

JULY/AUGUST 2003

FOOD ARTS

AT THE RESTAURANT AND HOTEL FOREFRONT

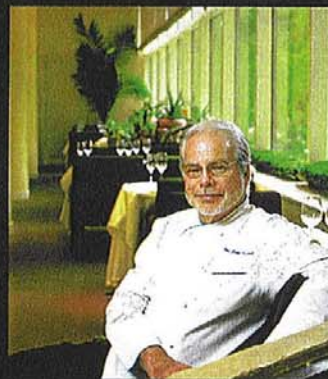
A CHEF'S

KITCHEN SPY AFTER A LIFETIME OF EXPERIENCE, JEAN-MARIE LACROIX KNEW EXACTLY WHAT HE WANTED, FROM SEPARATE REFRIGERATION FOR MEAT AND FISH AND FOR DAIRY AND VEGETABLES TO FREESTANDING STOCKPOTS. JOHN GROSSMANN TAKES A COOK'S TOUR TO FIND OUT WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A CHEF CALLS THE DESIGN SHOTS. KITCHEN PHOTOS BY STEVE LEGATO.

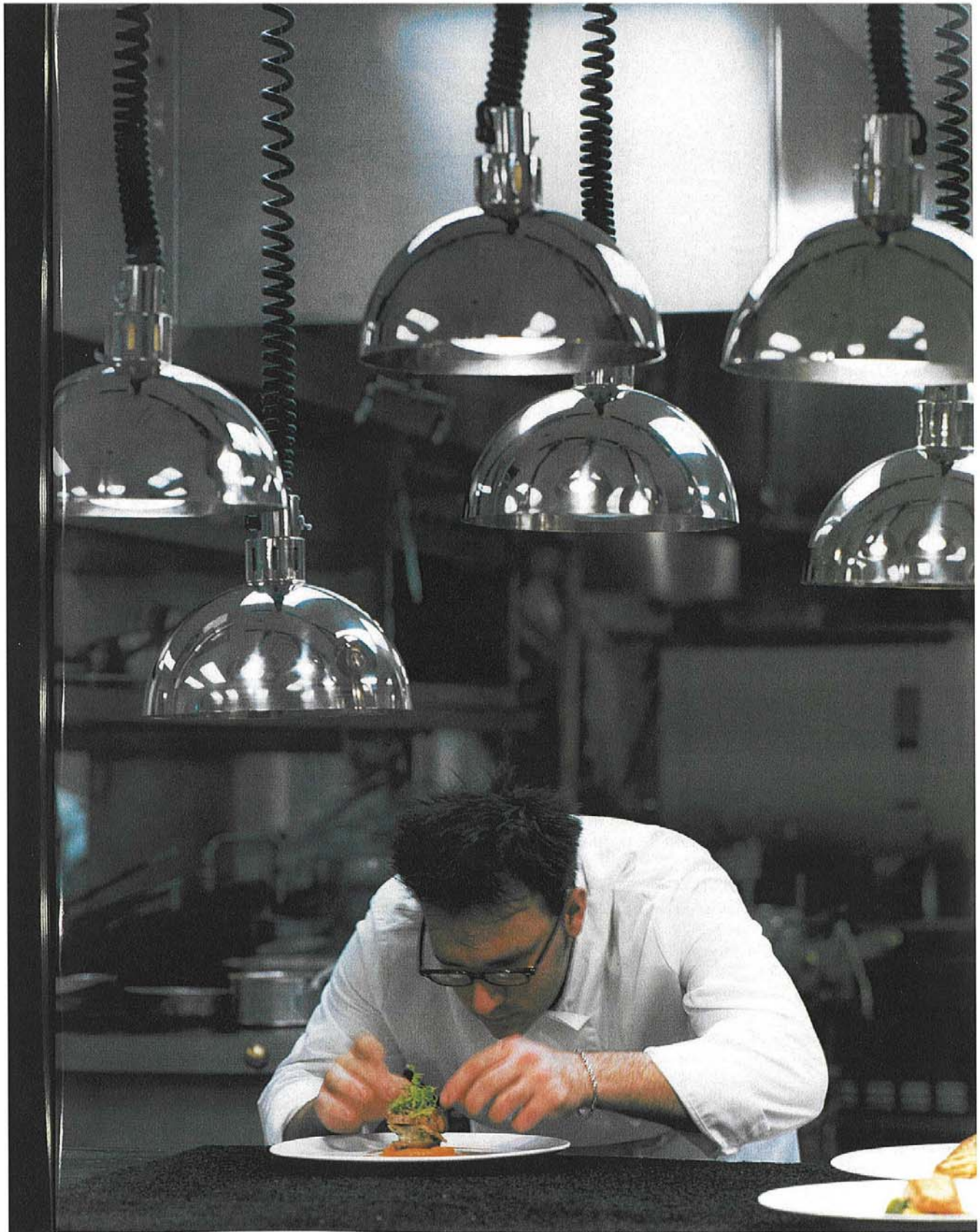
DREAM KITCHEN

Nearly a half-century after starting his cooking career at age 14 at a hotel and restaurant school in Thonon-les-Bains, on Lake Geneva, after stirring stockpots and tending sauté pans, supervising staffs in some 20 kitchens on both sides of the Atlantic, and most recently (for 18 years) heading the kitchen as the acclaimed executive chef at The Fountain Restaurant at Philadelphia's Four Seasons Hotel, Jean-Marie Lacroix finally has the kitchen of his dreams. Small wonder. He designed it himself, incorporating the lessons of a lifetime on kitchen ergonomics and efficiency and realizing, at last, his pent up desire for a diner-friendly, showcase workspace.

Lured across town to the leafy environs of the city's venerable Rittenhouse Square by the opportunity to create a temple of fine dining and to



Above: Executive chef Jean-Marie Lacroix. Photo by Bill Milne. Opposite: Chef de restaurant Matthew Ridgway garnishes a plate underneath heat lamps stylish enough to dazzle guests at the nearby chef's table.





A cleverly outfitted kitchen (clockwise from far left): One of twin 40-gallon stockpots that help free up stovetops. A drawer of dirty dishes on wheels. Still life of food processor and hand blenders.

design his own kitchen virtually from scratch, Lacroix jumped to the independent **Rittenhouse Hotel** in the fall of 2001. A member of the *Maitres Cuisiniers de France* and a recent recipient of the James Beard Award for best Mid-Atlantic chef, the 63 year old master chef postponed retirement for the challenge of creating a career-capping kitchen and eponymously named restaurant in the service of his longtime cooking mantra: taste is everything.

The only one happier than Lacroix might well be longtime Rittenhouse Hotel vice president and general manager **David Benton**, whose 98 room boutique establishment has hosted the likes of Prince Andrew, former president George Bush, Oprah Winfrey, Tom Hanks, and Michelle Pfeiffer and now offers a dining experience equal to its overnight amenities and service. Indeed, after praising such dishes as iced oysters on the half shell with Champagne vinegar/shallot sauce in a mound of rich mashed potatoes, celebrity chef/author **Jeremiah Tower** (see page 43) summed up a recent review he wrote for the *San Francisco Examiner* thus: "Lacroix at the Rittenhouse is America's newest and best example of a restaurant that meets the old Michelin standard of 'worth the journey.'"

"I wanted to put in everything I've learned over the years," says the soft-spoken, white-bearded Lacroix in a quiet moment well before lunchtime on a spring morning seven months after opening, warming to the task of explaining the ins and outs of the very first kitchen that's a true partner in his culinary vision. He has taken a seat in the companion venue of the 120 seat **Lacroix**, an adjacent room called *Lily's Café*, named after his granddaughter. This space, and the two-level Lacroix dining room—formerly

home to a much less ambitious restaurant called *TreeTops*—bear the handsome design touches of Marguerite Rodgers and the salutary effects of a sweeping million dollar renovation.

A second million dollars transformed a standard hotel restaurant kitchen into a showplace complete with a **Philippe Starck** chandelier-topped chef's table, a dedicated cheese cave, even a nearby confiserie to fill elegant blue and gold colored boxes with multiselections of handmade chocolates made fresh daily, which are now used in the hotel's turndown service.

The demolition of the old kitchen down to its floor and exhaust hood cost nearly \$75,000—and left Lacroix with an empty shell. Along one wall, he installed a row of small walk-ins, enabling separate refrigeration for meat and fish, held at 34°F, and vegetables and dairy products, each held at 36°F, ensuring pristine raw ingredients. The small, below-counter refrigerator that serves as the restaurant's cheese cave ages and stores nearly two dozen varieties at 43°F. Seeking to declutter his cooktops of hulking stockpots, Lacroix ordered two freestanding, 40-gallon gas-fired kettles for the *de rigueur* simmering of bones and vegetables as well as a two-burner stockpot range for reducing the essence of those kettles, which can be easily drawn off via a tap at the bottom.

At each of four stoves, Lacroix incorporated heated recesses for keeping warmed plates close at hand and added a clever invention of his own. Addressing the age-old problem of an accumulation of used pots and pans, he designed a floor level drawer on wheels. Dirty a pan, then just stash it out of the way in the drawer. When full, the drawer can be tugged from beneath the stove and, by the



Clockwise from far right: Under-the-counter refrigerated drawers keep chilled ingredients close at hand for executive sous chef Tod Wentz and the rest of the brigade. 85 foot-candle illumination makes Lacroix's kitchen a well lit workspace. In the Chocolate Laboratory, pastry chef Fredrick Ortega oversees another batch of Lacroix's handmade chocolates as they emerge from the enrober.

raising of a collapsible handle, pulled like a wagon to dishwashing.

"The whole idea is to free the cook so he can focus on preparation," says Lacroix, explaining how the carefully thought-out layout of his kitchen serves his *dégustation* menu concept, which, in turn, frees diners. Lacroix, the restaurant, is all about *le choix*—choice. Diners assemble either a three (\$55), four (\$65), or five plate (\$75) meal (dessert is included—and at \$6, the cheese course is a steal), selecting at will from a menu divided into four sections, called "plates." Perhaps two first plate offerings, maybe an entire meal

from the third plate listings, or perhaps an all-seafood dinner—enjoying their choices in the order they prefer. Maybe a fourth plate cold-water Maine lobster, prepared with *beurre monté*, with soft amaranth, Armagnac stewed prunes, and sauce Foyot before a second plate *magret* duck breast with slow roasted white onion soubise, confit of royal trumpet mushrooms, and natural meat jus.

"The menu here wouldn't have worked at the Four Seasons, because of the line restrictions," continues Lacroix. "Like most kitchens, it was very narrow and short on preparation space. The

Personnel

Owner Rittenhouse Development Company
 Vice president and general manager David Benton
 Assistant general manager Keith Wagner
 Executive chef Jean-Marie Lacroix
 Chef de restaurant Matthew Ridgway
 Executive sous chef Tod Wentz
 Pastry chef Fredrick Ortega
 Restaurant manager/maitre d' Bobby Boribong
 Interior design Marguerite Rodgers, Philadelphia
 Kitchen design consultant Tony Pilla, Gelmarc
 Distributors, Cherry Hill, NJ

Equipment

Walk-in cooler Master-Bilt

Freezer/Blast freezer Master-Bilt
 Range/Oven/Fryer/Salamander Montague
 Induction cooker CookTek
 Mixer/Slicer Hobart
 Exhaust hood Gaylord
 Refrigerated counter Craig Manufacturing
 Kettle/Combi-Oven/Ecotech steamer Market Forge
 Pizza oven Bakers Pride
 Reach-in refrigerators Beverage-Air, Traulsen
 Dough sheeter/Convection oven/Deck oven Pavaiiler
 Ice cream machine Taylor
 Dishwashing system Adamation
 Enrobing machine JKV

For a manufacturers listing, see SOURCE INDEX.

cook had to get out of the line to prepare on a table and then return to the stove. It was a lot of wasted movement." Equally troubling to Lacroix was that the design of his previous kitchen forced him to stand on the opposite side of the pass-through, away from the line, in order to monitor each plate before pickup. In other words, he had been physically separated from his brigade, disenfranchised from his very kitchen, like Joe Torre trying to manage the Yankees from back in the clubhouse instead of being right there in the dugout.

Consequently, Lacroix's new dream kitchen has no line or chest-high pass-through for readied plates. Instead, he opted for a table-like pass in the kitchen, near the stoves, where he has room for adding the final touches to as many as 12 plates simultaneously. Refrigerated drawers beneath the work surface keep garnishes at the ready.

That spot, on many nights, doubles as center stage for those lucky enough to have secured a seat at the nearby granite-topped chef's table. Chef's tables aren't new in American kitchens, of course, but this one is Lacroix's first, and it helps realize his long-standing desire to open his kitchen to his guests. He still has fond memories, many kitchens ago in London, of inviting New Year's Eve guests, a couple of hours into New Year's morning, inside his kitchen for bowls of fortifying onion soup.

"It's always been my idea to bring people into the kitchen. Maybe it's a selfish idea, because I like to have marble in my kitchen," he says, with a smile. "But until now, I never had the opportunity to design a restaurant with an entrance to the kitchen. I love to have people come in, so they can meet the cooks and vice versa. We know the customers by name, now we can know their faces. And they can see where and how we prepare their food."

In fact, Sunday brunch-goers *must* visit the kitchen—if they want to sample the hot buffet choices, that is. Shellfish bouillabaisse, carved rack of lamb, and miso marinated striped bass with bok choy—indeed, all the hot selections can be seen past electronically operated doors that slide open, as on a subway train, revealing an uncharacteristically bright kitchen—better for food preparation and a must for welcoming the public. Dispatched in the renovation: 2-by-4 lay-in fluorescent fixtures. In their place: four 32-watt, T8 lamps with energy efficient electronic ballasts and prismatic/acrylic lenses.

A glance into the hotel's adjacent, unrenovated sister kitchen, belonging to Smith & Wollensky, provides a before and after sense of Lacroix's transformation. Next door, cooks still work elbow to

elbow on a cramped line bathed in the dusky fluorescent light of 65 foot-candles' illumination. Stepping back into the kitchen at Lacroix is like going from night to day—returning to the warm glow of 85 foot-candle power.

Moreover, Lacroix's makeover continued down the ramp to the hotel's banquet kitchen, where, the evening before, chefs had prepared a seven course tasting meal for 60 members of a New Jersey wine group. "What you do in the restaurant, you should do in the banquet room," insists Lacroix. He remade the banquet kitchen,

removing one of its two stoves and adding a convection oven, a steamer, and a brazier. The change has been profound. No longer are wheeled, plate-warming units filled well in advance of the meal, as is common in most banquet kitchens. Now these towering chrome units are used simply to warm plates, which travel from cook to waiter to the table, so that, even for banquets as large as 250, dishes are prepared *à la minute* instead of *au jour*, the downfall of many a banquet meal.

One floor up, across from the pastry kitchen, diners are also welcome to peek inside a room identified by a brass sign reading Chocolate Laboratory. Here, executive pastry chef

Fredrick Ortega can cover as many as 1,000 chocolates an hour on a JKV enrobing machine that bears a well for 80 pounds of melted chocolate. "I call it the amoeba of chocolate machines because it's so simple," Ortega says. "Not a lot of digital displays, beyond the temperature readout. There's an on-off switch and a panic stop (a red 'I Love Lucy' button)." On display near the restaurant's entrance, the chocolates range in price from the \$8, two-piece Duet Lacroix to the \$85 Grand Lacroix, which opens like a jewelry case to display four trays of various flavor filled sweets—yet one more way of branding the restaurant, Lacroix's intended crowning touch.

Appropriately enough, his ultimate kitchen remains a work in progress. "You're always thinking of something new," he says, explaining he's still got one eye on the banquet kitchen. "I want to design a serving table to hold vegetables in the middle, so you can put plates on both sides." Even after nearly a half-century, he continues to strive after his twin goals of taste and consistency. "It's easy to be good one day. You have to be good over time."

John Grossmann has written on food and restaurants for *Cigar Aficionado*, *Cooking Light*, *Gourmet*, *Esquire*, *Savour*, and *Sky* magazines. He's based in Mountain Lakes, New Jersey.



Jean-Marie Lacroix's roasted cod in saffron nage with grilled fennel and petit basil.