

Forbes

Why Ben Chekroun, Le Bernardin's Longtime Maître D', Left Manhattan For Maryland

By Katie Chang | Nov 12, 2020



Ben Chekroun, who was Le Bernardin's maître d' for 27 years, is now bringing his expertise to Bluepoint Hospitality in Easton, Maryland. MELANIE DUNEA

If you've been to Le Bernardin, you'd recognize Ben Chekroun. As the longstanding maître d' of the French seafood stalwart by chef Eric Ripert, Chekroun managed everything related to the front of the house, including staff training, reservations, and maintaining ratings – always wearing a gentle smile and sharp suit, no less.

But then the pandemic swept across the country in March, forcing many dining establishments, including Le Bernardin, to shutter their doors mid-month. Suddenly, Chekroun, who began with the restaurant in 1993, was also without a job.

Thankfully, it didn't take long for things to pick up. A few months later, Paul Prager, a regular of Le Bernardin, heard about Chekroun's situation and reached out. As the founder of Bluepoint Hospitality, a collection of boutique restaurants and shops in Easton, Maryland, Prager realized he could use someone of Chekroun's professional background, gracious personality, and loyalty.

What began as a consulting position in the summer – Chekroun was helping align consistency of service across the Bluepoint portfolio – blossomed into something more. “I was enjoying the company as a whole, but I especially liked working with Paul – because it's clear he really cares about people,” explains Chekroun of Prager's compassion, a trait that could easily be lost on someone juggling such a full life. (Prager is also the CEO of Beowulf Energy.) “During a staff meeting, Paul noticed one of our florists carrying a heavy vase outside, and pointed out someone should help her,” recalls Chekroun. “Not everyone notices these small details.”



Now, Chekroun is the General Manager of Bluepoint Hospitality. And his goal isn't just to make service at every establishment is good, but great – unforgettable, even. And because all the Bluepoint concepts – which range from Weather Gage, a grab-and-go coffee shop, to Bas Rouge, an elegant contemporary European restaurant – already marry considered design with exceptional food and beverage offerings, it's easy for Chekroun to dedicate himself to ensuring guests feel welcomed and cared for. “What I want Bluepoint to be known for is our ability to combine these things with friendly and humble service,” he says.

Though Chekroun worked for 27 years at one of the world's most famed formal restaurants and believes fine dining will continue, he understands that today's diners – especially in light of the pandemic – naturally crave something “a little more casual and relaxed.” He also recognizes that the needs of younger diners are different from their parents' generation: “For them, it's not just about the food and beverage, but the experience and how they interact with staff.”

In the short months he's been with Bluepoint, Chekroun's been humbled by the overwhelmingly positive response people have had to all the concepts: “I'm amazed at the impression they leave on everyone, even New Yorkers. The combination of Easton and what Bluepoint offers is truly magical.” But whomever enters the doors, Chekroun's philosophy remains simple: “It doesn't matter who sits at your table. You have to learn how to read them, make them feel at ease, and make sure they have a great experience.”