

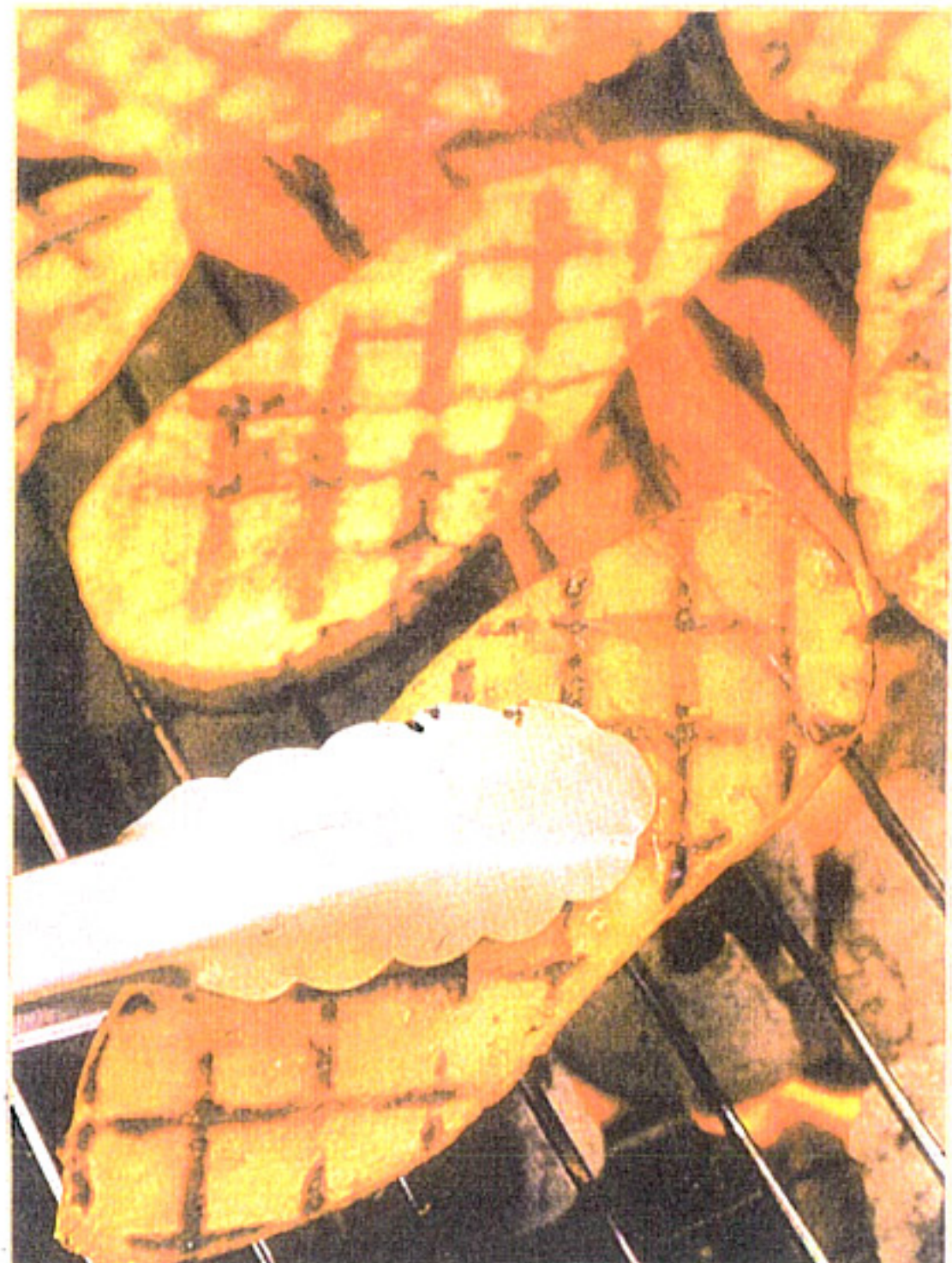
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THE BARBECUE ISSUE | WORLD FLAVORS



Photographs by RICARDO DEARATANHIA (lobster and binchotan) Los Angeles Times and RICHARD HARTOO (sweet potatoes) Los Angeles Times

LIGHT MY FIRE: Lobster and onions are more flavorful if cooked over wood. Chef Ludovic Lefebvre prefers binchotan from China. Sweet potatoes get the charcoal treatment.

Fireworks on the grill

Exotic wood, spices that pop: A chef in the spotlight offers his exciting take on an American tradition.

By LAURIE WINER
Special to The Times

WITH characteristic brio, Ludovic Lefebvre is explaining why he prefers grilling with wood, instead of the far more convenient gas method. "With gas, you press a button and it starts. Gas has no flavor! It's not exciting! It's not romantic! It's not love! Why not just cook in a microwave? Cooking should be a pleasure. It's a pleasure to buy your wood, to build your fire. It's like they were doing a long time ago!"

When quoting Lefebvre, who has just been named executive chef at Bastide, one just wants to use exclamation points. The heavily accented, 33-year-old chef grew up in Burgundy but says he prefers the American attitude toward barbecue. "The French don't do the pork rib; they don't do the beef rib. People here are more passionate about the barbecue." Yet today he is barbecuing neither the pork rib nor the beef rib but a leg of lamb with an exotic world-spice flavor, along with a couple of lobsters, some vegetables and a pineapple. He is using a brand-new classic black Weber grill, on which, he says, grinning impishly, he is grilling all these things in this way for the first time. "I know it's going to work," he says. "I'm a chef! This is what I do!"

Lefebvre is especially volatile today. "I'm scared, I'm scared, I'm really scared. Every day I go into the kitchen, I'm scared. I want to be scared. I want to push myself." He is scared because he has been named to replace the esteemed Alain Giraud at what is perhaps the city's premiere restaurant. The news shocked the food world, and just the mention of it sends Lefebvre right into the bedroom. He

[See Lefebvre, Page F5]



RICARDO DEARATANHA Los Angeles Times

CONFIDENT: Lefebvre massaged the leg of lamb with a spice mix and olive oil before cooking on his new Weber grill. "I know it's going to work," he says.

THE BARBECUE ISSUE | COOKING

It's all about the sizzle

[Lefebvre, from Page F1] emerges with two crystals the size of baseballs, one purple and one clear. "I need the power of the stone," he says. "They will be in my office."

But there's more. He pulls down the neck of his T-shirt to reveal two necklaces, made of citrine, beads, a Chinese coin ("for protection") and a string of nuts from India called Rudraksha that look like tiny hairy macaroons. He unfolds a small piece of paper on which is written a few key phrases, such as "thank you for my blessing" and "calm, no stress." One also can't help noticing that he has had apparently helpful Asian characters tattooed on his right arm, along with what appears to be a dragon. A koi fish decorates his left arm, and, he tells me, his wife's name is emblazoned on his chest.

A week before the big news broke, I had arranged to meet Lefebvre to see what one of the city's top French chefs could tell us about what we like to think of as a great American summer tradition, the Fourth of July barbecue. We had planned to meet at the W Hotel, where Lefebvre had been installed for the last nine months, planning to open a new restaurant — Ludo — in late summer. Instead, we are on the patio of the Studio City house into which Lefebvre and Kristine, his American wife of five years and an entertainment attorney, recently moved.



Photographs by RICARDO DEARATANHA Los Angeles Times

WHO NEEDS TONGS?: Lefebvre grilled the lobster about four minutes on each side. For the sauce, he uses citrus zest, tarragon and imported Echirée butter: "I'm French, of course!"

Wood and herbs

AND so, for the moment, we try to stay focused on the task at hand: barbecue. For charcoal, Lefebvre uses a Chinese wood called binchotan, ordered through Nishimoto Trading Co. in Santa Fe Springs, Calif. The sticks lie on the floor of the patio in an interestingly battered box with red Chinese letters. "The flavor is very smoky but subtle. You cannot smell it, but you can taste it," Lefebvre says of the expensive wood from the Wakayama province. He says charcoal briquettes or a cheaper wood will do; "I just love this one."

In preparation, Lefebvre coated the 5-pound lamb in coarse sea salt and let it rest for two hours. The leg was then rinsed, dried and rubbed with a paste made from olive oil and a dry herb blend. Or, as he says, "I give it a massage all over." The herb blend was concocted by one of his favorite tradesmen, Perry Doty at All Spice in the Farmers Market on Fairfax. To this Lefebvre has impulsively added a teaspoon each of two more dried spices, Penja, which is a smooth and woody white pepper from the Penja Valley in Cameroon, and espelette, from a red Basque pepper that is not quite as hot as cayenne. "The blend was perhaps not aggressive; this gives the lamb more character," he says, when I ask how he decided on the last-minute addition of the two spices. Then he adds, "I don't know why I put this spice on! It's about cooking! You take a risk! You mix things up!"

Lefebvre ignores the instructions that come with the grill; he leaves the dome-shaped cover off, modulating the heat by crouching down on the ground and opening and closing the bottom vent, which is, technically supposed to remain open. "What I love about barbecue is that it's all about technique," says Lefebvre. To see him hunched over the Weber blowing on the wood, his long hair streaming in his face, is to think about men and their relationship to fire. "I can't have the cover on!" he says. "Then I don't see what's going on!"

"It's all about the sizzle," he continues. "It's all about how you work with the fire. It's hot enough — you just feel it. You control it." He's an intuitive cook. He believes in using all the senses. He may even have elevated this belief to theory; we'll find out when his first book, "Crave: See Touch Smell Hear Taste" (Regan Books) is published in the fall.

Lefebvre goes into his kitchen to prepare the sauce for the lobsters he will grill. He plunges



READY TO GO: Fingerling potatoes speared on rosemary branches, zucchini and garlic accompany the leg of lamb.

two Maine lobsters in boiling water — merely to kill, not to cook. He then chops each one down the middle — using one violent, lightning fast movement. To do this, he uses the biggest knife from the set that Kristine is not allowed to use. She has her own set. "I would know if she used one of mine," says Lefebvre. For the sauce, he melts imported Echirée butter. "I'm French, of course!" He grates the zest from a lime, a pink grapefruit and an orange and scrapes the aromatic fusion into the pot. Fresh tarragon will be added at the end.

The lobsters, which have been brushed with oil and salted and peppered, go on the grill, meat side down. When Lefebvre decides that side is done (about four minutes) he turns them over. He's right; it is all about the sizzle. They already look delectable. When dressed with the sauce, the smoky flavor of the lobster meat is accented perfectly by the subtle variations of warm citrus and tarragon.

Also to be grilled are some vegetables that have been sitting in a little olive oil and salt. He places a sliced onion directly on the grill along with parboiled fingerling potatoes that he has ingenuously skewered together on a rosemary branch. He has also sliced zucchini and squash. He stares intently at the vegetables and sometimes uses tongs to turn them. Sometimes he uses his finger. "Chefs are used to getting burned," he explains.

For dessert, Lefebvre will barbecue a pineapple. Having watched his wife grill corn wrapped in aluminum foil, he has decided to adopt the method. He adds more wood to the fire, blows lightly, waits. Then waits some more. When the fire is perfect, he places pineapple quarters directly on the grill, to get a good sear first. Then he places each quarter on a sheet of foil, tops it with a slab of butter, scrapes half a vanilla bean on top, then wraps it in the foil and pops it back on the grill.

"Trust me," says Lefebvre, employing one of his very favorite phrases, "barbecue should

be very simple. You don't need to complicate it. Simple, and have fun."

Still, after tasting it later, he'll add a generous sprinkle of dried mint and dried rose petals combined with sugar, transforming the dish from merely delicious to truly memorable.

Influenced by art

THERE will be no barbecue at the new and somewhat redesigned Bastide, at which Lefebvre says he will introduce his new menu in early September. He is expected at Bastide in a few hours to meet his new staff — a meeting that will later be postponed — but he agrees to take some time to assess this extraordinary moment in his already extremely successful career.

The offer to take over from Giraud came after Lefebvre was deep into the planning of Ludo. But that deal had already begun to sour for him, he says, when he learned he would cook not only for the restaurant but for poolside dining and banquets as well. "I cannot do the thing I want to do by cooking for 200 people," he explains.

Lefebvre elaborates a bit on his already stated desire to do surprising things at Bastide. "I don't want to do la cupcake. I don't want to do tuna tartar. I want to push the envelope. I want to work together with different flavors, to surprise the senses." He says he's still working on a beef candy chocolate idea — and admits it is not ready yet.

And what other menu items is he envisioning? A loup de mer (French sea bass, a.k.a. branzino) with praline, avocado gelée, red beet sorbet and black cardamom. Also, a ginger soufflé with lime and passion fruit and a Belgian endive sorbet with beer gelée.

"But I can always change my mind!" he points out.

The chef says he gets his ideas from travel (he loves Japan and India) and from going to museums. "I look at a painting. Why did he put this color here?" he asks rhetorically.

'It's a pleasure to buy your wood, to build your fire.'

— LUDOVIC LEFEBVRE
Bastide's new chef

"Sometimes I just think about the color. I want red and green, so I put the beets with peas. I think about sculpture too. How does the plate look? I hate an overcrowded plate. Then you don't know what you eat and you get so lost!"

In preparation for his new job, he is also reading six cookbooks a week. "I was promoted too young," says Lefebvre, who came to the U.S. in 1996 to work at L'Orangerie and was made head chef after only five months, at age 24.

"I didn't have time to finish all of my research. I didn't understand why I was doing what I was doing. It takes a long time to be a chef."

He left L'Orangerie in 2002, hoping to open his own restaurant, but investors had dried up in the post-Sept. 11 economy. Now, he is itching to finally put his stamp on his own place.

"I'm still learning technique," he continues. "I'm very open. I don't know everything." His criterion for success is succinct. "I want people to remember what they ate. I want them to say, 'Ten years ago I had this amazing asparagus with this crispy bacon. I remember it.'"

In the meantime, the beautiful leg of lamb sits uneaten and ignored on the patio. Even Lefebvre's incredibly well-behaved dog, Sullivan, doesn't dare take a bite before his master.

Later, it will be carved, garnished with grilled vegetables, the rosemary potatoes and garlic confit and drizzled with an herb-garlic oil. But, for now, it just sits. Lefebvre is too lost in his own thoughts about cooking and his new assignment to eat the food.

"It's like all my life I was driving a Volkswagen. Now I'm driving a Rolls-Royce. I'm so excited!" he says. He means excited, but either one works. Above all, he is focused on staying calm until his debut.

"I would like to be a Buddhist," he says, fingering his Indian nut necklace, deadpan. "But I don't have time."

Into the fire

Binchotan wood is available from Nishimoto Trading Co., 13409 Orden Drive, Building J, Santa Fe Springs; (562) 802-1900, \$60 for a 15-kilogram box.