



CHEF JÉRÔME FERRER

His rise to the top of Montreal's fine-dining scene.

by Lesley Chesterman

Fine dining has taken a hit in Montreal over the past decade. Talented young chefs have shunned the high rents in the city centre in favour of small locales in up-and-coming neighbourhoods. Elaborate dishes are a rarity on a scene that favours reworked bistro classics. White tablecloths have become scarce. Yet chef Jérôme Ferrer proudly carries the torch of *la grande gastronomie*. He's French, hard-working, devoted, and he can whip up one of the best lobster bisques this side of the Atlantic. His flagship restaurant is called Europea, and his rise from impoverished cook to one of Montreal's top chefs took a mere seven years.

Ferrer, 35, may not be well known outside Quebec, but his business ventures could rival those of any famous Canadian chef. Besides Europea, Ferrer counts several other endeavours in his mini-empire. In 2005 he opened Europea Espace Boutique, a pastry shop in Old Montreal renowned for its gourmet lunch boxes and pastel-hued macarons. Next came the bistro Beaver Hall, a popular biz-man destination with lineups out the door every lunch hour. He's written three cookbooks, most recently *Les Secrets des Desserts* (released this past April). This year he launched an online macaron shop (MacaronsExpress.com), as well as a cooking school within his restaurant, called L'Atelier. "I'm always dreaming up new projects," says Ferrer. "If I stop, I'm afraid I'll be bored."

Turns out this Narbonne native hasn't stopped since arriving in Quebec in 2002. With his two friends and partners, Ludovic Delonca and Patrice De Felice, Ferrer travelled from southwest France to Montreal, a city they chose over Paris after vacationing in La Belle Province. Ferrer and Delonca met at cooking school in Nîmes and eventually opened a restaurant together with De Felice in the Pyrénées-Orientales (about an hour north of Barcelona) called Le Panoramique. Yet business only boomed in the summer season. After five years, the partners began to despair. "We worked hard," says Ferrer, "but everything went towards taxes." In 2001 they sold and, with \$30,000 in savings, headed to Canada to open a new restaurant and start a new life.

And then everything went sideways. Upon arrival, they discovered their money was not transferred overseas as planned, but had been pocketed by their notary—who eventually made headlines as one of France's most wanted con men. They were left without a cent. "We immediately started working at odd jobs, collecting cans for recycling and delivering newspapers," says Ferrer. "I was working three jobs a day. Our goal was to make \$8,500 to pay for flights back to France. But then we found a café downtown that had been closed for two years. The owner let us rent it for \$3,000 a month and gave us the first two months free of charge."

Still without a car or even a phone, the threesome reopened the café and called it Europea.

The buzz began in foodie circles about a talented new French chef on the scene the minute the restaurant opened. Yet the garish space they took over—complete with faux snakeskin-upholstered banquettes, blue and orange walls, and an odd assortment of light fixtures—was hard to ignore. And despite the elaborate plate presentations, the menu featured moussaka as an amuse-bouche, brie en croûte as an appetizer, stuffed chicken leg and filet mignon as mains, and an ice cream-topped waffle for dessert. Hardly earth shattering.

But Ferrer and friends marched on. "When you lose everything you realize that things can only get better. Our hearts were in it, and we reinvested all the money we made in the restaurant. We didn't know anyone in Montreal, but we soon met extraordinary people who supported us. We were making nothing—maybe \$1,000 each per month. Our objective was for the three of us to work together. I turned down extraordinary offers to stay with my friends."

A year later, when a hairdresser's locale adjacent to Europea became vacant, Ferrer snapped it up and expanded the restaurant, increasing

cook. In restaurants, they want something they can't make at home. It's our challenge to offer them an experience."

Last summer the Europea team took the biggest risk yet. When an art gallery on the floor above closed in late summer, the chef invested \$800,000 to create a space worthy of his reputation. Now set on three stories, Europea is an elegant and airy space with steel-grey walls, dark wood floors, black leather chairs, and contemporary art. Says Ferrer: "I figure, if we fall on our faces, at least we'll do it with class and elegance. But so far the clients appreciate the change."

With 100 seats and 22 kitchen staff, today's Europea is a far cry from the little café of seven years ago. And the food has never been better.

A recent menu featured dishes like half-cooked/half-smoked king salmon fillet with a celery root, apple and Alaskan crab leg salad; Princess scallops and sweetbread nuggets swathed in vin jaune sauce; and whisper-thin crayfish ravioli served with a shooter of crayfish consommé. Ferrer features Quebec ingredients in such dishes as braised Kamouraska lamb shank topped with cheesy mashed potatoes, and grilled Boileau deer chop surrounded by wild mushrooms and roasted Ratte potatoes.

Asked to describe his style, the chef, one of only two Canadian members of Les Maîtres Cuisiniers de France, demurs, "I prefer not to label my cooking. It's not strictly French. What I do is following the idea of *produit du terroir* [local produce] transformed by different cooking styles. I serve tuna tataki, and that's not French."

"In restaurants, customers want something they can't make at home. It's our challenge to offer them an experience."

the number of seats from 35 to 80. As for the interior, Ferrer says, "We redecorated at least once a year every year—about 10 or 11 times in all over the past seven years."

The food, epitomized by the restaurant's signature dish, lobster cappuccino with shaved truffles, was constantly being upgraded as well. And rare were the restaurants that could match Europea for solicitous service.

As anyone who has dined out in France knows, an upscale dining experience always includes extras like canapés to nibble while perusing the menu, an amuse-bouche to acclimatize your taste buds to the chef's style, a frosty granité to cleanse the palate between courses, a pre-dessert to make you feel special, and a series of little sweets (*mignardises*) to soften the blow of the bill. At a time when restaurateurs were cutting back, Europea became *the* restaurant to offer all of the above. "Our only goal was customer satisfaction," says Ferrer. "Today's customer reads about food, watches food TV, and takes the time to shop and learn to

What is very French, however, is dessert. Ferrer employs five pastry chefs, including a bread maker and a chocolatier, who turn out perfect crême brûlées, parfait glacés, and sorbets. As a finale, diners are presented with a cake stand filled with candied orange peels, macarons, petits fours, and warm madeleines. And who can resist the silver bowl filled with bubblegum-flavoured cotton candy?

Though this kind of luxury dining may seem *de trop* in a time of recession, Ferrer's take on extravagance in lean times is quite different. "Now more than ever, fine dining is essential. The more hard times we have to face, the more we have to dream, escape. And by offering it at a fair price, we can eliminate the stigma of luxury. With our \$56 table d'hôte, we're the best quality-for-money restaurant in the city."

As someone who knows the meaning of hard times all too well, Ferrer adds modestly, "Ultimately it's the clients who decide whether a restaurant will be successful, and success is determined by a full dining room. We're booked solid. And we're working marvellously." ●

CARAMELIZED CREAM WITH CITRUS, CINNAMON, AND STAR ANISE (SERVES 4)



INGREDIENTS

2 C milk
¼ C white sugar
2 t finely grated orange zest
2 t finely grated lemon zest
2 cinnamon sticks
2 whole star anise pods
3 egg yolks
½ cup all-purpose flour
2 T brown sugar

METHOD

In a saucepan, combine the milk with half of the white sugar and the citrus zests, cinnamon sticks, and star anise pods. Whisk and bring to a boil. Remove from heat, cover, and let infuse for a few

minutes. Meanwhile, in a small bowl, whisk the egg yolks with the remaining white sugar until frothy, then whisk in the flour until smooth. Bring the milk mixture back to a boil, then strain it into the egg mixture and whisk vigorously. Pour the mixture back into the pot and bring to a boil, whisking all the while. Once it thickens, pour the cream into four ramekins. Cover each with plastic wrap (pressing the wrap against the cream) and chill until completely cooled. When ready to serve, remove the wrap and sprinkle half a tablespoon of brown sugar over each serving, then caramelize the tops either under a very hot broiler or with a blowtorch. Serve immediately. Ferrer suggests a glass of Muscat de Rivesaltes and a few almond cookies as the perfect accompaniment.