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Creme de la creme pastry chef

By BETH D'ADDONO
For the Courier-Post

It was a few days before Christmas and Lindenwold pastry chef Matt Maslowski was in hot water.

The problem wasn't on the job. His performance at chef Jean-Marie Lacroix's stylish self-named restaurant in the Rittenhouse Hotel in Philadelphia was top notch. Maslowski, who is both the restaurant's pastry chef and in charge of Lacroix's chocolate laboratory, was putting in 12 to 16 hours a day to create an array of perfect sweets such as creme brulee lightened with fruit foam, chocolate pate, homemade sorbets and ice creams and a delectable flourless chocolate cake.

His efforts in the laboratory were bearing dark and fudgy fruit, as he worked to create a line of retail bonbons with fillings such as raspberry, anise, Tahitian vanilla and rum, priced at \$36 per pound.

The problem was at home. His mother was fit to be tied because Maslowski wasn't going to be home for Christmas dinner.

"Mom's not talking to me," he said. "But what can I do? I have a lot of responsibility and the restaurant has to come first."

It's exactly that attitude that has propelled Maslowski to the top of his field at the age of 33. While he is quick to say there is still much he wants to learn and practice, his career is moving full speed ahead and his position working with Lacroix, the long-heralded chef of the Four Seasons who retired and then opened his own place in September on Rittenhouse Square, is enviable.

Chef Lacroix, a noted perfectionist who won the 2001 James Beard Award as the best chef in the Mid-Atlantic region, has created a hotel restaurant with the level of sophistication that Treetops, the restaurant that preceded Lacroix, sorely lacked. His standards are high and Maslowski said he is eager to meet and exceed them.

"Chef (Lacroix) has taught me so much," he said. "He's really helped me refine my style, to keep things clean, simple and very elegant."

Maslowski worked with Lacroix before, at the Four Seasons, but this restaurant is new in both its culinary concept and style. The menu at Lacroix is a prix fixe of five, six or seven courses, each including dessert, ranging from \$55 to \$75.

"The pastry is dictated by the menu concept," said Lacroix, 61.

"I wanted to offer the option of a lighter dessert, along with the chocolate that you must have," he said. "Everything is very much of the season. Right now we have a chestnut dessert with four different preparations. Our dishes reflect both the season and what is in the market on a given day."

Lacroix approves of Maslowski's style and work ethic. "I needed a person who was willing to work and learn with me - who doesn't have a lot of preconceived ideas. Matt is willing to work hard and be consistent, and understands that we must all be as good or better, as we were the day before. Every day."

Like many pastry chefs, Maslowski didn't start out knowing he wanted to concentrate on sweets.

Born and reared in Somerdale, Maslowski's love for food, and for the homemade babkas and pierogis made by his Polish grandmother, dates back as far as he can remember. But like so many chefs, he started out scrubbing pots in the kitchen as a teenager.



JOSE F. MORENO/Courier-Post
Matt Maslowski, pastry chef at Lacroix, grew up in Somerdale and went to The Restaurant School, Philadelphia.

"I washed dishes for a caterer, and was always fascinated by the wedding cakes that would come in on the weekends," he recalled.

He was hooked, and attended The Restaurant School, Philadelphia, in 1990, earning a degree in pastry.

An externship at the Four Seasons, under executive pastry chef Eddie Hales, turned into a full-time position, giving Maslowski the chance to really learn the ropes in a first-class setting. He left in 1997, accepting a position at a casino hotel in Lake Charles, La.

"Sometimes you have to go away from home to learn more," said Maslowski. "I felt that I needed to leave the Four Seasons to get to the next level."

Tony Clark wooed him back to Philadelphia to open the Sheraton Rittenhouse Hotel. From there, he went back to the Four Seasons as assistant pastry chef, then worked at Bruce Cooper's Old City restaurant, Novelty.

A summer at the shore working at Tomatoes in Margate ended when he had the chance to work at Lacroix. Originally hired under executive pastry chef Michael Vandergeest, Maslowski is now working with Frederic Ortega, formerly of Le Bec-Fin.

"Matt takes his work very seriously," said Hales, who Maslowski counts as his primary mentor in the pastry kitchen. "He's a hard worker, and takes on a lot of responsibilities. He's both easygoing and good technically, which is an important combination. When he started with us, he was really just a kid. He's pushed himself a lot to succeed. I'm glad he's gotten to where he is today."

"I learned a lot when I was down south," said Maslowski. "I used to get more rattled, to react more to pressure. I still get rattled, but I don't show it. It's all about understanding and respect. Everything starts from there."

Maslowski says he loves to work with chocolate, and is thrilled with the chance to create an upscale line under the Lacroix name. He also prepares dessert for the charming Lily's Cafe, a less formal, reasonably priced outpost of Lacroix, with a more casual dessert menu, including a chocolate mousse cake and English trifle with meringue and fresh berries.

His signature desserts include a poached saffron Reisling pear, served with spiced cranberry compote and pistachio ice cream, and a chocolate pate, spiked with Grand Marnier. "Matt is talented. Not everybody can be a pastry chef," said Lacroix. "I love to eat pastry, but hate to do it. You must be very disciplined and exact, but at the same time vary and intensify the flavor."

These days, for Matt Maslowski, striking the balance between hard work and sweet success is simply a piece of cake.

These recipes are from Maslowski.

Chocolate Flourless Cake

1 pound, 4 ounces semi-sweet chocolate, or 2 1/2 8-ounce bars (see note)
1 1/2 sticks butter
18 egg yolks
3/4 cup sugar

1. Melt chocolate and butter together in a double boiler.
 2. In bowl, whisk yolks and sugar together until fully incorporated.
 3. Butter and sugar a 10-inch cake pan.
 4. When the chocolate is melted, add yolk/sugar mixture and mix until smooth.<
 5. Pour into the cake pan. Bake at 300 degrees in a water bath (place cake pan in a large, shallow pan of warm water for gentler cooking heat) for 20 to 30 minutes or until firm in the center.
 6. When finished, let stand for 10 minutes then turn onto a cake board or plate.
 7. Serve with fresh berries or roasted pineapple. Makes a 10-inch cake.
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Note: Supermarket brands of chocolate are fine, but don't substitute morsels for bars, the quality isn't as good.

Chocolate Pate

1 1/4 sticks butter
1 cup sugar
1/4 cup orange juice
1/4 cup Grand Marnier
5 eggs
1 1/4 8-ounce bars of chocolate (10 ounces)

1. Combine butter, sugar, orange juice and Grand Marnier together and place in a sauce pot. Bring up to a boil.
 2. Crack eggs into a separate bowl. Try to keep whole.
 3. Place chocolate in a bowl. When your liquid mixture comes to a boil, pour it into the chocolate.
 4. Mix your chocolate with a whisk. When fully incorporated, slowly add eggs one at a time, mixing after each addition.
 5. When the mixture is smooth, pour into buttered and sugared 2-inch ramekins, or into the cups of a muffin tin.
5. Bake at 250 degrees with a water bath for 20 to 25 minutes or until firm. Serve with fresh berries. Makes 1 dozen rounds of pate.

If you go

Lacroix at the Rittenhouse is in the Rittenhouse Hotel, 210 W. Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia. Call (215) 790-2533.