



# Toque of the Town

From New York City's Le Bernardin, to Blue at the Ritz-Carlton®, Grand Cayman, celebrity chef **Eric Ripert's** French finesse meets island inspiration. BY AMIEE WHITE BEAZLEY

Eric Ripert, chef and co-owner of New York City's Le Bernardin and Blue at The Ritz-Carlton® Grand Cayman, is a hard man to miss. With dark skin attributed to his French heritage, bright blue eyes, and salt-and-pepper hair, he is an unmistakable presence. In the first few minutes of our meeting poolside at The Ritz-Carlton® Grand Cayman, several fellow chefs, fans, and patrons can't resist saying hello and offering their gratitude.



"We eat at Le Bernardin at least once a month," says a bikini-clad New Yorker. Flashing his signature toothy smile, Ripert responds, "That's a very nice tradition. I like that." He is gracious and patient with each person he meets.

"In New York it happens all the time," he says. "But it's not a bad thing. You are recognized, people are very nice. I feel not to give 15 seconds of your time is taking life for granted. I always feel blessed because I could be peeling onions and garlic for seven bucks an hour!"

Ripert's humility is refreshing, considering his formidable culinary success. In 2007, *GQ* magazine

Cayman, which he opened upon invitation from the five-star hotel in 2000 and is a favorite for members staying at one of the Club's 14 residences. Soon after, Ripert launched the Cayman Cookout, a food and drink festival on Grand Cayman that celebrates the Caymanian culture he has grown to love. During this *Food & Wine* magazine event, and on other Cayman island visits, Ripert can often be found snorkeling among the brilliant—and tasty—fish that inspire Blue's seafood-savvy menu.

Already a master of seafood preparation, Ripert says opening a restaurant that could source the very

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named Le Bernardin one of "Seven Food Temples of the World;" it also ranks No. 18 on the San Pellegrino World's 50 Best Restaurants list and the Michelin Guide honored Le Bernardin with its highest rating of three stars in 2005 and each year thereafter.

From an early age, Ripert, now 50, says his love of food and dining was fostered by various women in his life. Born in Antibes in the French Riviera, he had Italian and French grandmothers who loved to cook and feed him, and a mother who loved restaurants.

"They all knew I loved to eat," he says. "I had a very good palate at a young age and a tremendous appreciation for good food and also for restaurants. Sometimes they were asking me, 'What do you want for Christmas?' and I would say, 'I want to go that restaurant.'"

The restaurants Ripert now spends most of his time at are his own: Le Bernardin, its side project, Aldo Sohm Wine Bar, and Blue at The Ritz-Carlton® Grand

best from the islands was a no-brainer. He looks to Caribbean influences—fruits, spices and seafood—to create an experience at Blue that would remind people of Le Bernardin, but not "copycat" what he and his team have achieved in New York.

In order to source the best Cayman seafood, he created a dedicated network of local fishermen to catch and sell exclusively to his team at Blue. During our morning chat, he tallied six yellowfin tuna, some wahoo, spiny lobsters, and conch.

"I read I've got a good seafood restaurant," he laughs. "I always love cooking fish, and at my jobs in the kitchens where I grew up, I was put on the fish station, so I developed expertise and a taste for it."

Blue is the just the right fusion of local ingredients, refined technique, and sophistication on an island that stays close to its roots and heralds its people, the sea, and local cuisine. In turn, this chef—and his guests—continue to celebrate, and share, their good fortune.

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## Cayman Cookout 2016

Food, wine, and FUN.

As if one needs more entertainment to visit the **Cayman Islands**, foodies flock to the Ritz-Carlton Grand Cayman every January for the annual Cayman Cookout. Launched by Eric Ripert and **FOOD+WINE** magazine, the four-day festival (January 14-17, 2016), features the best in the business, including such celebrity chefs as **Anthony Bourdain**, **Tom Colicchio** and **Michael Mina**. Rarely will you find chefs snorkeling among the fish they serve, yet here attendees get up-close and personal to culinary masters. There's no shortage of wine and **cocktail experts**, either, and between demonstrations, seminars, and dinners, guests soak up authentic Cayman culture.

**STAY>** GRAND CAYMAN, CAYMAN ISLANDS

**ACCOMMODATIONS:** 14 Villas at the Ritz-Carlton Grand Cayman

**BEDROOMS:** 4

**BATHS:** 4.5

**SQUARE FEET:** 3518-3705

**NOT TO MISS:**

- Silver Rain, a La Prairie Spa
- Greg Norman-designed golf course
- Blue Restaurant, by Eric Ripert
- Swim at Dolphin Cove
- Seaside service at Seven Mile Beach