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Luc: Hat's off to Rautureau's bistro

By Providence Cicero
Special to The Seattle Times

If one picture is worth a thousand words, two pretty much sum up the raison d'Être of Luc, the unbuttoned Gallic flip side to Thierry Rautureau's fussier French Rover's.

The paintings are by Isa D'Arleans. One hangs in Luc's dining room and shows a stolid Loire Valley farmer and his wife, Rautureau's parents. Monsieur is the restaurant's namesake; madame, the woman who first mentored the farm-raised French chef in the kitchen.

In the other, hanging appropriately in the bar, a wide-eyed young Thierry looks caught unawares. Seeing that startled face above an ebullient crowd, one imagines a thought bubble: "Zut alors! How did all these people get in my room?"

This bustling, easygoing kitchen and bar is very much his room. Hard to miss in his wide-brimmed fedora among the tanned and well-tailored Madison Valley throng, the James Beard award-winning chef enjoys making the rounds. Like his quasi-namesake the Cat in the Hat, the Chef in the Hat is a natural impresario as well as a charming, irrepressible scamp.

Cheek-kissing two women searching in vain for seats at the bar, he asks, "Have you tried the Lucatini? I have one every day."

I wouldn't mind a daily dose myself of this St. Germain-smoothed Vesper variation served with a spiraling orange zest. And with it, a nest of souffl  potatoes   plump, airy potato crisps that deliciously mimic fried dough.

When he's not out front or across the courtyard at Rover's, Rautureau pops up in Luc's open kitchen, where chef de cuisine Seamus MacKenzie oversees the preparation of French classics like boeuf bourguignon



ERIKA SCHULTZ / THE SEATTLE TIMES
A painting of chef Thierry Rautureau as a child, created by artist Isa D'Arleans, can be found inside Rautureau's restaurant Luc in the Madison Park neighborhood.

and trout amandine, as well as burgers, pork chops, sausages and steaks. There's a pasta du jour, and even pizza.

It's a menu shrewdly designed to entice people back once, perhaps twice a week. Every day there's a featured specialty to be shared among three or four — a whole roast chicken or duck, braised beef tongue, Dungeness crab or roasted leg of lamb.

One Sunday night from the shelter of a dining-room booth with benches like church pews, I watched enviously as two people at the next table devoured that night's shareable feast: thick slices of roasted pork shoulder, a lofty potato gratin and sautéed greens.

Meanwhile, I sat picking with knife and fork at the sandwich du jour: pork belly and caramelized onions on a soaked and swiftly disintegrating bun spread with too little apricot jam to counter the punch of harissa-spiked aioli.

The sandwich was unremarkable, but so much else was unforgettable: boeuf bourguignon, for example, admirably yielding in an earthy, wine-dark sauce of bewitching intensity; and peppery grilled onglet (hanger steak), an appropriately virile partner for a posse of supermodel fries — skinny, hot and salty.

Terrific Moroccan-spiced lamb sausage, nearly a foot long, is propped on a pair of crostini cushioned with braised cabbage: one red and sweet hinting of caraway; the other green and mustard-sharp.

Trout amandine nearly afloat in brown butter (and wanting, I thought, just a bit more lemon) came beautifully butterflied under a mosaic of toasted almond slivers. A phenomenal pasta du jour paired shards of rare salmon and crisp pickled green beans with linguine in a tarragon-fragrant fish fumée.

Pickled mackerel teamed with mustardy potato salad made an invigorating summer starter that was far more appealing than the cool but bitter zucchini soup. Arugula tossed with tiny roasted beets in bing- cherry vinaigrette neatly captured the season's softer, sweeter side.

I wanted to take a spoon to the pot of chicken liver mousse with rhubarb gelee scattered like tart, twinkling rubies on top. Instead I spread it on oiled crostini, then on chunks of fresh, crusty bread. I did much the same with a



ERIKA SCHULTZ / THE SEATTLE TIMES

The entree of whole trout amandine, potato, parsley, almond and lemon at Luc.

Sample menu

Soufflé potato crisps	\$7.50
Chicken liver mousse	\$7.95
Lamb sausage	\$12.50
Boeuf bourguignon	\$16.50
Trout amandine	\$19.50

Luc ★★☆☆

French
2800 E. Madison St., Seattle
206-328-6645

www.thechefinthehat.com/luc/

Reservations: Recommended.

Hours: Dinner 4 p.m.-midnight daily.

Prices: \$\$\$ (appetizers \$6.50-\$9.25; entrees \$11.50-\$20)

trio of lovely cheeses also accented with rhubarb, this time melted into a ginger-spiked compote.

With either of these you might do as the French do and drink the local wine. A half-carafe of a soft, slightly oaky, red blend from Madrona's Wilridge Winery is just \$10. It ought to go well with that pork shoulder, which I plan to try, some Sunday, very soon.

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Drinks: Full bar; imported and local beers; wines by the glass, carafe or bottle.

Parking: On street.

Sound: Loud.

Who should go: Everyday gourmets.

Credit cards: All major.

Access: No obstacles.