

Awards of Excellence 2016: Overseas Development Program (ODP)

Participants – Chef Brandon Foo (KitchenAid Chef of the Year 2015)

Travel Experience

My concerns before I went on the trip was, 'How would be able to handle being in a 3 Michelin-star restaurant, when all the staff are French-speaking, and I'm the only Singaporean Chinese?' Régis Marcon is known by two titles – either as "mushroom hunter" or as the President of Bocuse d'Or. He's known for his passion for his craft, enthusiasm for all things culinary and friendliness.

I was in Saint Bonnet Le Froid, a small village located in the central of France, in the Auvergne region. The department is Haute Loire. The area is forested, and near Puy, where I learnt how to handle mushrooms, lentils and all kinds of blue cheese. One of the best and most memorable experiences was when I was given the chance to visit the local market with Chef Régis' son, Jacques Marcon. I had to wake up early, at 4.30 am. The market is located in Saint-Etienne, with a sprawling area of over 30 stalls. The market has been operating in the Saint-Etienne neighbourhood for centuries, and it has cemented its reputation for selling the best fresh produce in the region. While some traders offer hot food and ready-to-go fare, others specialise pantry items from cured meats to preserves to the best craft wines from around the region. Given the variety of goods on sale, the market draws an equally diverse clientele, where tourists like me get to rub shoulders with home-cooks and top chefs sourcing for top quality ingredients. Nevertheless, the best experience was having the chance to dine in Chef Régis' 3 Michelin-star restaurant, where he serves high quality French avant-garde cuisine. I don't mean to be dramatic, but for me, it was like being in heaven that night. My only bad experience was that I missed the train to Geneva on my last day in Saint Bonnet Le Froid, but Chef Régis was kind enough to drive me to Lyon to catch up with another train from there. I was extremely touched, never having met a down-to-earth chef like him. In the car we were even sharing our cooking experiences like how he achieved a gold medal in Bocuse d'Or culinary competition in 1995.

Working with Chef Régis and Jacques Marcon at Saint Bonnet Le Froid is the best possible training for anyone wanting to enter the industry could get. Chef Régis and Jacques treat every employee as an individual, making sure that every member of staff moves in the right direction and gets a chance to prove themselves. The result of the effort they put into their organisation – regardless of its 3 Michelin -star status – shows that the sky's the limit, if you're dedicated enough. Even their staff have inspired me with their energy, passionate and enthusiasm.

From my experience, I have a word of advice; forget being a celebrity chef for a moment. If you aspire to be a professional chef, expect years of working more than 50 hours a week, during nights, on weekends and even holidays, for limited pay, and in high stress situations. Upon my return to Singapore, I plan on teaching and sharing all my new-found skills and knowledge with my fellow colleagues and juniors. I even plan to put my own spin on some of the dishes that I cooked in Chef Régis' restaurant and add it to my own menu. I am excited that we made this connection through our work and hope it is the start of something that'll only keep growing.