

Lacroix

continued from M1

tain into an institution. His namesake has been one of the city's most beautiful dining spaces, an airy room padded with green velvet chairs that hovers tranquilly above the park like a medieval culinary oasis. But it had yet to truly reach its lofty potential before Lacroix, 65, eased into retirement last summer.

The arrival of new chef Matthew Levin, however, is proving to be just the energy jolt that Lacroix the restaurant needed. The 34-year-old Philadelphia native is a Culinary Institute of America grad and a veteran of Striped Bass, Le Bec-Fin and Aureole, who first starred at New Hope's Moonlight with contemporary pyrotechnics like tempura-fried lobster tails speared with pop rocks.

That gastronomic adventurism has evolved considerably over the course of his subsequent posts at the Bridgetown Mill House Inn, and most recently central Jersey's Pluckemin Inn. And the vision he has brought to Lacroix is ripe, revealing an artful command of rare ingredients and cutting-edge techniques cast onto the plate with startling creativity.

It's obvious with stunning dishes such as butter-poached Scottish langoustines with lemon and horseradice root puree and butterbeans tossed in grilled black olive vinaigrette. Or the Cuban



Chef Matthew Levin flash-freezes a curried coconut milk foam, the result: a crackly meringue cloud filled with Cointreau jelly.

pork belly — braised for 24 hours, its top broiled to a delicate crisp — that exsaporates in the mouth like savory custard ribbed with tender meat. Or even a garish of golden beets and asparagus tips tossed in gouda cream, an amber froth of vermouth and aged cheese so diabolically good it should be served on its own with a straw.

Of course, running a grand hotel kitchen, with its myriad menus and endless hours, is an awesome task that goes far beyond one chef's personal expression. And in many ways, Levin has shown maturity by knowing when to simply refine and polish what already worked.

Chief among them is chef Lacroix's blowout Sunday brunch, which redefined the weekend meal as the ultimate small-plate orgy. The normally sedate room comes alive in the warming Sunday light with a palpable glamour, for which all of Rittenhouse Square, it seems, shows up in its finest glitz. For a mere \$52, there is a jaw-dropping array of exquisite hors d'oeuvres and edible jewels that stretch from the hostess stand deep into the kitchen, where chefs slice grilled Vietnamese beef at the roasting board, and there's an entire station of exotic gratins (sweetbread and wild mushrooms? Tuscan bread pudding? Truffled purple cauliflower? How to choose? Like them all!)

It's hard to save room after platefuls of oysters, caviar with fresh blinis, and giant shrimp dunking in cocktail-sauce shots. I downed spoonfuls of eggplant caviar glazed with smoked chile oil, and smoked salmon mousse with avocado panna cotta. There were glasses of cauliflower and lobster cream sporting tempura-fried asparagus spears, salad bowls filled with heronem



An artful arrangement of 24-hour braised Cuban-style pork belly with black beans, grilled cutletfish and barbecue sauce. The quality of service is finally coming to match the food at lunch and dinner.

beans, and charred scallions with truffled maltake mushrooms.

And then, of course, there was pastry chef Fred Ortega's symphonic buffet of exquisite mini-desserts, a chocolate fountain with homemade marshmallows, and a basin of liquid nitrogen that deep-froze pods of curried coconut milk foam into crackly meringue clouds filled with Cointreau jelly.

I ate salad for dinner.

While brunch has always been a four-bell feast, Lacroix at the Rittenhouse was rarely able to put its food and service together with any consistency at lunch or dinner until now.

The service — always outgoing but often out of sync in previous years — finally found harmony during each of the meals for this review. Our splendidly pleasant server, Jorge Sanchez, never let a napkin go unfolded, or a push-pot of robot coffee get tepid on our many trips to the brunch buffets. And sommelier Eric Simonis loosened up nicely when challenged to find something beyond the cellar's prestige French bottles — and he succeeded in mixing some nice gems from Chile (a cabernet franc from Valdivieso), and a quenchingly dry Alsatian muscat ottonel from Barmes-Buecher.

At each meal, however, the kitchen was the undeniable star. Even the French fries at lunch — the beneficiaries of a three-day treatment involving duck fat and truffle oil — were unbelievably good.

Levin's most elaborate efforts, though, are at night, where the chef has added a handy à la carte option to the existing tasting menu. Among the highlights was an unusual "gratin" of rich mussel broth studded with tender mollusks, salty suggests of gascaille, and pillows of gnocchi that melted away like dumpling wicks. A magnificent rib steak, sliced through the midriff and spiced like two medium-rare meat Frisbees, speckled with a zesty Asian crust of toasted nori, sesame seeds, and bonito-scented sea salt.

The multicourse tasting meals, meanwhile, are a showcase for sharp concepts and prized ingredients — like the season's first Narruckett Bay scallops (a tiny harvest Lacroix divided up with Thomas Keller at Per Se and Alex Strain at Vegas.) Levin served them pristinely, but with a tweak, the sweet raw scallops stained in prime olive oil and citrus-veda, then scattered with the best crunch of tiny dried apples and the salty pop of caviar.

A thick fillet of black bass came with a "cannelloni" of minced shrimp wrapped in a tempura-fried seaweed tube, and a pedestal of lotus root stewed with mufled molasses and chestnuts. Raw squid was sliced into toothy seviche-style "aoddes" illuminated by a marinade ringing



Diners face a profusion of choices, from exquisite hors d'oeuvres to wonderful mini desserts, at the Sunday brunch — \$52 per — at Lacroix.

with the zest of grated Buddha Hand citrus. Meanwhile, the intensity of Kobe beef crusted with Japanese spice was magnified by a concentrated schmear of citrusy peanut butter.

Among the most startlingly good creations, though, was Levin's seafood "latte." This intense cup of roasted shellfish bisque, steeped with lemongrass and ginger, came topped with a dollop of coffee-scented milk foam, a twinkle of gold leaf, and a sidespoon cradling a nugget of salt-speckled tuffet.

Stirred together, the already intriguing soup transformed into an otherworldly potion of sweet deep-sea luxury with a whiff of smoky salt. It was at once profoundly complex, ethereally light and totally unexpected. So make that latte a grande next time. Because it's the taste of greatness brewing.

Next Sunday, Craig Laffan reviews Alphabet Soup in Audubon, N.J.

Contact restaurant critic Craig Laffan at 215-664-8888 or claffan@phillynews.com. Read his recent work at <http://go.philly.com/craiglaffan>.

★★★★ SUPERIOR

LACROIX AT THE RITTENHOUSE
210 W. Rittenhouse Square,
215-798-2533;
www.lacroixrestaurant.com

Founding chef Jean-Marie Lacroix has stepped down from his green velvet perch overlooking Rittenhouse Square, but talented successor Matthew Levin (ex-Moonlight) has finally elevated this luxury destination to elite four-bell status. He's maintained the city's best blowout brunch, but also infused the other menus with the inventive spirit of Philly's most sophisticated contemporary cooking.

MENU HIGHLIGHTS Tasting menu: Kobe beef tabot; shellfish soup with toffee; langoustines with scoria-lemon puree; black bass with shrimp cannelloni; veal with beets in gouda cream. À la carte: squash veloute with chestnuts and smoked maple syrup; Tasmanian trout; non-crusted rib-eye. Lunch: Parmesan truffled duck-fat fries. Brunch: everything.

WINE LIST The 500-plus-label cellar has a high-end Burgundy/Bordeaux focus, but also has more obscure finds from Chile, Alsace, southern Italy and Spain that reflect a list of great depth, if not necessarily great value.

WEEKEND NOISE A plush 77 decibels. (Ideal is 75 decibels or less.)

IF YOU GO Lunch Monday-Saturday, 11 a.m.-2:30 p.m.; Dinner daily, 5:30-10 p.m. Breakfast daily, 6:30-10:30 a.m. Sunday brunch, 11 a.m.-3 p.m.

■ Entrees \$32-\$48; multicourse tastings, from 3 (\$60) to 5 (\$85.)

■ Reservations recommended.

■ All major cards.

■ No smoking.

■ Wheelchair accessible.

■ Validated valet parking costs \$8.

OR TRY THESE

Here are two other haute hotel kitchens with new chefs:

THE GRILL

★★★★ Fitz-Carlton Philadelphia, 10 Avenue of the Arts, 215-529-8211. The departure last year of Terrence Foyry has sapped some glamour from the Fitz-Carlton's dining room, but it's been tempered by a quality contemporary menu from new chef Kevin Scrago that, with classy service and a well-padded classic mood, keep the Grill on the go-list for power meals. *Revisited November 2006.*

SOLE FOOD

★★★★ Loews Philadelphia Hotel, 1200 Market St., 215-627-1200. The posh deco dining room at the Loews has always aspired to — but never quite joined — the local pantheon of luxury hotel dining. Newly arrived chef Thomas Harkins (ex-Moshulu, Circa, Pato) has given the menu a stylish boost, but service has an institutional coolness. *Revisited November 2006.*

The Bell Key

★★★★ Superior: Rare, sets fine-dining standards. ★★★★★ Excellent: Excels in every category of the dining experience. ★★★★★ Very Good: Interesting, with above-average food. ★★★★★ Hi-or-miss: No bells. Poor.