

French, American Foodies Chew Over Trends of 2007: John Mariani

By John Mariani

Jan. 16 (Bloomberg) -- It was a unique meeting of gastronomic minds last week in Manhattan when French food writers sat down for breakfast with U.S. colleagues and top New York chefs to assess where global cuisine is going.

Nine French food journalists -- Jean-Claude Ribaut of *Le Monde*, Jean-Louis Galesne of *Les Echos*, Agnes Lasceve of *GaultMillau*, Jean-Francois Chaigneau of *Paris Match*, Veronique Andre of *Madame Figaro*, Gilles Pudlowski of *Le Point*, Michel Creignou of *Elle a Table*, Jean-Pierre de Lucovich of *Monsieur* and Pierre Rival of *Serie Limitee* -- had been invited to New York to gorge at 17 restaurants in four days.

They took time out for breakfast with chefs Daniel Boulud of Restaurant Daniel, Jean-Georges Vongerichten of Jean-Georges, David Chang of Momofuku Noodle Bar, Geoffrey Zakarian of *Country* and Gabriel Kreuther of the Modern. Journalists included Gael Greene of *New York* magazine, Tim and Nina Zagat of *Zagat Guides*, Kelly Choi of *WNYC*, former *New York Times* food writer Jonathan Reynolds and this reporter.

After flicking their cigarettes into the rain outside the Warwick Hotel, the French met their counterparts at 9:30 a.m. in a smoke-free banquet room where they were served fruit, coffee, breads, quail eggs, three types of bacon and three different types of foie gras.

The event's organizer, Albert Nahmias, a sociologist and former restaurateur now a consultant and gastro-journalist, began by declaring that fine dining was moving "faster and faster" all over the world but that New York was now "the gastronomic capital of the world," an assertion no one in the room disputed.

High Costs

Everyone also agreed that haute cuisine was now dangerously expensive and threatens to become elitist, while at the same time returning little or no money to the restaurateur. Galesne noted that almost no chef in France is opening an haute cuisine restaurant unless backed by wealthy investors or hotel chains that can afford to lose money on restaurants that may cost as much as \$1 million per 1,000 square feet.

"Keeping the investors happy is the way to stay in business," he said. "One way of making money these days is for a top independent chef like Michel Rostang or Guy Savoy to open several bistros for little capital and to turn a good profit quickly. This has led to a real renaissance of bistros in Paris."

Investors' Demands

New York chef Zakarian agreed with Galesne's assessment, saying, "There is no way ever to make back your money on

a \$15 million restaurant, which is why independent chefs and restaurateurs either have to accept investors' demands or find the money on their own to open a lesser space."

De Lucovich contended that if a top chef who might run a 50-seat restaurant with three Michelin stars is bankrolled to open in Las Vegas, he will be asked to make it into a 250-seat extravaganza like Alain Ducasse's *Mix* in the Mandalay Bay.

The conversation then turned to the influence of experimental "molecular" cooking by chefs like Spain's Ferran Adria, New York's Wylie Dufresne of *WD-50* or Chicago's Grant Achatz of *Alinea*, which *Gourmet* magazine recently named the single best restaurant in America. Chang applauded such creativity and lamented that Americans should be more supportive of chefs he believed would someday be considered the artistic masters of world cuisine.

Most of the French writers disagreed. Rival argued there is a difference between creativity and lab experiments, in which foods are so manipulated that they no longer look like what they are. "I do not agree with this concept," he said, "but it is even being taught to some degree in the French culinary schools now. To adapt some of the techniques is reasonable, but not to copy chefs like Adria."

When asked why the French press thought Adria's restaurant, *El Bulli* in Roses, Spain, was awarded three Michelin stars, Pudlowski sniffed, "They were Spanish inspectors."

Fast Food

There was general agreement that fine fast food, of the kind Joel Robuchon is doing at his chain of *L'Atelier* restaurants in Paris, London, Tokyo, New York and Las Vegas, is definitely the way of the future, and the mania for more and more steakhouses in U.S. cities shows no signs of slowing down, despite the zealous opposition of animal rightists to slaughtering animals.

"I warn you," said Ariane Daguin, owner of *D'Artagnan* gourmet foods. "These people regard animals as human beings." She said actress Loretta Swit, who played *Hot Lips* in *TV's M*A*S*H*, "has compared the making of duck foie gras to the treatment Iraqi prisoners received at Abu Ghraib. And if states like California can ban foie gras, I guarantee you that veal, lobster and cattle will be next, and in 50 years we will all be forced to be vegetarians."

Just as this horrifying prospect was broached and the French were polishing off *D'Artagnan's* foie gras, the organizers announced that the meeting regrettably had to end: A pre-lunch was about to begin at *DB Bistro Moderne*, then lunch at *Le Bernardin*, followed by appetizers at *Morimoto* and dinner at *Daniel* -- undoubtedly with more foie gras to come.