



Hidden Gems of Singapore's Oldest Independent Fine Dining Restaurant

With over 15 food concepts in five countries (with more franchises coming), it's hard to recall a time when we didn't know the name Les Amis. Yet the local-born restaurant group's success birthed from its flagship French fine-dining establishment despite tumultuous challenges, have ceaselessly pleased finicky celebrities and media doyennes for two decades.

This year, they mark their 21st birthday on March 15, with the reins of Les Amis Executive Chef Sebastien Lepinoy whose forte lies in classic French cuisine with a touch of Asian aesthetics, with heavenly desserts by Pastry Chef Cheryl Koh to harmonize the meal. We felt it was a good occasion to mine the team for some of the hidden gems behind closed doors of Singapore's first independent fine-dining restaurant before it closes for its month-long facelift till mid-April 2015.

LE PONCLET BUTTER

One of the most covetable gems Les Amis boasts is the Le Ponclet butter – only served in less than 20 restaurants in the world. "I always focus on ingredients, not just trends of cooking," Chef Sebastien said. "I had to send in my resume to get this! Maybe I got it because I'm always in the kitchen and I run only 1 restaurant so he trusts the standard of quality."

There are 3 bio-certified dairy stockbreeders in Brittany whom Les Amis works very closely with. Here, dairy cows are allowed to graze and feed in open fields with plenty of natural herbs. They have also co-invested with the breeders to buy only ancient Celtic races such as Froment du Leon and Jersey, and crossed-bred cows that have almost gone extinct. The milk from breeders is never mixed – instead, they work with each cream, obtained from raw milk, individually, to conserve specific flavours and tastes from their "grand cru" dairy producers.

Warm milk is collected straight from the cows, letting the cream and milk separate naturally without cooling down the milk. Hence, it 'cultures' naturally to develop more flavours before they skim off the cream to make butter that is raw and natural with no added preservatives. The meticulously churned butter is then rinsed with water from surrounding Arree mountains, dried carefully, and acidified with precise temperature in the Ponclet workshop.

"One major difference between normal butter and Le Ponclet is that the latter is non-pasteurised so the flavor tastes like strong raw cream with amazing creamy texture. When you pasteurize it, milk has to be heated at 65 degrees, and it destroys flavor. Another difference is that Le Ponclet is entirely hand-made," Chef Sebastien explains.

Its final product is unique – between Spring and Autumn, it is golden yellow, from the herb-based diet of cows. In winter, it is pale yellow from a heavy diet of hay, barley and beetroots.

INGREDIENTS FROM FRANCE

The wild fishes that are flown in 3 times a week are caught only by an individual line method (A La Ligne) near an island called île d'Yeu, just off the Vendée coast of western France. A fisherman goes out in a small boat at night and catches less than 5 fishes for only 4 restaurants in the world, before selling it in the morning. This method reduces bruising and tension, as compared to trawling (Au Chalut), and guarantees freshness as compared to bigger boats that sail longer.

"Wild fishes are like sportsmen, they swim in deeper waters so the texture is harder and this determines the quality", said Chef Sebastien. He continues to explain that the water is usually more polluted in a farm, and the fishes are often

fed antibiotics, hence it is not very healthy to consume. Chef Sebastien focuses on John Dory, Sea Bass and Turbot which in his opinion are the 3 best fishes to export, unlike the Dover Sole or Rouget where their quality is often compromised when shipped to Singapore.

In one dish, he cooks the Sea Bass with butter that melts into each layer of springy meat, before drizzling an orange-hued sauce of tomato paste, vinegar and Tobasco sauce that add a subtle spiciness for our Singaporean palate. He then finishes with a sprinkle of dried shrimps and asparagus. The tangy sauce adds some punch without drowning the flavour of the fish when you sink your teeth into its soft buttery center, while the shrimp adds a 3-dimensional texture with a crunch.

Other ingredients flown in from France include vegetables like Artichoke and organic lemon from “Menton” – dubbed the best lemon in the world.

WINES

Boasting the widest wine selection in Singapore (4000 bottles), it’s no surprise that Les Amis’s two award-winning wine cellars cradle over \$3m worth of prized gems such as the exclusive 2011 Thibault Liger Belair made solely for Les Amis (Pour Les Amis). On top of that, Les Amis’s sister company Vinum Fine Wines grant access to many private vineyards in France.

CHARVET ISLAND COOKING SUITE

On her 21st birthday this 15 March, Les Amis will undergo an exciting one-month long facelift that will cost approximately \$1.5m, reopening mid-April with a one-in-the-world eco-friendly cooking suite from France and a slightly revamped look with expanded seating to 100 guests from its current capacity of 76. The customised and handmade Charvet island cooking suite is designed entirely by Chef Sebastien and will boast an oven, 4 stoves and 1 hot cabinet to keep the plates warm.

Les Amis will offer 3 lunch menus post-renovation. The “Express” menu (3-course) will cater to busy executive who are looking for quick meal at \$55++ per guest and the 4-course menu at \$80++ for guests to select their preferred appetizers, main course and dessert from a list of signature dishes. Diners who have the luxury of time can have the complete fine-dining experience with the 7-course menu priced at \$145++.

Dinner will include a 6-course menu (including Amuse Bouche) at \$165++, a 7-course menu (including Amuse Bouche) at \$220++, and the 8-course menu (including Amuse Bouche and a cheese platter) at \$280++.

For more information, visit www.lesamis.com.sg

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For print, radio and TV (media) enquiries, please contact

Ms Lin Ziqi

Marketing Communications & Public Relations Executive, Les Amis Group

T: 6733 7741 | E: linziqi@lesamis.com.sg

For digital media enquiries, please contact

Ms Chevonne Cheng

Public Relations Associate, Les Amis Group

T: 6735 2285 | E: chevonnecheng@lesamis.com.sg