



Guide to Executive Living Presents

DINING OUT

Lacroix Is La Great Center City Restaurant

By Natalie Pantaleo Smoley

I cannot remember the last time I left a restaurant raving about my entire experience from soup through service.

That is ... until a recent visit to Rittenhouse Square's exquisite tree-top level French restaurant, Lacroix – namesake of renowned chef Jean-Marie Lacroix (formerly of the Four Seasons Fountain Restaurant and winner of the 2001 James Beard Award as best chef in the mid-Atlantic) located inside the Rittenhouse Hotel (215-790-2633).

Bobby Boribong, the maitre d', escorted us through the elegant dining room garnished with tasteful, country-esque additions including a froth filled with fall apples at the entrance and potted ferns on the window sills by each table which offset any stodginess that may accompany such fine dining environments.

There is also a glass-enclosed private room in view from tables throughout the main dining room, with a large farm style wooden table and eclectic china plates adorning the walls.

Once seated in the warmly lit, comfortable surroundings with plush, high-back velvet chairs and a clear view of Rittenhouse Square, the corporately suited male staff handled the business of delivering Lacroix's flexible menu options with a professionalism and familiarity as though they were restaurateurs themselves; not to mention with consistently, smooth French pronunciation.

Prix-Fixe Menu

Our waiter, Phil Freda, aptly recommended that we select the four-course prix-fixe menu (\$65 per person and includes a fifth dessert course), which allowed for mixing and matching dishes, though he informed us that menu course options were designed to take diners from light to heavier fare.

We jumped around the menu a bit in our selections and were treated to one gastronomic delight after another.

For our premiere course, I selected the Poussin (actually listed on the menu under "Second Plate.")

It is a petite roasted chicken breast with an artichoke heart and sweet garlic dressing that bore the consistency of baked ricotta cheese and it was delicate.

My husband, Craig, began with the pureed onion soup, Soupe A L'oignon, which was topped with a mustard froth similar to cappuccino foam.

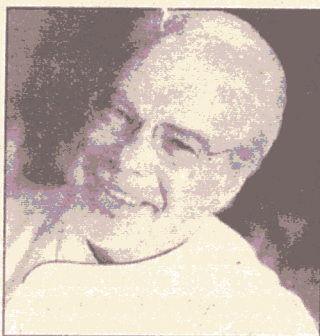
Our friends tried the mixed field greens and unique display of Eggs on Eggs.

It is half of a brown eggshell banked in a garden of salt and filled with a lobster and Chanterelle mushroom sauce and red roe topping. While it looked like delicate country kitchen craft, there was an incredible medley of flavors.

For seconds, Craig savored a light serving of



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Chef Lacroix

Pinwheel Scallops with marinated eggplant and veal berges gratin.

I indulged in the "Fourth Plate" Main Lobster – about four ounces of sweet lobster meat in an "au poivre" that was perfectly spicy.

One of our friends allowed me to taste his Skate Wing "T-Bone" – stingray, something I/we had never before tasted, which was a delectable mild, white, flaky fish similar in consistency to sea bass. It was prepared in an exquisite, non-typical caviar sauce with a Thai verve.

Between the third and fourth courses we enjoyed a complementary intermezzo of lemon sorbet, as well as a personal welcome from Rittenhouse Hotel's vice president and general manager, David Benton.

Former Tree Tops

Mr. Benton's discerning eye seemed approving as he scoped the dining room for important details – those which facilitate this restaurant's stand above the competition in Philly's posh restaurant district (literally speaking as well – Lacroix occupies the second floor space that formerly housed Tree Tops Restaurant).

Next, it was on to beef tenderloin for myself that cut like "buddeh," seated in a sherry wine sauce enhanced by braised green onions.

Craig had the Lamb Two Ways, literally –

sauteed Australian double-thick lamb chop au Jus garnished with a potato gnocchi and shaved aged goat cheese. (With most of the dishes we tried at Lacroix, the garnishes were as interesting and delicious as the entrees they complimented.)

Adjacent was a petite potage of lamb ragout – a tasty, homemade style stew that seemed a little out of place and perhaps unnecessary, but was nonetheless palatable.

Our friends opted for some of the previously mentioned items.

Though the four of us are not big drinkers, my husband and I enjoyed a few glasses of our favorite wine, Beaujolais (Jullenas, Bernard Sante, 1998 at \$10.50 per glass).

The portion sizes were satisfactory for me to enjoy all four courses without feeling uncomfortable.

So, it was on to Course Four. This time around, our friend and I had selected the lamb; Craig, the lobster and our other friend, the striped bass prepared with Asian greens and an Anise Jus. Each plate was an artistic compilation of flavors and colorful components unlike I've had before.

Desserts; No Charge

Finally, we reserved some room for desserts prepared under pastry chef Michael Vandergeest, and agreed to share a few.

We forked into an apple compote with perfect puffed pastry, a unique medley of ice cream scoops which included a mouth watering butter almond and a creme brulee (the only preparation of the evening that was not to my liking – I prefer a creamier version than the firm underside of the caramelized sugar creme brulee served at Lacroix that evening).

Lacroix offers three different ordering options: a Three-Plate Menu at \$55 per person, a Four-Plate Menu at \$65 per person and a Five-Plate Menu at \$75 per person.

Reservations are required by calling 215-790-2533.

All major credit cards are accepted.

Natalie Pantaleo Smoley is director of marketing at a major financial institution. She has been a professional communicator, journalist and reviewer in the Philadelphia area for many years.