

BY MARGOT DOUGHERTY

# HAUTE SHOT

Ludovic Lefebvre's appointment to the kitchen  
of Bastide has the food world apoplectic.  
What's a chef from L'Orangerie doing with sushi  
rice ice cream on his sashimi plates?



## FOUNTAINS SET IN PALE YELLOW STUCCO

walls trickle lazily. A cadre of silent waitstaff—all men—moves among well-spaced tables and heat lamps as smoothly as mimes. Striated khaki-colored table linens match the Limoges dishes. Wicker stools appear for ladies

to park their purses. Christofle silverware and Riedel crystal catch the reflection of fairy

lights twined around mature olive trees. Up a short flight of steps one enters Bastide proper, the French restaurant on Melrose Place that assumed something of landmark status upon opening two years ago. Wide-plank dark wood floors give the feel of the farmhouses particular to the south of France for which the restaurant is named. One of the small dining rooms, with walls painted in hues of blue and green so delicate the color is lost after sundown, has a tiny fireplace; another

has a skylight and a wall of vegetation; and another, with the chef's table, has a window that looks into the kitchen and a glass wall that reveals the wine cellar.

Bastide began as the product of a partnership between Alain Giraud, a chef who wanted a place where he could bring the memories, flavors, and ambience of his native Provence, and Joe Pytko, a millionaire commercial director who wanted a place where he could bring his friends. The men met when Giraud was the executive chef at Citrus and Pytko a frequent diner there and became better acquainted when their daughters attended the Lycée Français. They decided to collaborate on a casual restaurant. The project soon snowballed. They took over the old Manhattan Wonton space and hired famed Parisian designer Andrée Putman to do the interiors. The remodel took two and a half years and, by conservative estimates,

cost \$3.5 million. Pytko delayed the opening even further with week after week of private dinners whose guests included Madonna, Janet Jackson, Tom Hanks, Rita Wilson, Nancy Reagan, and Betsy Bloomingdale.

In October 2002, Bastide made its debut and was immediately the toast of L.A. Giraud's Provençal cuisine was deemed elegant and earthy; the staff, culled from hundreds of applicants, flawless; the exclusively French wine list, impressive and intimidating. Bastide's reviews read like love sonnets. The *Los Angeles Times* awarded it a rare four stars. *Los Angeles* magazine declared it the city's best French restaurant.

Without warning, in June 2004 Pytko stunned Bastide fans by firing Giraud. "I was bored," he says. More surprising was his replacement: Ludovic Lefebvre, last seen as the executive chef at L'Orangerie from 1996 to 2002. Lefebvre is a different chef from Giraud. Whereas Giraud's cooking prizes harmonious flavors and tradition, Lefebvre uses classic techniques to turn tradition on its head and positions tastes on his plates like fighting fish in a tank. Critics wasted little time to assail the madcap creations: foie gras piña colada, *poularde* with praline-popcorn crust, tuna sashimi with sushi rice ice cream. The *Times* took back three of its four stars and accused Lefebvre of concocting meals with science rather than diners in mind.

Once again, everyone was talking about Bastide, which may be just what Pytko had intended all along.



## IN HIS CHEF WHITES LEFEBVRE RESEMBLES A

slightly errant altar boy. Dark hair parted in the middle is tucked behind his ears. He wears two platinum cuff earrings that glitter with little diamonds, a fourth-anniversary gift from his wife, Krissy. A moment of brooding evaporates with a smile that shows teeth so perfect and white they look purchased. But when the chef's jacket comes off, Lefebvre exposes arms tattooed with a large koi, a dragon, a star representing his younger sister, Sanskrit lettering for peace, and a Chinese character for double happiness. "This represents Krissy and me," he says. So does the KRISSEY emblazoned across his chest. "When you love someone, you love someone," he says with a wave of his hand. Not visible, above his biceps, are French words, which he translates: "Have no god, no master, just follow your way, believe in you, do what you want." Beads, chains, and good luck totems wrap around his wrists and neck.

**LEFEBVRE'S STYLE IS INFORMED BY AMERICAN EATING AND DRINKING HABITS. HIS INTERPRETATIONS ARE AT ONCE COMICAL AND SERIOUS, SILLY AND SOPHISTICATED—EDIBLE VERSIONS OF ANIME.**





Lefebvre's accent is thick. Born in Auxerre, France, he routinely substitutes an *f* for a *th*, creates *r*'s in the back of his mouth, and gives a Gallic dismissal to any semblance of *b*. "When I first come here, I only know how to cook French food," he says. "But I am in America, so I want to do some fun things. I like chicken, and I like popcorn. I think, 'How can I put these together?'" Whether Lefebvre is a genius, as Pytka maintains, an overzealous extremist, as the *Times* proclaims, or a gifted cook finding his rhythm, as Alain Gayot, publisher of the guidebook empire, posits, pretty much everyone is in agreement on one thing: In the kitchen, the 33-year-old is a man possessed. He puts white chocolate in potato puree and serves it with striped bass. He uses liquid nitrogen (a trick made famous by Ferrán Adrià of Spain's avant-garde El Bulli and now used by many chefs) to make ice cream out of just about anything he can think of, including mayonnaise, which he has served with french fries on a veal plate.

"I like french fries, and I like to dip them in mayonnaise," he says, giving the condiment a few extra syllables. "I like the contrast of hot and cold—dip the hot french fry into the cold mayonnaise. To me, this is very good. What I'm doing is very new for Los Angeles, and I know that. I understand people are shocked."

One of Lefebvre's *amuses-bouches* is startling in a seductive way. Minute golden cubes of gelée made from Ciroc vodka (made, in turn, from grapes), a sphere of spicy tomato sorbet, and a dollop of celery foam are served on a large spoon. Voilà. A deconstructed Bloody Mary. The disparate textures and flavors slowly lose their distinction in the warmth of the mouth, melting and moving like the contents of a lava lamp until they combine as seamlessly as the vowels and consonants in a word like *whoosh*. The creation is indicative of Lefebvre's style, which is informed by casual American eating and drinking habits.

#### POSH SPICE:

*Vadouvan, shichimi togarashi, and harissa* are Lefebvre favorites

His interpretations can be at once comical and serious, silly and sophisticated—edible versions of *anime*.

"When I was a kid, I was very fat," he says, blowing air into his cheeks for emphasis. "I love to eat. I love food."

His father, an insurance salesman, and mother, a bank secretary, worked long hours, so Ludo was often in the care of his Burgundian grandmother. "She loved wine and she loved cooking," he says. "She'd pick me up from school, and we'd spend time in the kitchen. She showed me how to cook." » CONTINUED ON PAGE 166



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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 61 » When he was 13, Lefebvre told his parents he wanted to work in a restaurant. His father asked a friend who owned a bistro if his son could spend two weeks doing odd jobs there. "It was the first time I feel good," says Lefebvre, who had never liked school. At the end of the stint, his father asked him if he still wanted to work in a restaurant. "Yes," he said. "I love it."

This time Lefebvre's grandfather pulled the strings. He was a close friend of Marc Meneau, chef of the exalted L'Espérance hotel and restaurant in Saint Père-en-Vézelay. He arranged for Lefebvre to have a one-month internship there, with the idea that if it went well, the boy would be hired. "The first day Marc Meneau was clear with me," Lefebvre says. "He said, 'I take you one month here, and if I don't like you, I don't keep you. I'm not going to be nice because I know your grandpa.'"

The initiation was not smooth. "That first day I forgot my jacket, so the chef give me shit. I was in a three-star restaurant, and I forgot to bring my jacket. And it was hot. So hot. I was already shaking and want to cry, and then I pass out." On day two Lefebvre was given a quick tour of the kitchen garden and was introduced to each of its 30 herbs. When Meneau called for chives that evening during service, Lefebvre was petrified. "I went out there with my little torch in the dark, and I didn't remember which was the chives," he says. "I bring back, of course, the wrong herbs. Thank God, one chef was very nice and he take me back and show me." Meneau was demanding, in the French chef tradition. "Believe me, when he walk into the kitchen, you're shaking," says Lefebvre, who stayed with him for four years. "But you learn."

When Lefebvre was ready to move on, Meneau helped him get a job with the chef Pierre Gagnaire, who is known for working with a chemist named Hervé This to come up with new cooking ideas. "He traumatize me!" Lefebvre says. "I was amazed with all the combinations he was doing over there. It was really crazy stuff!"

After four years with Gagnaire, Lefebvre did his military duty by serving as the private chef for the minister of defense in Paris. His next posting, facilitated by Ga-

gnaire, was with Alain Passard at L'Arpège, another three-star establishment in Paris. Passard, like Meneau and Gagnaire, is considered one of the most innovative chefs in the country. "Mr. Passard is amazing," Lefebvre says. "It is a school of fire. You learn to control the fire, to cook the whole piece of meat, the whole fish, and to turn the fish in the pan, to cook with your ear, to hear the sizzling. The first month Mr. Passard tell me, 'Cook with your ear.' I think, 'What is that? How can I cook with my ear?' By just listening to the piece of meat in the pan, you know if you are going too strong or too slow. But it was stressful. Very intense. It is a small kitchen, and Mr. Passard is always watching. Sometimes I go back home and cry the night."

In 1994, Lefebvre moved to Guy Martin's kitchen at Le Grand Véfour, the opulent, gilt-ridden Relais & Châteaux property once frequented by Bonaparte, Colette, and Malraux. "It is the most beautiful restaurant in Paris," he says. With Martin he learned "how to deal with people. He was a smart chef but also a businessman."

After two years Lefebvre decided to move to the United States. On his behalf, Meneau sent letters to five of the top French restaurants in the country, including L'Orangerie. All responded positively, and Lefebvre chose Los Angeles. "I don't know why," he says, "but I always want to come to Los Angeles. Maybe because of what I see in the movies."

He was 25 and spoke no English when L'Orangerie owner Gérard Ferry anointed him executive chef of L.A.'s most prestigious French dining room. He continued making L'Orangerie's classics, like the signature caviar-atop-a-coddled-egg dish, and brought some outré French touches to bear. A proponent of using vanilla in savory dishes—a trademark of Guy Martin—Lefebvre combined it with ahi tuna. One night Pytko came in and was bowled over by a John Dory wrapped in phyllo and served with a white wine-shallot sauce. "I've been going to L'Orangerie since it opened," he says. "I never order from the menu. Ever. I always have the chef cook whatever he wants. I hate looking at menus. One night the food was amazing. Subtle, provocative, extraordinary spices and flavors. I was blown away. And Mr. Ferry drags Ludo out of the kitchen."

**M**Y INITIAL VISIT to the newly reconstituted Bastide began much as those to the original had. General manager Donato Poto was at the front desk dressed in his khaki Armani. Maître d' Franck Alix showed us to our seats with a subtle bow. A waiter who looked like Ryan Phillippe's little brother addressed me as "milady," which broke the mood a bit, but not so much as a scan of the menu. I remembered the feeling of landing in India for the first time. Because there was no recognizable touchstone to temper the unfamiliarity of every aspect of the country, the strangeness was ratcheted up. Where were the mixed field greens, the roast beet salad that could safely launch me into Lefebvre's wild kingdom?

This wasn't a menu for a diner wanting to test the waters with one toe. It was a get over yourself, dive in, and swim proposition. So I started with the foie gras. The liver itself, from the Hudson Valley, was a beautiful seared lobe accented with crunchy grains of *fleur de sel*. An egg-shaped scoop of mango sorbet seemed radical on the page but wasn't on consideration. Acceptable foie gras accompaniments include huckleberry compote, rhubarb chutney, and prunes. The rebelliousness was only in the varying temperatures—hot foie gras, cold mango, neutral coconut. The fruit served the same purpose it always does: The acid of the mango cut the fat of the foie gras and revitalized my taste buds so they could appreciate the next bite. The lightness of the coconut foam acted as a bridge between the two flavors.

I followed with the popcorn chicken. Juicy, relaxed, tender white meat was molded into two short, fat pillars and wrapped in a praline coating studded with popped corn. It was sweet, but not nearly so sweet as a duck *à l'orange*, say, or what passes for lemon chicken. The flavors were distinct rather than cloying. I'd ordered the chicken because I thought it was preposterous, that its wrongheadedness was so comical it would be fun to write about. When I liked it, I felt a little embarrassed.

I left the restaurant convinced it didn't have a chance but found myself thinking a lot about Lefebvre's food. It didn't represent the way Angelenos eat; however, his technique was unassailable. The components—the fish, the meat, the poultry—were among the highest quality » CONTINUED ON PAGE 181



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I have been back to Bastide several times, and each meal has been better than the last. Lefebvre's current foie gras comes with coconut sorbet and pineapple foam, a softer trio. I love a shrimp appetizer that arrives in a giant martini glass poised on a cut-glass ball. The shrimp, marinated in pistachio oil and barely cooked, are as sweet and tender as sushi, cushioned by onion *bavrois*, pink grapefruit gelée, and an avocado slice. Osetra caviar foam and a teaspoon of sevruga cap the dish, and the mix is both primordial and luxurious. More rustic is a carbonara risotto, made with premium aged Acquerello *carnaroli* rice and flavored with pancetta, truffles, and coffee gelée. A raw egg plopped on top cooks when stirred in. Again, Lefebvre has extrapolated, dressing up classic breakfast food for dinner. The skeptical reserve that the art critic Robert Hughes calls "the shock of the new" has worn off, and the pairings no longer seem confrontational. After a few days in Mysore, hailing a rickshaw and nodding "namaste" seemed second nature.

It helps, too, that Lefebvre has been modulating his menus. Gone are the white chocolate mashed potatoes (just as well) and, for now, the praline-popcorn chicken. The sweetness has been toned down, which is probably a relief for some diners as well as for pastry chef Koa Duncan, whose desserts are breathtaking. Her butterscotch soufflé is so delicate, it seems ready to float out of its pot, but when the waiter taps a hole into its top for cream to be poured, it falls in slow motion. A tiny dish of orange and vanilla *granité*, an orange salad, and a *fleur de sel tuile* arrive by its side. If ever I have to order a last meal, it will end with this.

**T**HE KERFUFFLE over Lefebvre's cooking at Bastide may have as much to do with the restaurant's owner as it does with the menu. Joe Pytko is six feet five, 66 years old, and has a large forehead he often rubs as though it is physically painful to pull thoughts that

would be coherent to others out of a head so crammed with complicated information. His hair is thin, white, and approaches his shoulders. He has the appearance of Heidi's grandfather come down from the Alps and a reputation for being demanding and abrasive. Just about anyone asked to describe him, friend or foe, tosses "genius" and "difficult" into the mix.

By profession Pytko directs ads for clients like Pepsi, GE, IBM, and Nike. He directed Michael Jordan in *Space Jam*. His '80s loft-style office building in Venice is still the future side of contemporary. There are emblems of big spending everywhere. An enormous plaster bust of Bacchus he found in France sits in a hallway around the corner from a communal dining table for his staff of eight. There are two chefs and a stainless steel professional kitchen installed by Bulthaup. A mint condition 1969 Mustang is parked in the lobby, a gift for his daughter Sacha, who just turned 16. He recently bought an 1847 Château d'Yquem, a wine he's nuts about, for \$71,000. Three years ago he made headlines for paying \$35,000 for a 2.2-pound white truffle. "This probably sounds selfish," Pytko says, "but it's not. Bastide is a restaurant for me to eat top-of-the-line cuisine with my friends, the finest cuisine I can possibly have. If there are other people who can share that, God bless them."

Pytko's personality and money separate Bastide from any other restaurant. He doesn't worry about turning tables to ensure a second seating, about repaying investors or making payroll. He hasn't asked Lefebvre for a menu that will appeal to conventional tastes; he's asked for one that will get attention. "Mr. Pytko said to me, 'Ludo, I want you to do something this city has never seen,'" Lefebvre says. "He push me." While this might be liberating and heady, it's also dicey. Lefebvre has the ego necessary to be a chef but not enough arrogance to be indifferent to what diners and critics think. He was devastated by the *Times* reviews. "They call me the Freddy Kruger of cooking," he says. "Why they are attacking me?" Now with some distance, he has a new outlook: "Bastide is the best one-star restaurant in Los Angeles. Yes, I can say that now."

From Pytko's point of view, the more provocative the restaurant, the better. The

*Times* reviews, he says, made him laugh. "They're enraged because they don't understand what Ludo's doing," he says. "Did Stravinsky change the *Sacre du Printemps* when the critics booed him? No, and now it's in every other movie score. I'm not comparing Ludo to Stravinsky, but the man does what he does. Ludo is the closest to a genius I've met when it comes to food."

After leaving L'Orangerie, Lefebvre had hoped to open his own restaurant, but the project fizzled. He traveled to India and Japan for inspiration. He wrote a cookbook, *Crave: See Touch Smell Hear Taste* (Regan Books), which will be published in March, and worked with the Sushi Roku team on a restaurant to be called Ludo for the W Hotel in Westwood. As negotiations faltered, Pytko approached him about Bastide. "At first I think no, because Alain [Giraud] was a friend of mine," says Lefebvre. "But you know, Mr. Pytko make up his mind, and if it wasn't me, it would have been somebody else. He asked me to come here and to do the thing I always want to do."

Lefebvre often calls on Jing Tio, the owner of Le Sanctuaire, the high-end cooking store in Santa Monica. Tio, whom Lefebvre describes as his "secret weapon," finds cookbooks nobody else can and spices few have heard of and delivers them to Bastide. The chef's prize magnetic spice rack from Le Sanctuaire is filled with herbs Tio has scoured the globe for: sambar powder, wattle seed, *vadouvan*, *shichimi togarashi*, sumac.

These days Tio is helping Lefebvre come up with an innovative caviar service. On the computer at his store, he opens a folder of 3-D prototypes, all to be made of jade. Once refrigerated, the stone retains its coldness for long periods, negating the need for ice. "In China they buried the emperors deep, deep in the ground in jade," Tio says, "and they're perfectly preserved. Every hair." The design Lefebvre settled on—the "caviar bridge"—is a rectangular black box that will be filled with water and dry ice. Four strips of white jade, about five inches long and an inch wide, lie across the top, and each has four dimples to cradle the beluga, sevruga, osetra, or whatever roe strikes Lefebvre's fancy. The chef is excited, and a little nervous, as he describes how the vaporous bridge will be brought to the table. "I think people will like this," he says. "Don't you?" **LA**