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Celebrity chefs add spice to culinary courses

There is plenty of fine food and wine on the masters menu

Stephen Hoare

Bocconi University in Milan has served up what it claims is Europe's first masters degree in fine food and beverages. Taught in English, the MA takes the management expertise of Bocconi's internationally ranked business school and seasons it with teaching from a top class chef school and Italy's University of Gastronomic Sciences.

Bocconi's 22 MA students spend a week at ALMA, La Scuola Internazionale di Cucina Italiana, near Parma. Massimiliano Bruni, the course director, is enthusiastic: "We want our students to realise what it means to run a top restaurant, or what it means as a supplier to partner a top restaurant. We give them the experience of a chef, the experience of looking for perfection."

The course attracts international students who have experience of managing production, sales and distribution of luxury food and wine, but equally it can give a food focus to young catering professionals.

Bruni says: "My ambition is to create talented managers with a real passion for food and beverage and a culture of excellence." The MA has attracted students from Europe, China, America, India and Japan.

In France's Champagne region, Rheims Management School has just launched a two-year masters programme in fine wine. The course combines business theory with the nuts and bolts management of luxury food and wine production. David Menival, the course director, believes increased international competition is forcing a cottage industry to think global. "Fine wines are part of big luxury brands that are competing in international and emerging markets. There are a lot of good home-grown wines in China, for example. How do we in France get a share of that market?"

Some UK universities are responding to the media-driven obsession with fine dining by taking postgraduate degrees in catering and hospitality to a new level — a format best described as "*MasterChef* meets master of arts". Brighton University's MA in culinary arts was launched two years ago by the celebrity chef Rick Stein, who cut the ribbon on the Eastbourne campus's new culinary arts studio. In the past year Oxford Brookes has uncorked a new MSc in international wine management. Its MScs in hospitality and tourism are backed by a research centre, Oxford Gastronomica, whose visiting fellows include Raymond Blanc, Prue Leith and Stein.

The demand for postgraduates is fed by a buoyant luxury food and beverage sector that so far is proving recession-proof. Fine dining is now a recognised part of the hotel experience and managers frequently run complex operations that might include an haute cuisine restaurant and a conference centre.

In the UK, the *Michelin Guide* lists 98 one-star restaurants, 16 two-star and just four which fall into the three-star category.

Career openings are as varied as the students themselves. Ashley Davis, 28, a sous chef at the one-star Arbutus restaurant in Soho, London, studies two days a week at Brighton University. For the rest of the week he works from 7.30am till midnight managing a team of a dozen chefs, constantly checking on the quality and delivery of fine food.

Davis, from Melbourne, sees an MA as a way to fast-track his career. "These days you need to offer more if you want to get to the top. In five years' time I see myself running a restaurant but I don't want to spend all of my career cooking over a hot stove."

But how useful is an MA in culinary arts to an employer? Brighton focuses on practical topics such as nutrition and food, culture and society. Davis, who is writing a 4,000-word essay on the impact of molecular gastronomy in shaping today's fine dining experience, plans to write a detailed business plan as his dissertation.

Peter Odgers, the Brighton course director, says: "When added to a person's managerial experience, a masters degree will help to give them an extra push."

Jorn Sorensen, 41, a Danish MSc graduate of Oxford Brookes and a qualified chef, has gone down the catering consultancy route. Sorensen works for Tricon Foodservice Consultants in London, a company that plans catering services, from arts venues to offices in Canary Wharf. "The masters has helped me to take my skills to a higher strategic level," he says.