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In praise of Lacroix

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Special To The Examiner

During the next couple of months I will be on the road again, traveling America to promote (again) my new cookbook, "Jeremiah Tower Cooks."

With a few breaks for the likes of Valentine's Day, views of the Mexican reef at 120 feet and house hunting in South Beach, I will be visiting Dallas, Santa Fe, Scottsdale, Chicago's Charlie Trotter, Vancouver, San Francisco, Seattle, Las Vegas and Philadelphia. I thought I would write about the food I find.

Actually, I was in Philadelphia last weekend. Before that trip I had wondered if readers would be interested in the food I might eat and the restaurants I might visit in these cities. Then I discovered (and had a couple of dinners in) the brand new restaurant Lacroix at the Rittenhouse.

I had seen the space in the hotel that was to become Lacroix a year ago, when it was the old hotel restaurant. When the interior designer showed me the proposed changes outlined on her design boards, they looked good. But I was not prepared for what greeted me as I walked out of the elevator, turned left and saw the sign LACROIX. Its perfect, discrete lettering reminded me at once of something new and of something wonderfully familiar. Rarely has a first visual impression been so on the money.

When I entered the restaurant I was immediately enveloped in the heady perfume of what I saw 20 feet in front of me, against the windows looking out onto Rittenhouse Square: a 10-foot altar covered with enormous, ripe pomelos sitting on a bed of aromatic limes. My mouth started to water.

Looking around some more, I saw big fat candles flickering and some that weren't, and had one of those moments when one kicks oneself for not having thought of it first. I had always wanted, at Stars, to use candles and the light that comes from filtering through beeswax, but had never overcome the problem of drunken customers playing with fire. At Lacroix, all the candles were real wax and all were placed above eye level and out of reach, so that one could not see the bulb in those that were electrified and could not tip over the ones that had flames. Brilliant.

Brilliant (and very difficult to achieve) also was the color of the upholstery, a green that must be identical to the color of the leaves on the hundreds of trees outside for a few days in the spring right after the leaves first appear.

As I kept looking at the dÉcor other appetites took over, so I took a place at the long table in an adjoining room called Lily's Lounge, and sipped some Alsatian pinot blanc while looking at the menu. Noticing that the bottle wine prices were all in the \$40-\$50 range, and that prices per glass in California would all be \$2-\$5 more, I assumed that similarly good judgment would follow with the food.

For lunch I had the "Petite Menu" with its petite price of \$17: a little salad of beets and Belgian endive with quail eggs, a dish of pea shoots with poached and flaked skate wing, and small square of goat cheese and chard lasagna sauced with lamb braised in the "ancien" style. The meat had all the depth of flavor of grande bourgeoisie cooking without any of its physical weight. I was in heaven.

For a late supper I was tempted by the lobster au poivre served with Picholine olives, and the loin of pork served with a hot pate en croute, the eggs on eggs (poached eggs with steelhead caviar), and the rabbit and lobster crepinettes, all from a menu of four choices (in whatever order you want) for \$65. But Jean-Marie Lacroix at other ideas.

Iced Spinning Creek oysters with champagne vinegar and shallot sauce, the shells stuck into a little mound of imperially rich mashed potatoes; sea scallop carpaccio with acacia honey, citrus and ginger sauce; rabbit loin with its kidneys, and something delicious and wonderfully textured that looked like semolina but turned out to be amaranth; loin of venison rubbed with an anise-dominated quarter epices served with a sweetbread and black truffle crepinette (wrapped in lightly floured crepine or caul and quickly deep-fried); and, to finish, lemon thyme crepes with fresh coconut ice cream.

You will not believe what cold oysters taste like with a spoonful of hot, massively rich mashed potatoes, and the new-old (or old-new) sweetbread and truffle crepinette brought me to tears of simultaneous remembrance and love for the future. As I sat there drying my eyes I made a promise to come back and have the snails in parsley butter and grilled pork belly, or the choucroute garni on Lily's supper menu.

Lacroix at the Rittenhouse is America's newest and best example of a restaurant that meets the old Michelin standard of "worth the journey." The Rittenhouse Hotel is at 210 West Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia, Pa. 19103. Call (215) 790-2527 or visit www.rittenhousehotel.com.

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