

Lacroix works culinary magic at Rittenhouse

By TRISH COFIELL
tcofiell@delcotimes.com

My college chum, Sport, and I scoped out the perfect setting for the next gathering of the elite, yet raucous Grover Red Hat Society.

Each year, we aim to pamper ourselves by visiting the most posh, gourmet restaurant we can find ... one where the servers will make a huge fuss over us and we'll feast until our elastic waistbands are stretched to the max.

The choice this year is (drum roll) Lacroix.

Of course, the Grovers will butcher the *tres-French* name of the restaurant. It's LA-KWAH! Similar to Voi-LA! And it's the namesake of celebrated Philadelphia chef Jean-Marie Lacroix.

Lacroix is the French-born chef who made the elegant Fountain at the Four Seasons one of Philadelphia's top-rated restaurants. But his name did not appear above the door of that hotel restaurant.

At the tony, five-diamond Rittenhouse, Lacroix has his very own restaurant, which he designed and developed from scratch in the space that used to house the unimpaired TreeTops Restaurant.

Lacroix, winner of the 2001 James Beard Award for

Lacroix at the Rittenhouse

■ Lacroix is located in the Rittenhouse Hotel, 210 W. Rittenhouse Square. Breakfast is served starting at 6:30 a.m. Lunch is served Monday through Saturday with brunch served on Sunday. Dinner is served daily starting at 5:30 p.m. Valet parking is \$14, but diners get a discount when their parking ticket is validated. The dining room is smoke-free and handicapped accessible. Reservations are recommended. Call (215) 790-2533.

best chef in the mid-Atlantic region, "retired" from the Four Seasons five days after winning that award, causing a stir in the restaurant community.

But his gentleman-farmer days didn't last long before he announced plans to open his own restaurant at the Rittenhouse. Renowned designer Meg Rodgers (Striped Bass, Le Mas Perrier) was brought in to oversee the renovations, which resulted in a relaxed, yet elegant reflection of the beautiful park outside.

Lacroix opened in September and definitely has the makings of a heavy hitter on the Philly dining scene. LaCroix is not as fancy-schmancy as the Four Seasons or Le Bec-Fin, but the dining experience is just as supreme and it's more affordable.

To reach the dining room, you saunter through the opulent lobby of the Rittenhouse, graced with spectacular floral arrangements, and head to the second floor, passing by a large oil painting of a high-society costume ball.

You enter on a pebble walkway, lit by candelabras, leading past a massive oak wine case to the main dining room. There, you are awed by an expansive view of the city through giant windows.

The dining room is bathed in shades of sunshine-gold with green velvet chairs and square-shaped, rice-paper chandeliers glimmering overhead. A food altar overflows with ripe, shiny apples. French plates from Lacroix's own collection hang on the wall. The items that caught my eye were the many boxes of herbs and succulents perched on tables and sills, one brimming with the minty chia herb. These plants are also from Lacroix's own garden.

There are so many touches that draw the eye and spark conversation that we had to be reminded to look at our menus. After all, we were here to feast on the culinary wizardry of "Papa" Lacroix.

His list of credentials, accolades and followers is longer than his apron strings. Suffice it to say, Lacroix's food is superior.

For the Rittenhouse, Lacroix created a French-American menu that shows off his talent, but is affordable. The prix-fixe dinner is \$55 for three courses; \$65 for four courses; \$75 for five courses.

Three of us indulged at lunchtime on a beautiful winter day when Rittenhouse Square was bustling with activity.

There are two prix-fixe lunch choices, for \$17 and \$24, but we went a la carte, sharing all of the intricate flavor combinations that would burst forth in our mouths.

Our server, Alma, was very knowledgeable about each dish and helpful in making selections. Sometimes the service was a bit slow, but we were in no rush and our aim was to relax, indulge and have fun.

For starters, we tried paper-thin slices of carpaccio

Dining Restaurant Around review

of beef served over greens with a light, savory truffle vinaigrette (\$9); plump, yummy scallops served with creamy yams and Swiss chard (\$9); and a scrumptious roasted pear and pumpkin salad with toasted brie (\$7). All were artfully presented, and burst with the flavors of the season. My favorite and the most unusual was the pear salad.

Just for the fun of it we also tried a "lobster knuckle sandwich" (\$7), an upright triangle of a lobster sandwich crunchy with cucumber. Very creative and delicious.

For my main course, I had a unique version of a club sandwich made with tuna and shrimp (\$13). This item is marked with an asterisk that indicates it is "rejuvenating and lighter fare," but I had enough to take home for a second meal.

One friend had the seared jumbo crab cake (\$22) served with the unusual but complementary side of herb grits, braised fennel and tomato ragout. Crab and grits never entered my mind as a flavor combo, but this was a yummy mix of sweet, tender crab and warm, creamy grits. One friend had tender poached chicken, delivered in an iron crock brimming with fall vegetables and dumplings.

We also sampled the handmade tagliatelle pasta, served in a tilted white bowl with a robust lamb Bolognese. If you're a meat lover, try this hearty dish on a chilly day.

Next comes the dessert cart, which is laden with tempting tarts, galettes, fresh fruit, chocolate creations, crème brûlée, homemade ice cream and much more. I sampled a delicious gingerbread crème brûlée.

At the top of his menu, Lacroix has printed his mantra, "Taste is everything." And to that end, he does not disappoint.

But our adventure did not end with our memorable meal. Charming maitre d' Bobby Boribong offered to give us a tour of Lacroix. We paraded through the kitchen, where there is a chef's table for people who want to see the chefs at work. This was a beehive of activity with chefs chopping parsley, slicing and fanning scallop slivers and whipping up all kinds of dishes.

He also showed us a private dining room available for groups (perhaps the Red Hat Grovers), the pastry kitchen where pastry chef Frederick Ortega works his magic, the Willy Wonka-style chocolate laboratory, and Lily's Café, a more casual dining room off to one side.

We were all happy that Lacroix decided to come out of his brief retirement to indulge diners with more of his culinary magic. For Delaware County diners who like to explore the region's finest dining, don't miss Lacroix.

The famous chef, by the way, was born in Epinal in France and cooked in France, Switzerland, England, Scotland and Canada before coming to Philadelphia. He is a member of the prestigious *Maitres Cuisiniers de France*. He and his wife, Vivienne, live on Logan Square.