

Taste Is Everything

It's true in life, as it is at Lacroix at the Rittenhouse, which is top-drawer in every respect.

When I sell the movie rights to the book that I haven't finished writing, I plan on moving into The Rittenhouse. In an effort to support my semi-maniacal dreams, my editor chose me to dine at Lacroix, The Rittenhouse's newish restaurant. Because I'm a good girl, as yet unspoiled by celebrity, I asked my mommy to accompany me.

The mood is set immediately upon entering Lacroix. Five-foot-tall, black, candle holders glowing with soft, gold candles greeted us. The chunky candles decorate the entire restaurant, bringing warmth and intimacy. It's good lighting for the mood, the food, and the faces of those of us who benefit from a soft lens.

In the dining room, Mom and I detected an Asian vibe, manifested through dark woods; pea-green, upholstered banquettes; and mushroom-colored dining room chairs. The windows overlooking Rittenhouse Square are bare. Meg Rodgers, the designing diva, had more than enough sense to let the

grand windows work their own magic. Ms. Rodgers has placed subtle accents around the restaurant, such as plates of erect pears, ebony rafts for the table candles and absinthe-green glass lamps.

No fewer than five of Lacroix's staff fawned all over us. It was a little overwhelming, but I'll have to get used to this as I will undoubtedly be recognized from the photo on my unpublished book.

The best of the staff was our waiter, Daniel. Looking spiffy in his dark suit, white shirt and classic tie, Daniel explained the menu, which takes some doing.

Emblazoned with the phrase, "Taste is everything," Lacroix's is a degustation menu. There are three ordering options. The three-plate menu is \$55, the four-plate menu is \$65 and the five-plate menu is \$75. Dessert is inclusive; the cheese plate is an additional \$6.

Once you've selected the number of plates you desire—Mom and I went with three—you choose the dishes you like. The menu is divided into first-

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second-, third- and fourth-plate items. However, Daniel informed us that we could choose whichever items we wished and have them in any order we desired. Why then separate the menu into categories? Presumably for taste purposes, and Daniel did advise us on which dish should follow which. The menu is a little confusing, and instead of tackling the wine list, we let Daniel tell us exactly what to drink.

Mom had a glass of a light and fruity Cotes du Rhone, Michel Picard 2000, for the quite nice price of \$10.50. I like my wine like I like my men, big and bold, so, I had a Hain 2001 Cabernet Sauvignon for a very reasonable \$10.

While we waited for our first plates, the great one himself came to our table. Is there a more suave chef in Philadelphia than Chef Lacroix? I know he's got a good 30 years on me, but just shaking his hand gave me goose bumps. Chef Lacroix spread the love, greeting each table and wishing them bon appetit. His mere presence makes everything taste better.

Mom's first plate was veloute of green lentils, described as slow-cooked lentils du Puy, braised veal sweetbread, foie gras jerez vinegar dressing and huile d'olive penitents. In front of Mom, Daniel placed a huge bowl with a small pile of sweetbreads. From behind her, Daniel poured the veloute, a lovely, creamy sauce. It was divine.

My first plate was Florida red grouper with country style veal stew and braised Romaine hearts with Perigord black truffles. The fish was delicious and the stew went perfectly with it.

Daniel promptly delivered our second plates. I had Scottish pheasant, which was a larger portion than I imagined. Daniel said that the pheasant was wild, so I should be vigilant for shot. Ugh. Also, Daniel pointed out the sprig of Douglas Fir that adorned my plate and said the pheasant had been infused with it. Should I also be on the lookout for tinsel? Whatever. The pheasant was delicious, made better by the sautéed Fuji apple accompaniment.

On the menu, Mom's second plate was rillettes Perigourdine, with savory artichokes and leek salad, confit of

orange segments and shaved black truffles. It was the pureed leek salad that stole the show. Chef, can we have more of that?

Our third courses arrived. Mom had "Lamb Two Ways," the better of the two being a sautéed Australian double lamb chop. The chop was subtle and perfect in its au jus. The plate was decorated with potato gnocchi.

My third course was roasted beef tenderloin with slow braised green onions in sherry wine vinegar sauce. It was fabulous.

The dessert menu, created by Fredrick Ortega, is pure seduction. If we could have chosen all four courses from the dessert menu, we would have. I ate a Napoleon with caramelized apples, cider jus and vanilla ice cream. The apples were wonderful, and the Napoleon had crusts of three different textures. Mom had a Tahitian creme brulee and a raspberry foam, served in a wine glass. Foam? Oh yes, and it is wickedly divine. Daniel brought us a selection of house-made ice creams; my favorites were the Spanish almond and the pistachio. They are rich, chunky ice creams which I would like pints of—if Chef Lacroix could in any way manage it.

After hauling ourselves out of our chairs, we checked out the rest of the restaurant. There is a private room for intimate affairs. That room is new; the previous chef's table room has been transformed into an a la carte dining area. It's called Lily's, named for Chef Lacroix's granddaughter. Lily's is intimate and has a wonderful view of the Square. That's where I'll take my daily meals when I live at The Rittenhouse. And perhaps I'll hire Daniel away to be my personal assistant. And maybe . . .

Well, the rest is the stuff of dreams. Then again, it's only natural that a sparkling oasis like Lacroix at The Rittenhouse should fuel my delusions of grandeur. ■

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inside SUMMER 2003

This summer **inside** goes over the river and through the shopping malls when we take our first ever look at the Jersey-Philly connection! Like it or not, these areas are seemingly joined at the hip. We'll examine some of the reasons why.

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Shop Till You Drop: Why do so many people choose to drive over the bridge when King of Prussia and Willow Grove malls are so close? What are Jerseyites' favorite local shopping spots?

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