

Bastide

Leading a French new wave

BY HARVEY STEIMAN / PHOTOGRAPHS BY LISA ROMEREIN

When Bastide opened, in November 2002, it was seen as a Provençale oasis of serenity and classic cuisine. Los Angeles had largely turned away from gilded dining rooms in favor of places that bustled with energy and served Italian, Asian or modern California cuisine.

Today, it's evident that Bastide is leading a wave of new French restaurants that have invigorated the L.A. dining scene. Restaurants such as Mélisse, Lucques and Bastide are challenging the top positions long held by Spago, Patina, Matsuhisa and Valentino. These modern French restaurants avoid the clichés that can bog down fine dining. They instead treat the best ingredients with a French sense of refinement.

Bastide got off to a strong start, but it has been a soap opera behind the scenes. Before the restaurant even opened, Los Angeles newspapers breathlessly chronicled nearly three years of tribulations involving owner Joe Pytko and Alain Giraud, the chef for whom Pytko built the restaurant. Giraud, who had cooked for 15 years with Michel Richard in the upscale bistro-style atmosphere of Citrus, spoke wistfully of having a simple, rustic, country restaurant. He wanted to cook the kind of food he grew up with in the south of France. Pytko wanted an edgier style. In June, only 19 months after Bastide opened, Pytko and Giraud parted company.

The tall, scraggly-haired Pytko made his money creating television commercials, most famously the 1993 McDonald's campaign titled "Nothin' but Net," featuring Larry Bird and Michael Jordan, and the "This is your brain on drugs" public service announcements. He also directed the post-9/11 spots for New York City, getting Henry Kissinger to slide into home plate and Yogi Berra to conduct the New York Philharmonic.

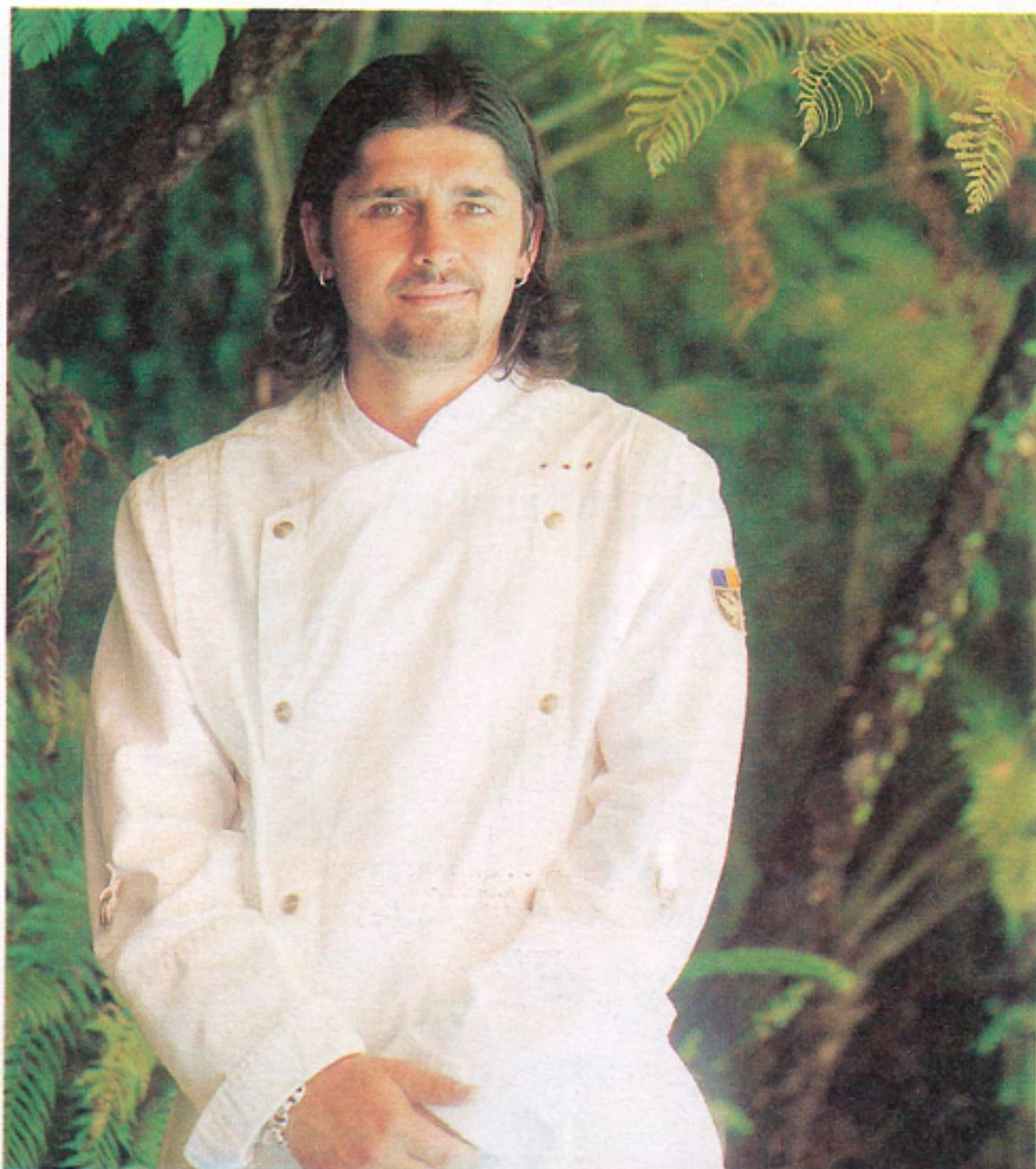
If Pytko wanted something more creative than rustic southern French food in his restaurant, he got it with his new chef, Ludovic Lefebvre, 33, who dazzled the L.A. food crowd when he



Bastide is leading a charge of French restaurants revolutionizing fine dining in Los Angeles, jettisoning the pomp typical of the old model and embracing the refinement of France's haute cuisine.

cooked at L'Orangerie, from 1996 to 2002. The new chef owes much to the modernist wing of France's elite chefs. Ideas he picked up while traveling in Japan and India after leaving L'Orangerie also percolate through his cooking.

Lefebvre's restless mind delights in deconstructing dishes and



Executive chef Ludovic Lefebvre has created an innovative French menu at Bastide, drawing on his years at Michelin three-stars such as L'Espérance and L'Arpège in France, as well as on his travels to India and Japan.

throwing gastronomic curveballs. One amuse bouche features spicy tomato, celery and vodka sorbets on a spoon—together they taste like a Bloody Mary. A scoop of sushi-rice ice cream balances on an appetizer slice of bluefin toro as rich as foie gras. Heck, it's better than foie gras. Coffee gelée melts intriguingly into risotto with pancetta and truffles. Shreds of fresh grapefruit add a lively touch and surprisingly appropriate character to the dark-brown sauce under rib-eye steak. Chocolate ice cream sings with the zing of black pepper.

For all the excitement on the plate, Bastide remains a serene place to dine. Stone walls surround a patio graced with terra cotta pavers. You can smell the lavender growing alongside the wall. Olive trees shade the 35 seats on the patio, and there are another 35 seats inside, making for an intimate setting that could have been transported from the Provence countryside. Bastide's menu and service are unabashedly and unapologetically French.

The wine list, too, focuses entirely on France, and is presided over by a sommelier classically attired in black apron and tuxedo. Consider the audacity of doing all this in a city where other wine lists offer up the latest trophy wines from Napa Valley, Italy and Australia and revel in offbeat choices from New Zealand, Germany and Austria. Bastide's list, which holds a *Wine Spectator* Best of Award of Excellence, is an impressive document, fluctuating between 1,300 and 1,400 choices. It comes to the table in a thick folder holding five booklets, one each for white wines, red wines, Champagnes, dessert wines and the 60-selection by-the-glass list.

The wine list mixes younger vintages with more mature options such as E. Guigal Hermitage White 1994 (\$68), Ramonet

Chassagne-Montrachet Morgeot 1995 (\$170) and Gérard Mugneret Vosne-Romanée 1995 (\$68). A wide range of mature Bordeaux are available, such as Château Calon-Ségur 1982 (\$325) or Château Lafleur-Pétrus 1982 (\$495). The trophy wines include high-end Bordeaux from great vintages. Cheval-Blanc 1947 (\$7,700) makes Margaux 1945 (\$3,100) seem like a bargain.

Credit the young and enthusiastic Christophe Rolland for putting together a world-class list so quickly. Only 32, Rolland was sommelier at the three-star L'Auberge de l'Ill in Alsace and at La Tante Claire in London before coming to the United States to work at Aqua Las Vegas. He has a winning way with guests, avoiding winespeak and using plain language to describe each wine.

Pytko, a serious wine collector himself, let Rolland plunder some of the aforementioned gems from his own extensive cellar. Bastide also direct-imports some wines that are unavailable elsewhere.

Unlike most L.A. restaurants, Bastide prohibits guests from bringing their own wines. That was a risky choice, but the restaurant has held firm on it. "I can sense the negative feeling from people who say they want to order Silver Oak Cabernet and ask why we don't have any," says Rolland. "But I love the challenge of finding a French wine that will satisfy them in the same price range." In a place like Bastide, that's not hard to do.

Offering five dozen wines by the glass—none of them boring—helps Rolland excel at finding deft matches for each dish on multicourse menus that change with the seasons. There's a four-course menu at \$80, a five-course menu focused on a single seasonal ingredient at \$90, and the seven-course Bastide Menu at \$100. A chef's-table menu at \$125 has nine courses of the most outré options. Wine matches for these menus start at \$50 for a four-wine set and go up.

Rolland makes inspired choices in these matches, such as a bright, floral Jean-Marc Joblot Givry 2000 for Lefebvre's lamb crusted with cardamom and black pepper. The wine not only

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suited the lamb, its acidity did well with the rest of the plate—soupy black squid-ink polenta, eggplant caviar infused with orange essence and a small pimento pepper stuffed with slivers of zucchini.

Now that Bastide has been open for two years, the service has acquired the professionalism and assurance that was missing in the early months. The seamless service, Lefebvre's food, the tranquil surroundings and a wine cellar accessible to a wide range of wallets combine to make Bastide the clear leader among the new French restaurants in Los Angeles.

Bastide

8475 Melrose Place, Los Angeles Telephone (323) 651-5950 Open Tuesday to Saturday, seatings at 6 p.m. and 9 p.m. Cost Menus \$80-\$125 Credit cards All major **Best of Award of Excellence**