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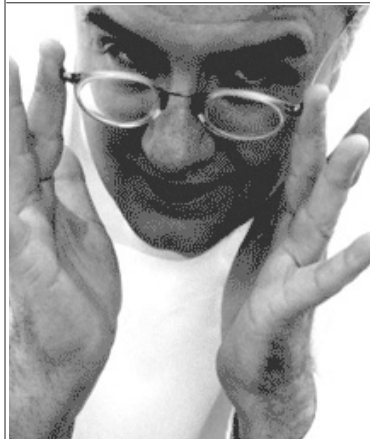
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WHAT DOES IT MEAN IF FRENCH SUPER-CHEFS COME TO CHICAGO?



## To Be Franc

By Michael Nagrant

LIKE A GEOGRAPHIC RODNEY DANGERFIELD, the Midwest gets no respect. Whether it was the California stylings rooted in locally grown politically vetted food of Chez Panisse or the haute wizardry of Daniel Boulud in New York, for many years, America's culinary consciousness, much like our artistic one, veered to the coasts.

Yet the Midwest, with its blue-collar denizens, immigrant culture and industrial engineering has a gritty ingenuity that required attention. In recent years, the Midwest has cinched up its rust belt and started deconstructing the roots of its rustic cuisine. At places like Avenues restaurant, pot roast and sauerkraut pierogies have given way to seared Kobe beef medallions and sauerkraut bubbles. The sweat of laborers that once powered the assembly lines now fuels our kitchens, and Chicago is the hub of America's food renaissance.

The most recent validation of this idea is the fact that the greatest of the French chefs are about to invade. According to a recent Chicago Sun-Times article, Joel Robuchon, once dubbed the "chef of the century," is planning to open a restaurant in Chicago at the end of next year, while Alain Ducasse (pictured), whose global restaurant empire has earned enough critics stars to form its own culinary constellation, dropped in to dine at Avenues amidst rumors of a potential new restaurant.

Ask any local chef about this development, and they gush.

Grant Achatz of Alinea: "I think it shows how important Chicago has become as a gastronomic city."

Homaro Cantu at Moto: "We are leaping toward the forefront of modern gastronomy and this is only more evidence to support that."

Rick Tramonto of Tru and Cenitare group: "Those guys are my idols. To get to Kumbaya with them would be fun."

As a rabid gourmand, I'd be lying if I said my stomach didn't leap a bit at their coming. And yet, because we have worked so hard to earn our own culinary place, there's also a parallel constriction of my heart, a burning twinge of protectionism.

Aren't Ducasse and Robuchon culinary carpetbaggers taking advantage of our Midwestern hospitality and standing upon the labor of our pioneers? Despite our success, the Tribune's Good Eating section still features a syndicated column from Wolfgang Puck. Hasn't Charlie Trotter or Paul Kahan at Blackbird earned a voice in our local pages? Legends, especially French demigods, cast long shadows, ones that may shroud our own identity.

Ducasse and Robuchon aren't actually coming here, their corporations are. (Ducasse employs thousands and runs twenty-plus restaurants and an assortment of hotels.) Sure they'll be here during the opening month and the food cooked will be incredibly executed, representing their vision, but we already have food of this quality. Guys like Achatz and Trotter are cooking at the same level of detail and refinement.

I don't begrudge Ducasse and Robuchon's desire to make money. They've earned that right, but the reality is that the pool of dollars is limited. I'd rather spend mine savoring a local hungry chef who's clawing his way to the top night after night, infusing his soul into the food at the pass of his own restaurant.

Some of the chefs I spoke with said that the arrival of the French chefs will raise the bar for fine dining in this city. Yet the bar that will be raised will have more to do with frivolous luxury than with the food. When Ducasse opened at the Essex House in New York, he offered diners a choice of expensive pens from Cartier and Mont Blanc to sign the bill, and tableside stools to hold purses. I say flick me a Bic and spend your budget on better food and service, or reduce the prices so women can carry light wallets.

Rob Levitt, a hungry young chef at Lincoln Square's Fiddlehead Cafe, sums it up, saying, "I have no problem with the big-name guys coming to Chicago. I just wonder if they will make it. Most of the expense-account set are at Gibson's eating a thirty-two-ounce porterhouse with a baked potato and out-of-season asparagus." He adds, "We have just enough high-end places for the out-of-towners and special occasions, and tons of hidden gems for the locals. The food savvy in this city want good solid food at a reasonable price."

Despite the Siberian nature of our winters, Chicago's not a communist state, and so the French dudes can come as they want and the market will determine whether they stay. So bring it on Robuchon and Ducasse, but be forewarned.

As Steve Chiappetti of Viand says, "Too many times other restaurateurs have come to this city and failed because the concept which is just being duplicated here loses its sharpness and nobody in Chicago wants a bad copy. We are proud of our original restaurants and the owners being in them to ensure quality. If the consistency is not as good as the original, Chicago residents usually won't go, and if they [the out-of-town chefs] just plan to stop by to check in every once in a while that won't fly either."

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