

Beat: Politics

ULTRAMARINE YOUTH MILITARY DISCIPLINE & FRENCH GASTRONOMY WITH STARRED CHEF MARX

UNDER MINISTER NAIMA MOUTCHOU'S WATCH

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USPA NEWS - On a sweltering Paris afternoon, 28th May as France is facing a general heatwave, we gathered in the shaded gardens of the ministry for the Outre?mer (Overseas Territories), rue Oudinot, to celebrate something very French and very political at the same time: the 65th anniversary of the Service Militaire Adapté (SMA, Adapted Military Service)) and the culinary awards of its anniversary competition. As a wheelchair?using political reporter who has spent years between the Elysee (French Presidency), Matignon (Primeship) and the Assemblée nationale (French Chamber of Representatives, MP's), I watched uniformed soldiers, young ultramarine trainees, Michelin?starred chef Thierry Marx and a rising minister from Édouard Philippe's Horizons party share the same lawn. The official theme was equal opportunities; the subtext, in an age of presidential pre?campaigns and social fractures, was how the Republic still chooses to tell its story to its most fragile citizens.

A GARDEN CEREMONY FULL OF SYMBOLS OF EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES, DIVERSITY & INCLUSION

Under the trees and rose bushes of the ministry garden, the scene could not have been more carefully composed. Seven regiments of the SMA, representing seven overseas territories, stood behind their colours, each flag a reminder that this "adapted military service" stretches from the Caribbean to the Pacific. The official figures are known: some 6,000 young men and women trained each year, more than 80 percent integration into jobs or training, and a growing share of young women among the volunteers. Around them, generals, colonels, prefects, advisers from the Elysée and a handful of journalists formed a discreet semicircle, while the staff of minister Naima Moutchou, including Cyril and Aicha, made sure every guest including this journalist in a wheelchair, could actually reach the gravel alleys without difficulty. It was a small but telling detail of the benevolence on display.

GENERAL BELLON COMMITTED TO THE MILITARY SOCIAL CONTRACT

When General Patrice Bellon took the floor, he spoke the language of both an officer and a social worker. He recalled that since 1961, in Martinique, Guadeloupe and now across seven territories, the SMA has welcomed tens of thousands of young people who were furthest from employment: school drop?outs, long?term unemployed, sometimes illiterate, often in situations that would easily have turned into "life tragedies". The SMA's promise is simple and demanding: a military framework, shared values of loyalty and discipline, and concrete professional training that leads to real jobs. Behind the anniversary slogans, General Bellon insisted on the human reality: around one third of the volunteers arrive with serious gaps in reading and writing, and the regiments work to repair those deficits before anything else, combining mediation, digital tools and patient pedagogy.

MINISTER NAIMA MOUTCHOU'S MOMENT: FROM LAW COMMITTEES TO RUE OUDINOT

For the Minister of overseas, Naima Moutchou, this 65th anniversary was also a deeply personal moment. Born in a working?class Moroccan family in the Val?d'Oise suburbs, trained as a lawyer in Paris, she made her name in the Assemblée nationale (French Chamber of Representatives, MP's) as a specialist in constitutional law, democratic safeguards and the fight against racism and hate speech before joining Horizons and becoming one of Édouard Philippe's key lieutenants. Today, as minister for the Outre?mer, she brings that legal DNA and her own experience of discrimination to a portfolio that often feels like a pressure cooker.

In her speech, Overseas Minister Moutchou made it clear that the SMA is not just another programme on a long list of public policies. "For 65 years, the Service Militaire Adapté (Military Adapted Service) has refused to leave our ultramarine youth on the side of the road," she declared, insisting that "no young woman, no young man in the Outre?mer (Overseas Territories), should ever feel that the Republic has given up on them." Linking her own story to that of the volunteers in uniform, she added: "I come from the banlieue myself. I know what it means when people tell you that certain doors are not for you. Here, at the SMA, we open doors instead of

closing them. We offer a framework, a trade, and above all the conviction that they belong fully to this country.”

“A VIRTUOUS CIRCLE BETWEEN YOUTH, THE ARMY AND THE STATE”

The minister repeatedly returned to the idea of a new social contract built around the SMA. “When a young person puts on this uniform, they are not renouncing who they are,” Overseas Minister Moutchou said. “On the contrary, they are reclaiming their own story, with the support of our soldiers, our teachers and our partners. The SMA is proof that when the Republic trusts its youth, the youth respond with talent, effort and loyalty.”

She framed the SMA as a strategic model for the years to come, far beyond the confines of the Outre-mer (Overseas Territories). “The President of the Republic has set a clear course with the development of a new national service,” she underlined. “The SMA shows us the way: a demanding framework, yes, but one that leads to strong professional integration. This is not theory; it is concrete, it is measurable and it changes lives.” Looking at the ranks of volunteers, she drove the point home: “You are not an adjustment variable of our public finances. You are the wealth of France. Our responsibility, mine as minister for the Outre-mer (Overseas Territories), is to stand by your side so that every early wake-up call, every training session, every plate you cooked for this competition becomes a stepping stone towards the future you choose for yourselves.” In a more political aside, she also hinted at the wider debate on youth and authority. “In times when some question the very idea of authority, the SMA proves that discipline and kindness are not opposites,” Minister Moutchou argued.

“Here, the military framework does not humiliate; it elevates. It gives structure, but it also gives esteem. That is the Republic at its best.”

OUTREMERS 360° LEADER OVERSEAS TERRITORIES, THE MEDIA BRIDGE

The ceremony also owed much of its tone to Marie-Christine Ponamale, president and editor-in-chief of Outremers 360° and lieutenant-colonel in the Citizens’ Reserve, who hosted the evening with a mix of journalistic distance and genuine pride. Her media outlet has become a central platform for stories from the overseas territories, and her dual role newsroom and reserve perfectly illustrated the hybrid nature of this anniversary. By giving live visibility to the SMA’s young cooks and to the speeches of generals and ministers, Outremers 360° was not just “covering” an event: it was actively helping to rewrite the narrative of ultramarine youth, too often reduced to crises and riots in the mainland press.

TWO MICHELIN STARRED THIERRY MARX, SOCIAL LIFT THROUGH GASTRONOMY

If one figure crystallised the link between social lift and excellence, it was Thierry Marx. The double-Michelin-starred chef, who grew up in a working-class neighborhood and founded the free reinsertion school “Cuisine mode d’emploi(s)” “Handbook of Cuisine” in Menilmontant, presided over the SMA culinary competition as if he were presiding over a new brigade. Chef Marx spoke of colours, smells and textures, but above all of horizons: how to help a young person stand up again, look beyond their neighbourhood, and use cooking as a passport.

For these young volunteers from (Overseas Territories), Mayotte, Guyane, Martinique, Guadeloupe, La Reunion, Nouvelle-Calédonie and Polynesie, the contest was more than a game. It was a practical demonstration that ultramarine products and recipes can compete at the highest level of French gastronomy, itself one of the country’s most powerful diplomatic tools. When the grand prize finally went to Polynesia for a dazzling fish dish evoking “the soul of the ocean”, the applause in the garden sounded like an answer to all the clichés that still cling to the Outre-mer (Overseas Territories).

MAS (SMA) AS A MODEL AND A TEST FOR THE REPUBLIC

Officially, the SMA is now presented as a flagship of equal opportunities policy, with high insertion rates and a strong demand from local employers. Unofficially, it is increasingly described in Paris as a laboratory for what could be done in metropolitan banlieues: a mix of military rigor and sectoral excellence in this case gastronomy that seems to produce results where many purely civilian schemes have failed. From my perspective in the garden of rue Oudinot, the thought was impossible to ignore. In a political moment where the head of state calls for more military frameworks for youth, and where Horizons tries to occupy the space of “order and opportunity”, the SMA looks like the perfect showcase: uniforms, discipline, flags, but also chefs, diplomas, medals and good jobs at the end. Yet the risk of over-simplification is real. You cannot ask the army alone to fix decades of underinvestment, discrimination or territorial neglect.

Turning the SMA into a new “one size fits all” solution for the mainland would be as dangerous as ignoring its very real successes.

BETWEEN BARRACKS AND HORIZON

As the sun went down and the last trophies, medals and goodie bags were handed out, I watched the young laureates pose for photos with generals, prefects, ministers and a Michelin?starred chef. Many of them will return to their territories with a diploma, a job offer or at least a new confidence in their own talent. Some will even become ambassadors of this hybrid device that has saved more than one life from drifting.

CELEBRATING THE WINNERS: ULTRAMARINE GASTRONOMY ON THE PODIUM

Before the sun set on the gardens of rue Oudinot, it was time to honour the young talents behind the stoves and to show, very concretely, what “equal chances” looks like on a plate. The first prize went to the RSMA of French Polynesia for a stunning creation entitled “Te Fenua the Soul of the Polynesian Ocean”, a tribute to local waters built around tuna, a violet taro ravioli, a smoked breadfruit crisp and papaya. The jury, chaired by Thierry Marx, praised both the technical mastery and the way the dish “told a story” of the archipelago through textures and contrasts.

Second place was awarded to RSMA Guyana for a delicately flavoured chicken fillet stuffed with pineapple, served with plantain, sweet potato and breadfruit chips, while RSMA New?Caledonia completed the podium with a mahi?mahi ballotine in mwata, accompanied by a sweet?potato mousseline, purslane achards and a courgette?flower fritter. Beyond the main ranking, several special prizes highlighted the creativity of the other regiments: RSMA Mayotte received the Revelation prize for its bold pairing of octopus, eggplant in coconut milk and local tubers; RSMA Guadeloupe earned the Innovation prize with a parrot fish marinated under a bougainvillea?flower crust; RSMA La Réunion was distinguished with the Special Jury prize for its “Legine in two ways” with songe risotto and mango?pineapple caramel; and RSMA Martinique took home the Audacity prize for an unexpected marriage of chicken, ouassous, cassava and terroir products.

In the days following the competition, the laureate teams were received in the kitchens of the Elysee Palace by presidential chef Fabrice Desvignes and under advising by Olivier Jacob, Counsellor Of overseas to President Macron a highly symbolic recognition for young people who only recently were counted among the most vulnerable in their territories. For General Patrice Bellon, this was more than a gastronomic exercise; it was the visible proof that when you combine military rigour, high standards and respect for local cultures, ultramarine youth can not only catch up, but stand at the very forefront of French excellence.

Leaving the garden, carried once again in my wheelchair over the immaculate gravel by smiling soldiers, I kept the same double feeling. The SMA at 65 is a unique French invention: a place where the army teaches not only obedience but skills, where gastronomy becomes a language of dignity, where ultramarine youth can finally hear that they are an asset and not a burden. At the same time, it is a mirror held up to the Republic. If we need uniforms and star chefs to remember that every young person deserves a chance, then perhaps the real work is only .../

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Editorial program service of General News Agency:

UPA United Press Agency LTD

483 Green Lanes

UK, London N13NV 4BS

contact (at) unitedpressagency.com

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