



“RESTAURANT OF THE YEAR”

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Jean-Marie Lacroix has nothing to prove. Thanks to the immaculate French fare he turned out for eighteen years at Philly's Four Seasons, he's already considered one of America's great chefs. At sixty-two, he should be lying on a beach somewhere, or maybe playing a little *pétanque*. What he certainly should not be doing is putting his reputation on the line with a risky new venture. At least, that's what we would have said if he had bombed.

In this modern, two-tiered restaurant overlooking stately Rittenhouse Square, Lacroix is masterminding some of the most unexpected and exuberant food in the country. His appetizer omelette, for example, is riddled with wild mushrooms, sidled with a quenelle of steak tartare, and drizzled with watercress cream. A small crock of mashed artichokes (slowly cooked in their own oil) is combined with a leek salad and confit of orange, then showered with black truffles. In Lacroix's version of Peking duck, a lean breast is marinated in honey until it soaks into the skin, then roasted rose-pink and served with a crispy wonton-and-snow-pea salad.

Designer Marguerite Rodgers has created the ideal setting for Lacroix: stylish and romantic, but not at all stuffy or cheesy. The first thing you see when you enter is a sleek farm stand piled high with produce. The dining room's lighting fixtures—square boxes with black trim—are straight out of a Mondrian painting. And there's also a “chef's table” in the kitchen, the perfect voyeuristic spot from which to enjoy the best dish in the entire country right now: crispy white cod served with nuggets of bone marrow, the bone itself stuffed with a puree of potatoes and butter. It's surf and turf times ten.

The wine list is solid, with plenty of offerings under fifty dollars, and the wait staff, plucked from several of Philly's best restaurants, couldn't be more professional. But here's the best part: A modest fifty-five dollars will get you a lavish three-course dinner, and give-away lunches start at only seventeen dollars. With that kind of pricing, it doesn't look like Lacroix will be able to retire anytime soon—and that suits us just fine.

(210 West Rittenhouse Square; 215-790-2533)

John Mariani, *Esquire Magazine*