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Chef/Proprietor Jean Joho Everest

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Dining with Chefs: Chef/Proprietor Jean Joho Everest

Recently, TravelsinTaste.com had the opportunity to blow into the Windy City for a meal at Everest, where we very happily caught up with Chef-Proprietor Jean Joho, who opened the restaurant in 1986 and has been preparing authentic French meals there ever since. During our meal, we discussed with the ebullient Chef Joho – who hails originally from Alsace, France – a variety of topics, from his culinary education and his path to chef stardom in the United States to the components of our meal and his very French philosophy of cooking.

Our conversation with Chef Joho began at the beginning, however, with his French roots, when we asked him when he became a chef, and how. "I've been working in a professional kitchen since I was 13," he told us. "It's something that I wanted to do for as long as I can remember – since I was a child. When I was 6, I peeled vegetables in my aunt's restaurant kitchen. My mentor, though, was Paul Haeberlin [the chef for many years at the famed restaurant Auberge de l'Ill in Illhaeusern, France]. I learned a lot from him."

MAKE A RESERVATION

After apprenticing under Chef Haeberlin, Chef Joho worked for several years in restaurant kitchens throughout Europe, in France, Italy and Switzerland. "After that," he continued, "I spent time studying not only cooking, but also baking, butchering, cheese making, wine making ... I wanted to know everything. After that, I went to business school [at the Hotel Restaurant School in Strasbourg] and learned the business side of things."

By the time he was 23, Chef Joho told us, he was the sous chef at a Michelin two-star restaurant in France, where he managed a staff of 35, and subsequently at the Michelin two-star Hotel Euler in Basel, Switzerland. He finally returned to Auberge de l'Ill, where he'd gotten his start, and received a life-changing offer. "The owner of Maxim's in Chicago [modeled after the famous Maxim's de Paris in Paris] came and picked me up and offered me the opportunity to work in his restaurant," Chef Joho recalls. "I never spoke English before, but I decided, 'Why not?' So I came to this country in 1984 and opened Maxim's in Chicago in 1985, before we opened Everest."



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Petits Fours

Speaking of Everest, we wondered how Chef Joho finally came to open the Chicago staple. While working at Maxim's, he said, he met Richard Melman of the Chicago restaurant empire Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises, which was known locally for its casual, themed restaurants. Melman wanted to prove that he could do fine dining, too, so he offered Chef Joho a job as the chef at a new restaurant inside a downtown Chicago office building. "Maxim's was not doing well," Chef Joho told us. "The company was not going in the right direction – in fact, they closed three months after I left – so I left to open Everest in 1986. Everest was the owner of the building – his middle name was Everest – and that's how we were able to open the restaurant. We negotiated with him the name of the restaurant, because that's the only way he would invest. At first, we were a private club, called The Everest Room. We served lunch, because I was first thinking that lunch would be very successful for us. But from the beginning, it was always the other way; we were very successful from the beginning for dinner and we were never successful for lunch. So, two years later I closed for lunch."

MAKE A RESERVATION

House Smoked Salmon

Eventually, when word spread of its success, Everest transformed from private club to fine-dining restaurant. Over the years, however, it's become just as famous for its amenities – including its art gallery decor and its giant-sized wine list – as for its food. "Wine has always been important to me," Chef Joho said. "Food and wine, of course, go together. My wine list is the biggest from Alsace in the world. Not only the biggest, but also the best. But art ... that's important to me, too. I always was in love with art. When I worked in Switzerland, in a wonderful area with lots of artists, on my day off I was always cooking dinner for wonderful artists. So when I opened my restaurant, I said, 'Give me a piece of art. It doesn't matter what it is; just give me something.' From the beginning, I've always paired art with food."

Because our stomachs were hungry and our eyes full, we turned our conversation next to the food on our plate, which was whole-heartedly French and yet uniquely American. "Since I opened this restaurant in 1986, I was always focused only on American ingredients," Chef Joho explained. "Now it's almost normal, but back in '86 it was unheard of. I believe in the products we have here. Look at the cheese and meat course, for instance; I've changed things so that now we only serve Midwestern cheeses."



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Amuse Bouche

Chef Joho has been quoted as saying that his culinary philosophy is, "What's good today is not good enough tomorrow." Before sampling our meal, we asked him to explain that philosophy to us. "Food for me is personal," he told us. "When you take tradition, you take it and you change it. The traditions are important, but you have to come back with new traditions. When you come to Everest, you find different food than what everybody else is doing. I do my own interpretation of meals from my homeland -- newer versions. I express the 'new old.' That's really what it is."

MAKE A RESERVATION

Casco Bay Sea Scallop

Anxious to taste the "new old," we started our meal with a delicious amuse bouche, the Elder Flower Celery Papaya Gelee with Coconut Glacee. "Amuse bouche I've always been very big on," Chef Joho said. "It's the first thing when the customer approaches the table, so I always give people little things to start their meal. It changes all the time, but it's always the first gesture when somebody comes in, to say, 'I'm happy you're here; you're welcome here.'"

To read Part Two of the discussion with Chef Joho, please [click here](#) or if you like, you can read the [full listing](#) for Everest.



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Casco Bay Sea Scallop

Dining with Chefs: Chef/Proprietor Jean Joho
Everest

Next, we sampled a series of starters, including the Home Smoked Salmon Choucroute Galette and Aigrette; the Casco Bay Sea Scallop, Marinated Turnips, Alsace Style, and Pinot Gris; and the Vintage Camaroll Risotto, Wild Mushrooms and Quail. "In France, we always have salmon," Chef Joho explained. "Here, though, we have it with potato and cabbage; some kind of starch always reminds me of Alsace, and the potato and cabbage really work together. For the scallops, I serve them with turnips because when I grew up, we did turnips this way. My own interpretation is using American turnips, marinated three or four days, that we cook almost like a cabbage."

MAKE A RESERVATION

Camaroll Risotto

What about the risotto, we wondered, which is decidedly more Italian than French. "I always have risotto on my menu," Chef Joho explained. "When I made risotto in 1986 at Maxim's, I got a whole page in *The New York Times*, which said it was the best risotto in the United States. I change the risotto all the time -- five or six times a year -- but I always have some kind of risotto. It's where my Italian background comes in."



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Main



Filet of Dover Sole

Our first entree was the Filet of Dover Sole, Petite Grenobloise, Lemon and Caper. "Over the years, I've found all these wonderful purveyors," Chef Joho said when we asked him how he managed to serve fresh fish in the middle of the Midwest. "My fish are flown in from Maine. They're caught fresh and in the restaurant within 24 hours thanks to new technology. I have 80 coming in almost alive every day. If you want to be the best of the best, you have to be on a higher level."

MAKE A RESERVATION

Colorado Rack of Lamb

Next we had lamb -- Colorado Rack of Lamb, Sweet Garlic Flan, Vegetable Gratin and Jus Natural -- followed by Filet of Venison, Wild Huckleberries, Braised Pear and Alsace Knepfli. "My lamb is from Pennsylvania," Chef Joho said. "It's wonderful. Really good lamb. I wish all lamb could be like this. With the venison, I serve it with wild berries. In Alsace, you have lots of game, and spice cake is very popular there. I've been eating venison with spice cake to get the different flavors; spice and venison go very well, and the berries are almost like a spice cake flavoring."



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Filet of Venison

Finally, for dessert we had the rich Selection of Five Chocolate Tastes. "Dessert's important for me," Chef Joho said. "Remember, I was a pastry chef. I was co-founder of Corner Bakery in Chicago. No matter what, you have to have desserts."

No matter what, you also have to have some down time. Before we finished our meal, therefore, we asked Chef Joho what he does to unwind when he's not in the kitchen. "I like to read," he told us. "I'm a big reader. I like to travel; I go to Europe a couple, four times a year, and visit my other restaurants in Vegas and Boston. But my base is in Chicago. And I have a 12-year-old daughter, so I like to spend time with her."

MAKE A RESERVATION

(Chocolate (selection of five chocolate tastes

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