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Clockwise from left: Masako, 33, from Australia (front), with her classmates; Masako measures the table settings; Masako with Nitasha, 23, from India, posing as staff, ready for the 'table service'; Naiane, 21, from Brazil; a flower arrangement made by a student



Class of 2012

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JONATHAN FRANTINI

No longer the preserve of nice gals preparing to bag a husband, the last finishing-school in Switzerland has gone all 21st century by broadening its curriculum and – heaven forfend – opening its doors to chaps.

SOPHIE WILSON reports



High in the hills above Lake Geneva, a group of ladies are lunching. The food is real – Tuscan-style roast veal, mashed potatoes and peperonata – but almost everything else is fake. Welcome to ‘table service’ at the Swiss finishing-school Institut Villa Pierrefeu (IVP).

Today an English girl is playing the part of a businessman launching an organic restaurant, hence her blue sash. ‘Who is my wife?’ she asks. A Japanese girl obliges and puts on a pink sash. Perhaps because her neighbour has assumed the role of an astronaut, conversation is a little stilted.

(Pause. ‘We’re opening an organic restaurant.’ Pause. ‘Would healthy food be good for astronauts?’ Pause. ‘Yes it would.’)

Another student, acting as one of the staff and wearing a frilly apron and white gloves, carefully pours out apple juice in lieu of champagne as the tutor, Rosemary McCallum, a trained Cordon Bleu chef and etiquette expert, hovers nearby. ‘You need to go clockwise, my dear, whenever you can. Ninety-five per cent of the time.’

Swiss finishing-schools were once the place to send well-connected girls who wanted to brush

up on their French and mark time before settling down – famously, Diana, Princess of Wales, attended Institut Alpin Videmanette and the Duchess of Cornwall went to Mon Fertile. But today's students would rather deploy their good manners to land a business contract than an eligible husband, according to the school principal Viviane Néri, immaculate in a skirt suit and Alice band. 'I always say there are lots of MBAs in the world, but very few people have this extra knowledge that can make the difference.'

'We're not training them to be good wives, but to be people who can communicate, whether it's with their husband, with customers or with family, in a polite and meaningful manner.'

After gently admonishing me for carrying a take-out coffee cup, Néri ushers me into an elegant drawing-room, designed to mimic the houses the students will eventually run. Founded in 1954 by Néri's mother, Dorette Faillottaz, the school moved to this site, a de luxe Alpine lodge, in the 1960s.

She pours some tea into china cups, and talks me through the school's curriculum. It's not all table service and flower-arranging. There are classes on office dynamics and social and business customs around the world. (Britain is an island nation, whose people don't always say what they mean, are obsessed with football and not all like the Royal family, students learn.) It is this ability to modernise that has kept the school in business when all of the others in Switzerland have closed, says Néri, who speaks five languages.

During the course of 24 hours at IVP you can pick up a bewildering array of trivia. I discover that the smaller the bubbles, the better the quality of your champagne (oenology), that Scandinavians drink the most coffee in the world (Western coffee history and traditions) and that the McDonald's Happy Meal was invented in Guatemala (international savoir-vivre: Guatemala) – just don't mention the civil war, we are breezily informed.

'Whenever we talk about conversation, we mean conversation with people you don't know,' Néri explains. 'Of course, when you know people you can start talking about lots of things.'

Students come from all over the world. In the 1990s, with interest from Europe waning, Néri targeted new territories such as Asia, Africa and the Middle East. The former communist regimes have been harder to crack. 'We've hardly had any Russians. The same thing with China. It's just starting this year that we got a few Chinese. I think

they're discovering that the finishing-school exists, what the use of it is.'

But funnily enough, she says that enquiries from Britain have recently picked up again. 'The attitude has changed. I don't know why it has changed.' Could it be the Kate Middleton effect? 'It was even before Kate Middleton... Apparently, she's very good at making small talk. I think that's a gift, you know.'

With so much overt politesse and grooming on show the atmosphere here is a cross between a graduate milk round and a Miss World contest. In June there were 21 students who came from 12 countries: Japan, India, China, Singapore, Australia, Britain, America, Nigeria, Lebanon, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Switzerland. Ranging in age from 18 to 65, all agreed that they had learnt as much about international etiquette from meeting each other as they had from the curriculum.

Known to each other only by their first names to preserve anonymity, many were highly qualified and from privileged backgrounds. No surprise, considering the six-week summer diploma course, with lodging included, will set you back more than £13,000. The fee for the 12-month gap-year course doesn't bear thinking about.

Najate, 30, from Beirut, works as a university lecturer. This year alone she has visited Bali, the

Below: Madame Néri. Bottom: Masako with Snigdha, from India, in the Western coffee class



'We've had people who've saved money to come and do the course because they felt it would be useful professionally'

North Pole, St Petersburg, the Canary Islands, Spain and Hong Kong. 'Every month I travel to a new destination when I have time. Sometimes for work, sometimes for leisure,' she says.

Masako, 33, from Adelaide, is a commercial associate in a technology transfer company and has taken six weeks' personal leave to attend the course. 'My mother went to finishing-school in Japan, which is really what planted the seed,' she says. 'In a field where everyone is on a similar tier, it's the soft skills that set an individual apart.'

Lulwa, a 19-year-old architecture student from Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, is already engaged, to a Saudi engineer whom she met in Switzerland. It's a 'sort of modern arranged marriage', she explains. Does she think the course will help her as a wife? 'It's not the reason for choosing the course, but I guess it will definitely help. We took a home-management course yesterday and I found the organising skills very useful.'

Néri has taught the wives and daughters of world leaders, who sometimes travel under an assumed name with a fake passport. Although the IVP application form asks prospective students to list their parents' professions, she insists that you don't have to be well connected to apply. 'We've had people who've saved money to come and do the course because they felt it would be useful professionally. If they're dealing with a lot of foreign clients, they felt, "If I know more about their customs I can feel more comfortable and have better communication with them."'

For those who can't make it to Switzerland, Néri will embark on what she terms 'missions'. She has flown to the Gulf for a one-to-one with a princess, and also taught four daughters of a government minister out there. "They called us two days later and said, "Oh Madame, it was so useful, because we just had to receive Princess Victoria of Sweden and we felt so much more comfortable because we knew more about her customs and her background and we dressed for the camera, like you told us."

There is no such thing as a typical student. Néri has had young and old, pregnant students and women with children and nannies. Mothers who attended 20 or 30 years ago send their teenage daughters. She has even had mothers and daughters attend together, but says this can be a little fraught. Speaking of which, IVP hosted an Argentine student and a British girl during the Falklands war. "They were sort of, "They're our islands..." "No, they're our islands," she recalls. 'But it's not a question of nationality, it's a question of personality. You can have more fights between people whose countries are not at war at all than between people whose countries are at war.'

Back in class, Irene de Huber, a former student from Guatemala, is teaching international restaurant etiquette to a chatty group. They are looking at a photograph of Dinner in the Sky, a restaurant in Brussels that is up a crane.

'What if you want to pee?'

'You hold it in until you've finished.'

'What if your shoes fall off?'

'I'm sure they must have a safety net in case something falls.'

**'Oh Madame,
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Carol, 50, from America (far right), with her fellow classmates. Apple juice is served in lieu of champagne

At the Japanese restaurant Aragawa, the kobe beef costs nearly £400. 'Don't go there for a date. You need a company paying,' advises a girl from Japan. 'This will be a fun topic of conversation when I meet Japanese people,' enthuses Carol, 50, from the east coast of America, who is keen to improve her small talk when entertaining her husband's business associates.

The conversation moves to food presentation in restaurants in China and Singapore, when suddenly a disembodied voice pipes up, 'Yes, we do use serving spoons.' It turns out that this is Vanessa from Singapore on the class computer. She has been quarantined from her classmates after coming down with chicken pox, and is keeping up with lessons via Skype.

IVP does its best to stay on top of technology, informing students about email etiquette and the perils of posting unsuitable pictures on Facebook. Néri says that we have lost the boundaries between public and private behaviour, but that she can see the pendulum swinging back.

Our tour ends in the basement, where two girls are diligently coaxing some cockscomb into an elaborate floral arrangement. 'Take a step back to see if things are even. If you're too close you can't see. It's like in life,' says the teacher, sagely.

The next innovation, launching in late January, is courses for men, a move pioneered by Néri's son Philippe, 42. The first week, aimed at men in the hospitality trade, will cover the European art of dining, the second, trends in international etiquette. The courses are open to men and women over 25, and several men in their forties have already applied. 'We've had requests all the time,' says Néri. 'Just because they're going to host a dinner, they're not always going to have a wife who will do all the table-arranging.'

There are no plans for mixed-gender flower-arranging just yet, although Néri hasn't entirely ruled it out. 'Some of the best florists are men. If you have your own household, if you can rearrange flowers, freshen them up and so forth, you're not dependent on the florist. So why not?' She smiles. 'It will require some readjustment.' ●