An Interview with Sergio Schoener
Chef and Co-owner of L’Ardoise, Cannes, France

KSN: How did you come up with the name of your restaurant?

SS: It came to us when we were looking for plates. We didn’t want to use tablecloths, since everyone does. We saw some slate (l’ardoise) and said to ourselves: this is what we’ll use! It’s our support for both the plates (instead of placemats) and the initial service (on top of each piece of slate a square white plate is set at an angle, like a diamond).

KSN: Why the red and black decor?

SS: The restaurant already had red walls, which was the only good thing about it. The rest we put together in fifteen days. We were advised to take this spot, since it’s so close to the Palais des Congrès. People can walk right over. We’re different from restaurants in the districts that cater to tourists, like Suquet and the Carré d’Or.

KSN: Describe your cooking.

SS: My food is very simple. It’s all about the products, the quality of the products. Respecting products is important. After that, you have to master cooking to make them right, to give them value. You also have to give your absolute best. What is important in every trade is the heart. If you add heart, you add something meaningful.

KSN: How do you come up with ideas for your menu?

SS: My ideas come from the market. Technique comes first. Then I go to the market and see things and decide what will work well together.

KSN: You go to the market every day. Is this typical of other chefs in Cannes?

SS: No. A few maybe, but I don’t see many of them there. I have a relationship with the market, with the producers. I know about their troubles, their habits, their goods. I talk to the farmers, find out what they are bringing in over the next few days. Now I can get priority for any new products they bring. They’ll reserve them for me.

KSN: You use a number of Asian ingredients in your cooking, such as the coconut milk served with cod.

SS: Yes, poaching in milk adds a sweetness to the fish. The dish is rather sweet, but it ends up just right; the coconut milk marries well with the cod. I add orange zest and ginger confit. I also add parsnips and blue potatoes, les pommes chinoises, also called les pommes violettes. I try to find market produce that isn’t run of the mill, which is harder in winter.

KSN: Do you have a signature dish, or is there one particular ingredient you really enjoy working with?

SS: I don’t have one specific dish. I like everything, and I eat everything. There is nothing I don’t like. I like everything because each product is different, each one has its own meaning.

KSN: Tell me about the service here. The hostess announces the dishes—a very good idea. Is that typical?

SS: You find it in the starred restaurants. It’s true that you don’t see it often in the little restaurants like ours in Cannes. I think it’s good to announce the dishes because then guests can revisit what they ordered. Sure, you read it on the menu, but when you see the presentation and we explain the dish, you find out exactly what you are eating. This is important to us.

KSN: It puts the cuisine first. As does the fact that L’Ardoise is a nonsmoking restaurant.
SS: We were one of the first in Cannes to go nonsmoking. For the simple reason, first of all, that our restaurant is so small. Second, we want the restaurant to smell good, and third, the law is going to change. Now there are four nonsmoking restaurants in Cannes.

KSN: How large is your restaurant? With your warm welcome and attentive service, you seem more like a “grand restaurant, mais petit.”

SS: We have twenty-six seats inside and thirty-six on the terrace. Rather small. I have two associates, Arnaud Douilly and Sandrine Beccard. Then there is the pastry chef, Elodie Delaroche; a dishwasher; an apprentice during service; and a young woman who interns here. I’m the only one in the kitchen. Me and the pastry chef, who takes care of dessert, mignardise, and bread.

KSN: You make the bread here? That’s impressive.

SS: Yes, we make everything. Nothing leaves the kitchen that we haven’t prepared, including the chocolates, the mignardise, and the ice creams.

KSN: Do you ever dream of earning Michelin stars for L’Ardoise?

SS: Yes, absolutely. We hope to find a bigger space someday so we can welcome more diners in the best way possible. A place that goes with my style of cooking. I need a really nice space, one that is tranquil and relaxing.

KSN: You earned a Michelin star in Brussels, right?

SS: Yes, at Les Quatre Saisons in the Royal Windsor Hotel. I worked there for a year, taking over as executive chef.
after they decided to open a high-end restaurant. I earned them a star, but the management decided to close the restaurant anyway.

KSN: *That must have been really hard!*

SS: Well, that is what they decided. It was very hard for me. That was...well, that’s how it goes.

KSN: **If you weren’t a chef, is there something else you would like to do?**

SS: Be a race car driver! It goes right along with my mètier. The technical ability, the quick thinking, the precision. It takes a lot of thinking.

KSN: **What is your definition of success? What do you wish for your restaurant?**

SS: For the restaurant to have a team that wants to work hard with great respect for both the products and the guests. It’s also about making wonderful food that our clients enjoy. Of course, success for me would include a star. Why not? It’s possible. I’m not someone who wants to make a million dollars a month. Of course, like everybody, I want a good life; that is important. But it’s more about being happy with what you do.

KSN: **If someone offered to finance the restaurant of your dreams, what would you want?**

SS: The liberty to express myself, for sure. I don’t want a lot of pressure, someone watching over me, telling me to be careful. No, in fact, that’s the problem we’re having right now in Cannes. You have to pay attention to the financial side to make a living, but right now we are losing customers on the Côte d’Azur because we aren’t taking good enough care of people. We’re taking care of the accounts more than the clients. We have it all backwards. People will go elsewhere if you don’t take care of them. That would be a real shame because we have the sun, we have the sea. All these beautiful products from the ocean are here, but they aren’t being properly exploited. People who come to the Côte d’Azur, not just to Cannes, tell me they are tired of eating poorly and paying a lot of money. All we need is to put great products on their plate.

KSN: *Your Méli-Mélo fromage blanc, tomato, and chocolate parfait dessert is really original. How did that idea come about?*

SS: I worked together with my pastry chef. First we make a confit of cooked black tomatoes, a local variety, and layer it with fromage blanc. The fromage blanc is refreshing, and the tomatoes end up a bit sweet, with well-balanced acid—they’re a fruit, after all. We then place a piped chocolate screen over the top of the glass. At the table we pour a lightly sweetened cooked tomato juice over the chocolate so it melts over the layers. I think our guests are surprised, happily surprised! ❗