



By Rick Maedje (USA - Civ)



There are hundreds if not thousands of French countryside Bed & Breakfast (B&B) getaways offering excellent accommodations, sterling service, and exquisite cuisine. They are increasingly popular and people visit these establishments over and over in search of a quiet holiday. The point is of course to get away from it all.

More and more travelers though report to us they become restless a few days in to their longed for quietness and are searching for something different other than exhausting tours or outings that when all is said and done usually seem to leave one more tired than when you left home. There should be a middle ground. We all want a great location, great food, terrific accommodations, but we want *to do* something. Something not too taxing but nevertheless worthwhile. Something we haven't done before. Consequently, that is exactly what we went in search of for the Benelux SHAPE community. What we discovered knocked our socks off.

Nestled in the Brittany / Loire region of France is an establishment that is top for accommodations, location, and cuisine. Notch. The food is out of this world superb, but as it turns out, the food is excellent for a very good reason. It is designed and crafted and indeed cooked personally by a chef with 30 years experience who was formally trained at Easterly Culinary in the U.K. after which he did a residency under the tutelage of the very chef who cooked for Lady Diana. This is a first



class master of the culinary arts. After working at 5 star hotels around the world, he opened what became a very successful and highly rated restaurant in Wales. Owning and running a top establishment requires an incredible amount of work and dedication, and for years he and his wife did just that.

“I look at pictures of myself back then, recalls Chef Maynard Harvey, and while I was a young guy, I had bags under my eyes. I looked 50 at 30. We needed a break.” So, deciding he had enough of the fast pace of owner/chef and restaurateur, he and his wife sold his restaurant and opened up a quaint B&B in France to settle into a slower pace of life.

The cooking bug wouldn't leave him. And just as he had been taught and in turn taught so many budding chef's working under him over the years, Maynard began building the facilities and designing courses that people could enroll in to learn how to really and truly cook while in fact (*getting away from it all*). This is what attracted us to investigate this establishment.

There are cooking schools, and then *there are cooking schools*. We most definitely learned in researching this topic the distinctions between those run by chefs with no formal training or real world experience and those that are. The other important quotient is whether other professional chef's also come to a particular school to hone their skills. In the case of Chef Maynard's Walnut Creek Cookery School, this was without a doubt evident. The professionals were coming to Walnut Creek to hone their skills under Chef Maynard.

Indeed, while I was there, my class was comprised of professional chef's learning from Maynard while they took breaks from their own jobs on luxury yachts and restaurants. One of the students I became friends with was Nepalese but lived in Poland where he and his brother own two wildly successful establishments in Warsaw. In short, professional chefs come to learn here too.

Knowing that leads to the question for a home cook like myself who along with one of the other students was in the same boat. We simply wanted to gain a better understanding of the craft. Would we be intimidated by our class mates or in over our head. The answer to that concern was a resounding no.





Maynard has designed the course to begin with the basics for everyone. Before we ever got started, Maynard, who limits the actual class size to 5 in order to give personal attention to everyone, queries each participant to glean what they want out of the class and where they might be in their cooking abilities. He then personalizes the teaching. It was not lost on me after completing the course that even the most unexperienced cook could successfully complete the class and take with them capabilities and knowledge exceeding some of the professional cooks working in restaurants today. It is that substantial of a learning experience.

What became increasingly evident was that not only was Maynard teaching me, but those three professional chefs in the class were also sharing their secrets. It was a win - win for a home cook like myself. I brought home a stack of notes that I quickly put together on my desktop and now keep in my kitchen. Frankly that's the most valuable thing I have in the kitchen.

One thing is certain, Walnut Creek is *not* a weekend recipe school where all too commonly one learns only ingredients but gains no real understanding of what it is you are doing or why a recipe actually works. Instead, Maynard's school teaches you cooking on a level that makes sense and is useful so that once you leave, you not only know how to chop, peel, blanch, smoke on a stovetop, puree, crush, sauté, sweat, season, roast, sous vide, avoid splitting, cook the perfect scallop, sear exquisite pork tenderloin or chicken breast, but you will most importantly learn how to create the bases, clarify stocks, and create the all-important mire poix used as the foundation for so many dishes and meals that you can then go on to design yourself and improve upon.

As well, you'll learn pastries, desserts, sorbets, parfaits, breads, ice cream, and fine decorative garnishing accoutrements. On one of the afternoons Maynard brings in another chef whose specialty is Patisserie. You will unequivocally learn how to do croissants the way professionals do them as well as macaroons shown to you by a person who has won awards in France for making them. You just can't get this kind of teaching easily. Students aren't just being shown a recipe, they are taught how and the all-important why things are done. That's really learning.



Here's the most surprising part. Excellent cooking is not complicated. In fact, it's very simple incredibly so. I was floored at how a professional chef like Maynard had honed down accomplishing what virtually every cook book I've ever tried to learn from couldn't do for me. He simplified it. As well, you learn time management. Maynard shows you simple prep techniques so that you don't wind up running around the kitchen at the last moment in a mess. I was amazed at how relaxing and enjoyable cooking could be once you know what you are actually doing in a kitchen.

Chef Maynard stresses, "Taste. Taste. Taste. Walk around with a spoon in your pocket as you work on dishes," and by the end of the course, you do start to have an opinion based on your learning. You naturally start to refine your understanding of taste and seasoning. It is definitely a confidence builder.

That said, the question arises for us and our readers as we search for bonafide activities to do while on holiday, whether this 'get away from it all' experience is actually relaxing or whether it's more like work? A fair question. This is where the genius, of Walnut Creek Cookery comes into play and is indicative of why Maynard saw success in the service side as well of the restaurant business. The service was impeccable. You'd think that at a cooking school you would wash a plate or two, but I never washed anything I didn't want to do. I never had to pick-up a plate after a meal. I was always asked if I needed a drink at our meals and aperitif times, and we were served like we were at a Five-Star restaurant. Come to think of it, that is exactly the service we received. The B&B side of the equation was up to par with the quality of the cuisine, and while the classes were intense and required your attentiveness, once the day was done, you ate like a king and were served like a king.





During the day where some of what you cook becomes your own lunch or dinner, Maynard was still your personal chef for each of them. The meals are outstanding as a result. It isn't until the last day, after having been thoroughly taught a mind boggling range of skills that you are given a tray of vegetables and herbs and meats and told to do what you've been trained to do: design a meal. While it seems daunting, you button down the hatches and realize you now have the training to tackle such a challenge.

"How can I make this dish better," is Chef Maynard's motto. We students definitely had some opinions on how we could improve our own dishes, but they were opinions now based on knowledge and better understanding. This really is an experience that you can take away something that will stay with you and you can enjoy long afterwards.

If that wasn't enough, in order to break up the week, we were offered an outing to an operating traditional French windmill that grinds buckwheat for Five-Star restaurants around the world. It was a great throwback to an era gone by that is making a comeback today.

I do not believe there exists a cooking class that could be more perfect for the average person nor the professional. It is utterly clear that Maynard has employed his own motto to his school. It is without hesitation that of all the establishments and locations I have had the pleasure of reviewing for SHAPE readers, I think it is fair to say this was one of the most rewarding travel experiences I have ever had. I highly recommend this establishment. This world make a terrific Christmas or birthday gift.

Chef Maynard speaks English and his wife Freya speaks both French and English and can be contacted at the following:

<http://www.walnutgrovecookery.com>

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They also have a You Tube video that was very helpful for me in making the determination to go. It can be viewed on their Facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/walnutgrovecookery>

