

LAS VEGAS SUN

Chef Robuchon makes it great in the States

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Dining at Joel Robuchon's first and only fine dining restaurant in the United States, Robuchon at The Mansion, was an exquisite experience. I had met with the legendary chef during his frequent visits to oversee the construction.

Acclaimed French designer Pierre-Yves Rochon is known for his sublime decor. His credits include the Four Seasons George V in Paris and the St. James Hotel in London.

For Robuchon at The Mansion, inside the MGM Grand, he has designed a glorious setting befitting the maestro's formidable cuisine. Enter the dining room through the handsome doors and time stops. Diners are transported to the glamor and allure of 1930s Paris. Take one bite of the food and, as MGM Grand President Gamal Aziz said, Robuchon "ends all arguments about haute cuisine."

At Joel Robuchon at The Mansion, the Michelin three-star chef returns to the cuisine he retired from more than three decades ago. At a young age the chef's formidable food earned him the title of "Chef of the Century," and three Michelin stars over three consecutive years.

I dined there with a friend the first night the restaurant was open to the public. We were seated in a booth that gave us a full view of the gorgeous appointments and the crystal chandelier that mesmerizes with its beauty. Surrounded by the beauty of the art and posh decor we were enchanted.

In the kitchen with the chef was a group of Robuchon chefs, many of whom are seasoned veterans of Michelin-starred restaurants. All have been groomed and mentored by Robuchon. All will remain in Las Vegas.

Robuchon will be a regular presence, returning frequently throughout the year. Leading the team is Executive Chef Claude Le Tohic, who worked with Robuchon at his celebrated Jamin in Paris.



MAIN COURSE Muriel Stevens

Working closely with Le Tohic is Chef de Cuisine Tomonori Dazaki, who has worked at Joel Robuchon restaurants in Tokyo and Paris. Executive Pastry Chef Kamel Guechida comes to Las Vegas from Switzerland, where he has served as Robuchon's pastry consultant for more than six years.

These chefs have spent the past few months getting to know the best purveyors to ensure the availability of the quality products that Robuchon demands.

The flour for the tempting house-made breads comes from France.

Two price-fixed degustations are offered: nine courses, \$165; 15 to 18 courses (depends on the season), \$298. It is, without question, one of the most expensive restaurants in Las Vegas. It is an unforgettable experience, one that would honor any special event.

Our choice was the nine-course degustation: an amuse bouche, one perfect, plump oyster presented as if it were a precious jewel (it was), a fresh tomato mille-fuille layered with king crab. The rich red color of the diamond-shaped tomato and mille-fuille assembly of layers was perfection.

I later learned that the tomato was seeded, then steamed. It was flattened and chilled. One perfect diamond was cut. The trimmings were used for the coulis that surrounded the mille-fuille. We spent as much time studying the presentation

As we did eating each dish. So beautiful.

Each dish was garnished with different herb flowers artfully arranged. Slivers of lemon grass, julienned baby leeks and my favorite — a bouquet of chive flowers wrapped in a tender Bib lettuce cup tied with a natural fiber. So appealing that I took it home. In water, it lasted two days.

A tiny cup of light cream of lettuce soup was enhanced with a delicate sweet onion custard. One tender herbed scallop was cooked in its natural shell and drizzled with a lemon and seaweed butter.

We nibbled the tender, lush morsel, exalting in the flavors. Could it get any better than this? Yes. Pan-fried seabass with a lemon grass foam and stewed baby leeks was superb. Robuchon makes foams that hold their shape. It changed my aversion to foams in an instant. A rosy small slice of veal tenderloin in a natural jus was so delicious. There's much more to share, but space does not permit.

Anthony Bourdain and Las Vegas: I've been following the career of Tony Bourdain ever since I read the first book written by this Peck's Bad Boy of the culinary world, "Kitchen Confidential." He's brash, biased and irreverent and he makes me laugh.

In the October issue of Gourmet Magazine and on his "No Reservations" television show on Travel Channel (Monday nights), the opinionated Bour-

dain advises that he'd never visited Las Vegas and didn't want to. He did acknowledge that he accepted the Gourmet assignment for the money, but he didn't know Las Vegas, so he invited along as an expert on Las Vegas, Michael Ruhlman, a friend who promised to show him the "real" Las Vegas that few but insiders know.

Their odyssey began at "a local joint," the Double Down, billed as "The Happiest Place on Earth." The show aired Oct. 10. I watched it. I'd never heard of the Double Down. It's not about dining; it's about slugging down the Double Down swill. It's a

hustler's hangout for sure. Bourdain made it funny.

Not everyone will get the humor, but don't change the channel. Bourdain is a one-of-a-kind maverick with a patois distinctly his own. Oh yes, he found comfort and authentic French bistro food at Thomas Keller's Bouchon at the Venetian.

Five more eateries at Desert Passage: Five new restaurants are making their way to the shops in Desert Passage at the Aladdin. Already on board is Max's Cafe. Max's features three-for-one all day happy specials; an upscale bar and grill that offers burgers, salads and



COURTESY PHOTO

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appetizers and a selection of steaks, chops, chicken and fresh fish. Lunch items are value priced at \$3.99; next dinner items are \$6.99. Next to open is the Brazilian Pampas Churrascaria — spit-roasted meats and vegetables.

Sin City Brewing Company will follow. It is the company's first Las Vegas-based micro-brewery. These excellent beers (the light beer is the best light brew I've ever tasted) can be sampled at Hubert Keller's Burger Bar in Mandalay Place. Sin City owner/brewmaster Richard Johnson was previously the longtime Gordon Biersch Director of Brewing Operations. Sin City beers are brewed and distributed exclusively in Las Vegas.

Tacone Flavor Grill and Sbarro pizza are scheduled to debut in early 2006.

Short orders

Athens Foods: New from Athens Foods: Smaller-size phyllo dough sheets and snack-size mini phyllo shells. The new phyllo sheet is a 9-by-14 inches, half the size of the conventional phyllo dough sheet. The fill-and-serve mini-shells are ideal for appetizers and desserts. Fully baked, these versatile shells can be filled and re-baked. For more information about Athens Foods new products, recipes and more, visit athens.com.

Last food column: On Sunday the Las Vegas Sun will become a daily morning paper. It is an exciting time for all of us who will remain. My shopping and food columns will make way for in-depth, food-related stories. I'll still be available to all of my readers and e-mail friends who have food questions, especially during holiday seasons, but you'll have to be patient.

So, call or write long before you need the information. And please send letters to our editors sharing your thoughts. Keep reading the Sun. I know you'll like the changes.

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