



Cooking Is Not Improvisation... It's Developing An Art

A conversation with Chef Jean Joho
By E.C. Gladstone



Despite what you might be led to believe, every world-class chef is not on television. Take for example, Jean Joho. While the Alsace native has been recognized by the James Beard Foundation, the esteemed *Relais & Chateau* and *Bon Appetit* magazine, he seems to focus far more on maintaining the quality of experience at Chicago's Everest and Las Vegas' Eiffel Tower Restaurant (along with Brasserie Jos in Chicago and Boston) than promoting himself as a celebrity. Clearly the man enjoys a challenge: at both destinations, his food has to compete with magnificent views.

Joho's recent *Eiffel Tower Restaurant Cookbook* (with Chandra Ram and photographer Susie Cushner) captures much of the experience at the surprisingly flexible restaurant, from signature cocktails and amusee bouche to desserts, with his modern takes on French classics. Still, while it might function as a solid cookbook, it is also a beautifully-appointed keepsake, with an arguably impractical red flocked cover and gorgeous photography throughout. We managed to get the on-the-go chef to sit down for a brief dejuner while in Vegas.

LAX: There are so many wonderful cuisines around the world, and they are blending more and more every day. Why do you think the

chefs of France and the cuisine of France continue to captivate?

JJ: France is a big name. I've worked all around Europe. I spent around 10 years in Italy and Switzerland... But I think the big difference when you have a professional French chef, it's how he comes to be a chef, you study hard and go through different stages. We begin in school, we have apprenticeships. Other countries, in Spain, in Italy, they dump you in the kitchen peeling potatoes, and soon you're a chef. With an artist, even the greatest artist did some schooling to know how to use a pencil, make a drawing, before they became a famous artist. An architect, you can build a tower, but you have certain guidelines you have to use. It's the same in the kitchen. Even when you start with peeling potatoes. There's a certain way to peel a potato. And it's the same with nearly every ingredient you touch. Cooking is not improvisation, for me, it's developing an art. There are so many details you have to know about.

LAX: Do you find Vegas diners are different to those in Chicago or elsewhere?

JJ: Well you have an international customer here, and a local customer... But even in Chicago over the years, I have lots of regulars, locals, and I have customers from out of town. You always have a certain percent who are gourmet, and a certain percent who know nothing about food. It's anywhere in the world, not just the United States. Even in France, you have certain people who know and people who don't know! They may think they know, but they

don't know. I think in this country, it's better, people want to know more.

LAX: I just wonder, when you create a dish, do you think, what are people going to want in Vegas, what are people going to want in Chicago?

JJ: I look to what is right for the concept of the restaurant. We call this updated French classic, Everest is totally different, more creative. Brasserie Jo is more casual. I always say when people compare restaurants: you have two kids, which one do you like better? Yes, you have to balance your menu so you have something available for everybody, You can't be stiff. The food has to be lively and exciting. But I have to be very careful, I don't want to make a 20-course meal, that's not my style here. Also, I have to enjoy it myself first. I don't like calf's brain, why would I put it on the menu? If you're a gourmand, or a person who rarely goes out for dinner, I want you to enjoy it.

LAX: I was always very curious why the Eiffel Tower restaurant is designed so that you come out of the elevator looking at the kitchen. Even though open kitchens are nothing unusual these days, they are rarely the first thing you see when you walk in.

JJ: A very good question. In Vegas, you have to do something to be different. When we set the design, this is almost 12 years ago, for me, I wanted to represent what I'm good at, which is food. I wanted people to see, the first thing when they came in, what we are trying to achieve. The first thing when you come up, you see the food, you smell the food, and it sets the focus. We're not trying to hide anything. You can see exactly what's happening. This is what you will see later on at your table. But at the same time I wanted it to be away when you're sitting down, you're not seeing the kitchen.

LAX: How are you meeting the current economic challenges, both in Las Vegas and in Chicago?

JJ: Vegas is a touristy town, but over the years we've built relationships with locals. And people come back, I think because we have good value for what we give. To get a one-shot customer, that's very easy to do. When you have customers who come back, and come back, you know you achieve what you set to do. Certain things you adjust for the economy. But I always have had some items on the menu which anybody can afford. We are far from the most expensive restaurant in Vegas. You look at the lunch prices, they're very reasonable. Maybe you can't come for dinner, but you can have a fabulous experience at lunch. You can come here and have a salad and leave, there's nothing wrong with that. Chicago, all the other restaurants are open only for dinner.

LAX: Do you pay much attention to what other chefs are doing?

JJ: Well I enjoy what my colleagues are doing, when I have a night off, I go see them. But you have to have your own style, your own cuisine. What you think is right for you, you develop. I think that's the success of a restaurant, when you have your own personality.

restaurant, Everest, and I never imported one food from outside America. Anytime people talk about trends... people are talking about Sous Vide now. I did the course for Sous Vide in 1968. It's nothing really new.

LAX: The biodynamic movement is very interesting. Are you a believer?

JJ: Absolutely. I studied Rudolf Steiner on food. Organic is such a vague name. The name Organic can go in so many directions. I'm from a region in Alsace. We don't even talk about Organic anymore, we only talk about Biodynamic. We're way ahead. But, when you go back, what is cooking? You buy the best ingredients. You cook it the best way you can. That's it. You can make thousands of things, but first you buy the ingredients, then you learn technique

LAX: How do you feel the restaurants have evolved since they opened?

JJ: I think a restaurant always evolves. Everest is 25 years old and I never stop improving. I think Eiffel Tower is exactly the same. I'm still developing most of the recipes myself. I change with the season all the time. Now it's different, but 30 years ago, a famous chef in France would have the exact same



LAX: Have you embraced the popular trends, slow food movement, sustainability...?

JJ: Slow food we've been doing in France for hundreds of years. It's true! Sustainability, I came to this country in 1984 with my first

menu when they started and for 20 years on. You're never done evolving or improving, you have to keep updating and keep climbing or you fall. The day you're done, you close.