



# A&E

## FEED

# Art of the Meal

Lacroix at the Rittenhouse reinvents French feasting.

ROBIN RINALDI (rrinaldi@philadelphiaweekly.com)

### LACROIX AT THE RITTENHOUSE

210 W. Rittenhouse Sq., 215.790.2533

**Cuisine:** French

**Prices:** \$17 prix-fixe lunch; \$55-\$75 prix-fixe dinner; breakfast and lunch also à la carte.

**Hours:** 6am-2:30pm Mon-Fri; 7am-2:30pm Sat-Sun; 5:30-10pm seven days a week.

#### *The Rinaldi Rundown*

**Atmosphere:** Quiet, expensive luxury.

**Service:** Formal but not stuffy.

**Food:** Pure French for serious foodies, the wealthy or special occasions.

There are great restaurants, and then there are great French restaurants. It's like comparing great choreographers to great Russian choreographers, or great yogis to great Indian yogis. The difference is between those who excel at a certain task and those who invented the standards by which we measure excellence.

Jean-Marie Lacroix's newest enterprise, Lacroix at the Rittenhouse, belongs to the latter category.

We follow the stone-tiled entryway past a copper tub overflowing with apples. We sink into green velvet chairs in the cavernous golden space lined with tall palms and thick candles and watch as one suited waiter after another delivers the menu, the wine list, the water, the bread--all patrolling the long room in brisk silence.

They each know their station; they don't so much walk as glide, folding an arm behind the back with an air of dignified responsibility, as if guarding an international secret.

Our waiter arrives to explain how the prix-fixe menu works. It is divided into four sections, each progressively heavier. But these categories are mere suggestions; you may choose three (\$55), four (\$65) or five (\$75) courses from any section, in any order, with dessert included.

"The chef wants you to design your meal exactly as you wish," he concludes, "so order whatever you like, and please ask me anything. That's what I'm here for."

French, formal *and* friendly? Could it be these soldiers of gastronomy are the guards not only of their own standards but of my pleasure?

Sommelier Eric Simonis approaches. We've barely browsed the 31-page wine list, ranging from a \$36 rosé to a \$2,400 Chateau Petrus, so he begins with the basics--red or white, glass or bottle--and delivers an extremely light Beaujolais and a spicy Shiraz. I could spend the evening nursing my Beaujolais and gazing out the huge windows over the Square, but the amuse-bouche has arrived.

It's a tiny bowl of cold dandelion-truffle soup harboring morsels of tuna tartare. The pale green soup tastes like perfumed earth, and the tuna chunks add buttery, raw texture.

We've decided to proceed in the recommended fashion with three courses. My onion soup is a puree in the strictest sense of the word: pure brown liquid onion. On top, a billowy blend of crème anglaise and pommery mustard swirls; inside are buried gamey spheres of sweetbreads--the pancreas and thymus glands of a calf. One bite and they dissolve.

The "eggs on eggs" is a piece of art: a brown eggshell perched upright on a beach of salt, topped with a hat of puff pastry. Gazing over at it from the dish's handle, a bundle of salty transparent-red salmon roe rests on toast. Inside the shell, a mixture of lobster and chanterelles swim in barely cooked quail eggs.

Our second course brings a skate wing--the meaty part of a ray fish--whose white-pink flesh is redolent of impossibly soft lobster. Its garnishes are a dollop of Osetra caviar and a thin crepe filled with lobster, clams and mussels bound in scallop mousse. No sauce is necessary, but a smear of Maltaise--an orange-flavored hollandaise--adds yet another dimension.

My Alaskan halibut is perhaps the best thing I taste all night, though by now good, better and best are becoming difficult to quantify. It is seared golden and crowned with thin shreds of Romaine braised in cream. Below the impeccably cooked fish is a melange of black truffles cooked with bits of tripe, osso bucco and beef tendon, but all I can discern is dark, pungent bliss.

Several months ago I wrote that I don't much like truffles. I was wrong, so wrong. The problem was obviously that I had never tasted these particular truffles.

Third course: a pan-roasted pork loin as tender as you can get without risking trichinosis, accompanied by nutty cabbage topped with another puff pastry, this one hiding a steaming mixture of ground pork, brandy, thyme and a touch of foie gras; and "lamb two ways": a sauteed double lamb chop with a few potato gnocchi for accompaniment, and in its own small iron pot, a stew of braised lamb shank, onions and potato.

Everything tasted more *like itself* than usual. The cabbage was cabbagey. The lamb was lamby.

A dessert of chocolate pate was chocolatey. Imagine a tray of homemade brownies just out of the oven, except the middle isn't firm yet--simply hot and barely cooked. Add some orange Grand Marnier ice cream on the side.

Finally, a poached pear exuding saffron, shards of caramelized sugar protruding from its sides like terraces, with pistachio ice cream and cranberry compote adding color and variety. Homemade chocolates from pastry chef Michael Vandergeest come with the bill.

We've spent three hours here. I sit watching the soft-spoken Lacroix roam the room asking after each table. I don't know how they do it, how they take innards and marrow and raw eggs and create such heaven from such earth. But I'm glad they do.