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Lacroix's Second Act

An old-guard Philadelphia chef joins the vanguard

BY JOHN MARIANI / PHOTOGRAPHS BY BILL MILNE

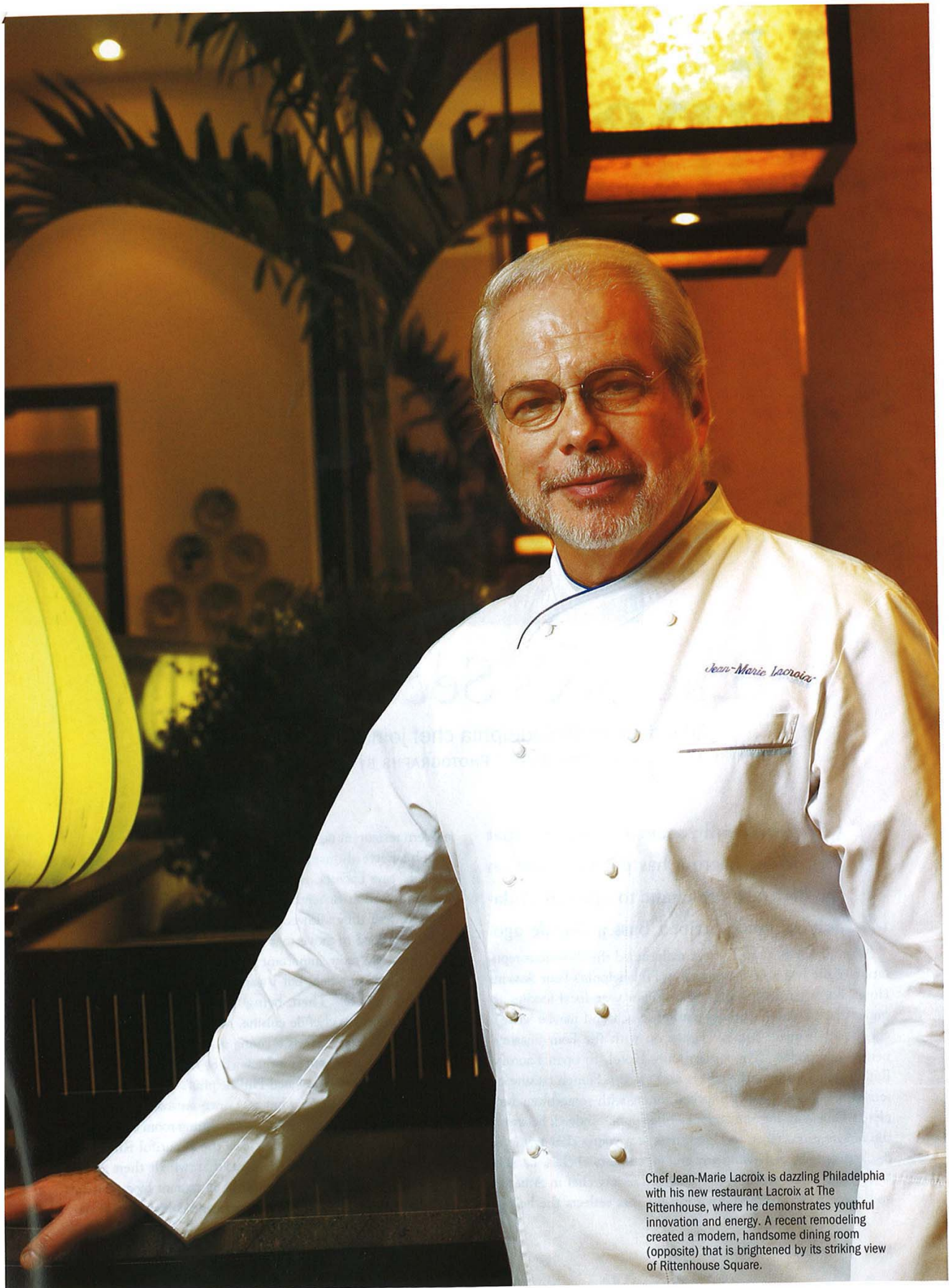
It shouldn't really come as a surprise that Jean-Marie Lacroix has put his name on the best new restaurant to open in Philadelphia since Striped Bass a decade ago.

After all, for 20 years Lacroix maintained the illustrious reputation of the Fountain Restaurant at Philadelphia's Four Seasons Hotel. But when he left that position last year, local foodies assumed the 61-year-old would consult, teach and maybe write a cookbook. Instead, Lacroix signed on with the Four Seasons' nearby competitor, The Rittenhouse Hotel, to open Lacroix. Rather than continue the classic and modern French cuisine he served previously, he has surprised diners with something completely new, both for him and for Philadelphia. Indeed, he shows the imagination, vigor and brightness of a young chef trying to dazzle people by eschewing any and all culinary clichés. Lacroix is serving food as much in the vanguard as any chef in America and doing so in a dining environment that reflects the best of

modern restaurant design.

"The Rittenhouse gave me carte blanche to do what I wished," says Lacroix, who contends he never really had much desire to consult or teach. "I always wanted to design my own kitchen, and they allowed me to do that, too. After so many years, it is good to move to a freer style of cuisine, where essential flavors are more important than anything else. I could have taken a safer approach, but I wanted to be unconstricted, more open, but simple." Then, being the cordial gentleman he is, Lacroix credits his chef de cuisine, Matt Ridgway, as an integral part of the change. "He is a young man with wonderful ideas," says the master, "so I am as influenced by him as he is by me."

Meg Rodgers, who designed Philadelphia's Striped Bass, Rouge and Avenue B, freed up what was once an awkward two-level space, coordinating it into a handsome dining room that takes full advantage of the sunshine that fills the beautiful Rittenhouse Square below by day, and of the lights that twinkle there at night. You are greeted at the entrance of the restaurant by a table piled with citrus fruits—bright yellow lemons and golden grapefruits—a



Chef Jean-Marie Lacroix is dazzling Philadelphia with his new restaurant Lacroix at The Rittenhouse, where he demonstrates youthful innovation and energy. A recent remodeling created a modern, handsome dining room (opposite) that is brightened by its striking view of Rittenhouse Square.



The four-course "business lunch" is a steal at \$24. Dishes might include (clockwise from top left) a braised veal osso buco with garden vegetable pot au feu, a pan-seared diver scallop with spinach polenta in a roasted tomato coulis, white asparagus soup, and an artichoke, fava bean and cherry tomato ragout.

sign that you are not in for a stuffy evening. Mondrian-like lighting fixtures mingle with potted plants and greenery, with walls painted taupe and cream. Dark, sturdy chairs give the room a stylish sophistication. There is also a chef's table inside the kitchen and a Provençal-style private dining room called La Serre.

The young service staff, overseen by maître d' Bobby Boribong, formerly of the Fountain, has been recruited from several of Philadelphia's fine-dining rooms, and the group shows an enthusiasm for and a knowledge of food and wine, emblematic of the best American style.

The wine list is young but ambitious, selected by sommelier Eric Simonis, who already stocks more than 500 labels in his cellar, beginning with seven *cuvées de prestiges* Champagnes. Not surprisingly, given his own upbringing in Strasbourg and Metz, France, Simonis has proudly selected a number of top Alsatian estates, such as Barmès Buecher, Zind-Humbrecht, André Kientzler and Marcel Deiss. The American white wine list is a bit skimpy,

but the reds are very well-chosen, including PlumpJack, Franciscan's Magnificat, Januik and Canoe Ridge. There's a full page of South American bottlings, and the Bordeaux listings admirably include plenty of good choices for easy drinking from the Côtes de Blaye, Canon-Fronsac, Côtes de Castillon and Lussac. Prices are kept as reasonable as possible, given Pennsylvania's restrictive state-controlled distribution system.

Lacroix has also been careful not to overprice his menu at a time when deluxe dining is clearly suffering. His three-course dinner is a pleasing \$55, while the four-course option, at \$65, allows you to choose four dishes on the menu and eat them in any order you wish. Thus, you might have lobster as an appetizer or as a larger portion for a main course. There is also a five-course menu at \$75. At lunch, the options are an astounding bargain—three courses for \$17, or the "business lunch" at \$24. Desserts are extra.

What do you get for lunch? More than you could reasonably hope for—especially since a comparable three-course lunch at the



Left: For a more immediate experience, interested diners can reserve the chef's table, located inside the kitchen. Right: Desserts, such as this poached pear with a red wine chocolate sauce and peppercorn ice cream, are imaginative and distinctive.

Four Seasons runs \$39.50 and at Le Bec Fin, \$45. The \$17 menu at Lacroix includes a salad of spinach with a Roquefort croustade and toasted pecans, then tuna tartare with a sweet carrot vinaigrette, followed by seared sea scallops with a roasted tomato salad scented with basil. The four-course meal, in which the dishes are served simultaneously on a large sectioned plate, is a marvel. On a recent visit, I had a light, frothy escarole soup with white beans; a salad abundant with jumbo lump crabmeat and slices of apples; a ragout of lobster and white asparagus; and lamb sirloin with truffled fingerling potatoes. If I lived in Philadelphia, I think I'd lunch at Lacroix five times a week. À la carte, you might enjoy pleasantly sweet, honey-marinated duck breast and crispy wonton with a snow pea salad (\$11), very juicy Cornish hen with olive oil-whipped potatoes and French beans (\$14) or braised cod with grilled fennel and a saffron nage (\$15)—all in generous portions.

At dinner, the same delicacy succeeds in dishes that exemplify Lacroix's insistence on taste above all. The primary ingredient—fish, meat or fowl—is always enhanced by every other. He makes a superb velouté of green lentils of perfect tenderness, with nubbins of sweetbreads and a topping of foie gras in a Sherry vinegar dressing—a tour de force that shows Lacroix is anything but set in his culinary ways. Savory artichoke rillettes and leek salad with a confit of orange segments and shaved black truffles comes together admirably, the acid and tang of the oranges striking a perky note among the earthy flavor of the artichokes. There was also a little omelet stuffed with wild mushrooms, sidled with a quenelle of steak tartare and watercress cream—a big wow factor.

Best of all was a simple consommé of pheasant with black truffles. I can't recall the last consommé I had with the kind of richness of flavor this clear, mahogany-colored soup delivered. The only misstep among the starters I tried was marinated yellowfin tuna hamachi, with a radish salad and *fines herbes*. The crown of caviar was far too assertive and made the hamachi—already a full-flavored species—taste fishy.

Crispy cod, on the other hand, came with the brilliant idea of nuggets of velvety bone marrow, the bone itself stuffed with pureed potatoes, accompanied by shallots braised in veal jus. Scottish pheasant (in contrast to the usual insipid, farm-raised, domestic variety) had plenty of flavor, coaxed on by an intriguing whiff of pine, with juicy sautéed apples and crisp Yukon potatoes glazed with fondant. Very honorable indeed was a marriage of rabbit with Maine lobster (paw and claw?) in an herbed crepe, with braised dandelions, roasted salsify mousseline and reduced verjus—a crossover dish from late winter into early spring. First-rate New York beef tenderloin gained measurably from a side of warm liver and onion gratin with a touch of mustard oil. There was nothing wrong with Lacroix's whole roasted lamb chop, with toasted barley risotto, that a change from Australian lamb to superior American lamb wouldn't cure.

Next comes a rolling cheese-trolley laden with about 20 varieties, all in peak condition, followed by desserts of imagination and distinction. A very good chocolate soufflé is served with Spanish almond ice cream, and a fragile napoleon appears with caramelized apple cider and vanilla ice cream.

The largesse of a meal here is wholly reflective of Lacroix's own personality, for although he is really a rather shy man, he is possessed of generous spirit. At a time when he might well have coasted on his reputation, he is instead exhibiting the kind of energy and exuberance younger chefs might well envy or emulate, which says as much about Lacroix's basic geniality as about his immense talent as an innovator.

John Mariani's most recent book, co-authored with his wife, Galina, is The Italian-American Cookbook (Harvard Common Press).

Lacroix at The Rittenhouse

210 Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia Telephone (215) 790-2533 Open Breakfast, lunch and dinner, daily Cost Lunch menus \$17 and \$24; à la carte main courses \$11–\$22; dinner menus \$55, \$65 and \$75 Credit cards All major