

Paul Bocuse

Lyon, France

Every now and then, life gives you a reward. Maybe it's the daily lottery number, or you got upgraded to 1st class on a flight. Just something that is enough to make the journey a little more enjoyable. As I sit here in the midst of a heat wave, I can look back with contentment on the early January gift that came my way. I had accepted a relatively below average ski season. Poor December conditions and lack of enthusiasm were conspiring to a lack luster year. Then I received the call: "Hey, can you fill in on the France trip?" A 10 second review of my schedule, and I was ready to go. Little did I know my fallen ski brethren had only reserved the 3 star accommodations. It was unbearable; in the evening we watched with envy, our faces pressed against the icy window as the elite members in the 4 star enjoyed exquisite dining, while we suffered through our mediocre mush. Then one evening I was invited to the realm for cocktails. A few members of the elite had reserved a large table at some fancy, schmancy restaurant during our stay in Lyon, and they needed some bodies to fill the table. I was questioned on my wardrobe, and having the bare minimum attire, I was invited to partake. So who or what was this *Paul Bokoosy*? Well, let's start with legendary. I'm not one to part with a dollar very easily, unless it's for a ski trip, but another brass ring was coming up, so I accepted. Our day in Lyon did not work out too well due to transportation complications. I made a dash to the main shopping promenade. This is a town I definitely want to come back and explore. My little excursion found many dining as well as shopping venues. But I had already made the commitment, so it was back to the hotel a little early for preparation for the evening. I waited in the hotel lobby for the balance of our party, and learned that another group from our trip was also headed off to *Paul Blackuse*. Maybe this place does have something. Little did I know, this 74-year-old man had revolutionized the cooking world with his nouvelle cuisine. Coming from a family of chefs dating back to 1765 Bookoos had emerged during the French restaurant evolution following the war as the premier gastronomist of the time. We sardined into a taxi-van for a short ride to the restaurant. As we approached, one could see the well-lit signature sign identifying the place, *PAUL BOCUSE*. Well, I don't think I will ever forget that name now, or those "PB" initials. You walk through the courtyard, and approach the grand entrance hall, glass doors labeled with PB knobs, and there, for the first time, I gazed on the portrait of the illustrious Paul Bocuse. I looked over to the Rotunda dining room. Truly grand, 3-foot candelabras on the table, ceiling to floor drapery, statuettes, artwork, a forbearing message to check your credit card limit. We were seated in the Fireside dining room, equal in décor. There were two pre-fixe menu options: the light fare or the whole enchilada. Our entire party selected the full menu, but first a bottle of champagne was ordered to celebrate our weeklong escapades, and the beginning of an exquisite meal. A toast was called, and we congratulated each other on a fine week past. It was then I noticed the master himself, adorning the standard chef's attire, posing in the next room for pictures with another group. Shortly we were graced with his presence. I will say my first impression was very favorable, here in one of the most celebrated restaurants in the dining capital of the world, was the master chef greeting his guests, posing for pictures, not much different then a few of my local hangouts. That was until someone got the idea that he was a genie, and all you had to do was rub his belly, and you would be given 3 wishes, one of which would be a free meal! I can tell you, this is not true, but if you ever want a man's attention, it is through the stomach. I must say, my memory of the courses has waned, and even checking with some others has revealed a similar result. Gee, how could I remember 10 courses, I can't even remember the names of ski runs! So rather than try, let me sum it up. What ever you may have heard about leaving a French restaurant hungry does not apply here. Start with bread, soup (look there's PB in the bottom of your bowl) then the 1st appetizer. Take a break and stroll to the restrooms. Peek into the kitchen on your way and look at the next generation of master chefs diligently preparing the balance of your meal. And if you have a few euros left maybe even pick up a PB souvenir. A favorite is the "Last Supper" superimposed with PB at the table. The next bottle of wine has arrived just in time for appetizer #2, did I forget the ensalade? Are you going to finish that? OK, on to the Pisces. And use the right utensil, we don't want any faux pas here. The Carne arrives, or was it the Fowl, all I remember now is the next wine arrived. The crowd is getting loose, we are now observing other patrons; is that his daughter, look at that dress, nice tattoo, heh that guy doesn't have a tie and jacket! We need more wine for the cheese tray. 1st dessert arrives (yes I said 1st), pick one or two. Now would be a good time for another trip to the restroom, as the chocolate tray is coming. Soon the bill will arrive and you definitely want to feel sweet. Can I borrow some Euros? The midnight hour has struck and it's time for our return. Our taxi has been called, and we exit through the grande doors. The new driver who does not speak English (or so he says) explains that we cannot all return in the same vehicle, you must take two taxis. But

we came in one, how could this be? Well this cabby is not going to push us Americans around, we came in one, we leave in one. Oh boy, look what we started. Cabby #2 says, OK I'll take all of you, but I need permission from #1, huh? This could take awhile. So we await the outcome, I should have brought a cigar. Well the determination eventually paid off, and we are on our way back to the hotel, in one taxi. All in all, you couldn't ask for a more enjoyable evening. Great food and wine enjoyed with the best of company. Keep your glass half full, and your tips downhill, next season will arrive shortly.

~Larry Ortmann
with Linda Riccardi contributing
Lift Lines - September 2002