

DEBUT

THE FRENCH CONNECTION

Pomp, pedigree and a little playful persuasion are all on the menu at Bangkok's hottest new restaurant. Diana Hubbell sidles up to the bar for a serious meal.

As we struggled with our last spoonfuls of silken potato purée—an unearthly emulsion more *beurre* than *pomme de terre*—chef Olivier Limousin of Thailand's new **L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon** swooped by. "You had better finish those potatoes or *no dessert for you*," he admonished with a swoon-inducing French accent and nary a wink. Rakish and evidently deadpan, the man is the 12-year veteran of the culinary empire who previously helmed its London outpost. "If you do not finish them, I am going to call my mother."

He meant his *maman*, of course. *En France*.

It wasn't the small talk I'd expected in this most serious of gastronomic temples. The term "spare no expense" springs to mind as you enter the darkly opulent, Pierre-Yves Rochon-designed space, where the floor-to-ceiling curtains of crystal are Swarovski, the Warhol prints are original, and the gilded, custom-made dinner plates clock in at a cool US\$1,000 a piece. Truffle shavings, lobster, caviar and edible gold leaf pepper the contemporary French menu. If Mr. Robuchon wants to prove that he isn't going to rest on the 28 Michelin stars he's accrued over the years to impress an audience, well, mission accomplished.

Luckily for Bangkokians, there's substance and some fine cooking ensconced in all that glitter. Most diners will get a front-row seat at the open kitchen that purrs with hushed, mechanical efficiency, turning out Lilliputian landscapes of baby braised endives and leeks with surgical precision. Staff, attired in enviably chic



Clockwise from top: Chef Olivier; a scallop in kumquat reduction; "chocolate nuns" made of *pâte à choux*; ring-side seats at the open kitchen; an upright eggplant salad; a Swarovski-shrouded dining room.



black-and-crimson uniforms, trained around the clock for a full two months prior to opening in order to nail every detail, from the sculptural toast obelisks beside a quail-yolk-topped tartare to the sear on a single Hokkaido scallop bathed in a buttery kumquat reduction so smooth I would have happily submerged in it myself.

There was a lot to love on our recent visit. The thoughtful wine list, for one, which is heavy on old-world, organic and biodynamic vintages. The upright curlicues of foie and wafers of truffle on a plate with the dramatically understated name "potato salad." The shockingly aromatic cloud of coconut foam over a melting slab of black cod. The soup—steaming onion cream poured over chestnut-studded custard—that tasted like a crisp autumn day somewhere far, far away from Thailand.

Oh, and those dreamy mashed potatoes? Devoured. After all, our own *mamas* always told us to eat our vegetables. **5F Mahanakon Cube, 96 Naradhiwas Rajanagarindra Rd., Silom; 66-2/001-0698; robuchon-bangkok.com; lunch sets from Bt950 for two courses, dinner tasting menus from Bt5,000 per person for five courses. +**

COURTESY OF L'ATELIER DE JOËL ROBUCHON (6)