria** of *El Bulli* fame, who has his “**Taller**” – the Spanish word for it. You have to admit, with the latter, you do get more of a culinary inspiration blended with an innovative scientific boffin.

A workshop sounds much more practical. Actually, that is what it is – a place of work and a venue where the fruits of your labour are not only sold, but also can be experienced. Therefore, to refer to it in a culinary manner, makes perfect sense. Moreover, you pick up a real feeling of the artisan. [L’Atelier des Chefs](#) is a French concept. It all started back in 2004 in Paris, where the original cookery school was established. Over the years, it has grown into a very successful brand and business. Currently, there are more than a dozen L’Atelier des Chefs in France, where it has developed very well, yet still has kept firmly to its ethos of back to basics cooking and keeping it simple and achievable. They offer a variety of [cookery courses](#) and their experienced professional chefs will help you create delicious, everyday recipes. In addition, you can also make some purchases in their shops, which offer ingredients and products, all of which are integral to the concept.

The London branch of [L’Atelier des Chefs](#) was established in 2006 on Wigmore Street in Marylebone. When they finally made it over the Channel to London, the original team was entirely French. The only person who has remained from that team is **Andre Dupin**, the head chef, who is responsible for all the menus. Recently, I went along to have a chat with the **Managing Director Tom McNeile**. He has been there for a couple of years now and has

dramatically developed the brand, yet still wishes to promote their friendly and engaging way of offering a revolutionary cook and dine experience in Central London. After all, **L'Atelier des Chefs is so much more than just a cookery class**. In essence, it is where you can come along, engage, create, discover and learn.



Tom McNeile of L'Ateliers des Chefs London

Tom explained to me how “in the early days, it was quite hard to translate this concept, which was very successful in its own French homeland, yet make it easy for English people to understand.” Like an entrepreneurial restaurateur he has a keen eye for the business and certainly knows what his target market wants. Even with the constant need to keep your eye on the ball, remain consistent, but be innovative and exceed clients expectations, it is also quite easy to get ‘lost in translation’. Over the years, especially with regards to food and wine, many brands have been built up, yet then completely destroyed or mis-communicated and they have become diluted. Tom’s background actually is quite diverse, as he cut his teeth for many years working as a currency trader in the City. However, and most importantly, Tom is a real foodie at heart.

Moreover, as with any top chef, the brand has its ‘signature dishes’ of reliable, high standard offerings and he and his team delivers consistency, which any discerning client demands. For example, their **‘flagship’ course is the 30 minute “Cook, Eat and Run”**. This is the very foundation of their ethos and brand. Its simplicity, speed and accessibility completely underpins their business plan. **Tom describes: “The formula is to keep it simple and achievable. Anyone who comes in and experiences our course can cook a main course meal in just half an hour and then sit down and enjoy it afterwards all for £15. That is great value. On the next day, by e mail, you are then sent a link to the recipe which you have created.”** His enthusiasm was certainly making my mouth water.

In fact, L’Atelier des Chefs have an amazing book of recipes, including 220 videos in English and more interestingly a kind of iPhone app, which you can scan over the recipe and download it automatically to your Smartphone. This savvy yet accessible business model also contains **“The Widget”**, which enables you to download a free [recipe](#) and calendar. **Tom continued: “So, for**

instance, you wish to make your daily bread, bake some croissants for your breakfast and so on and you can do that. When it comes to a Friday, you may wish to cook a traditional fish pie or a wonderful dish such as a quick pan-fried sea bass with vegetables. At the weekend, you can even get the recipes for the classic Sunday roast hitting your inbox, so that you can make the preparations and sit down and enjoy the meals with your friends and family. Everything is based around humans and seasonality.”

The two kitchens are completely open plan and enclosed in glass. This transparency is also important to their ethos of having nothing to hide. Tom explained that: “We want to inspire people to come in and learn for themselves how to cook with the guidance of our professional chefs. We want them to gain confidence in themselves, to help develop their passion and enthusiasm for cooking and go away and wanting to re-create the dishes for themselves. In addition, we want to inspire confidence and a belief in the quality and the product. Everything we use has to have this transparency and openness and must not be intimidating. Here we are dealing with real people and with a genuine top quality product. It takes time to build up that trust.” Moreover, he goes on: “We prefer to use fresh, everyday ingredients and seasonal produce, which is available for the consumer to purchase regularly in the supermarkets, delicatessens and local farmers markets and they then feel confident in themselves to cook these quick, easy and nutritious meals at home.”



Cook, Eat and Run

As well as the flagship [30 minute “Cook, Eat and Run” course](#), they offer a wide range and variety of other courses. “Everyday Easy” – one hour £36 is for two simple recipes perfect for cooking time and time again at home. “Cook and Dine” – 90 minutes £54 is to learn to create a delicious 3 course menu, whereby you can take your pick from Gastro pub, French Classics, Asian Flavours and many more. “All About” – 2 hours £72 is the icing on the cake, which focuses on specific cuisines, ingredients or culinary specialities, including knife skills, macaroon and fresh pasta making, The cherry on the top is the “Grande Cuisine Masterclass” – 4 hours £144 containing original recipes and expert tips helping you make the most of the very best

seasonal ingredients each month. They also sell amazing products, including all the latest kitchen gadgetry, pots, pans, knives and cookbooks.

I have been there a few times and the staff are always courteous and efficient. Last year I attended a master class, which was great fun and it involved making various desserts with a famous brand of sweet Sherry. There are more details about that event, including a video blog [here](#). Consequently, I have also been to [Divertimenti](#) on Marylebone High Street. For me though, the big difference between Divertimenti and [L'Atelier des Chefs](#), in my opinion, is the former is more of a kitchen shop with a small cookery school in the basement, but the latter is an engaging and inspirational environment and cookery school with a retail business incorporated.

Owing to my love of cooking, I thought I would go along and try out one of the courses on offer. In fact I started learning how to cook by watching my father and grandmother at a very young age and worked in his restaurant. Wine was purely my hobby, which later I turned into my career, when I came to London over fifteen years ago. Chefs still inspire me and are my heroes. However, over the years, I have developed my confidence, knowledge and ability and sincerely believe in the importance of taste. At [L'Atelier des Chefs](#) you are encouraged to taste and discover various things. They do not blind you with science and bombard you with too much technical information because that would be intimidating, yet, at the same time it is very important to be realistic. For instance, everyone does not share the same ability and skill and all the domestic kitchens are very different to the 'all-guns-blazing' appliances found in a professional restaurant kitchen. You learn about why preparation (a.k.a ***mise en place***) and timing are key elements to success. You learn how and why things work well together, when prepared and cooked using different methods and the effects of taste and flavour. As a [sommelier](#), when I am tasting a wine, I am always thinking about what type of food with which to match it and vice versa. However, it is also very important for me to know how that dish is prepared.

Recently, I went along and tried out one of the "Cook, Eat and Run" courses for myself. It was great fun and we sat down together literally after 30 minutes and enjoyed a delicious lunch which we had made ourselves. We felt so proud. The following day, the recipe for Asian salmon with spicy noodles hit my inbox. Even if I was a complete novice, I would be encouraged to cook it for myself. The chef at L'Atelier des Chefs very patiently and carefully showed us how to do things properly and taught us a few useful tips too. While we sat on the convivial dining table and enjoyed our meal, I discussed with the others which wine would we drink with that dish. They do serve a limited selection of wines there and also it is a great venue for corporate events and tastings. Our creative juices were now flowing and our renewed confidence inspired us to consider an Australian or New Zealand [Riesling](#) from somewhere such as Clare Valley or Marlborough. With its vibrant, citrus-packed flavour and mouth-watering acidity it would have been the perfect match for the spicy and flavoursome Asian salmon with noodles.

Hmmm...I am making myself hungry again now. My book **“An Epicurean Odyssey – A Road Trip Around New Zealand”** will be published in late Spring 2011. Please check [here](#) for further details.

To follow my tweets and updates on **Twitter**, please click [here](#). As for me, the [epicurean odyssey](#) still continues...

n.b an edited version of this article will be published in the April/May issue of the [Marylebone Journal](#).



Inside L'Atelier des Chefs London

