

LAKE MICHIGAN shore

style & culture

february/march 2010

CHEF
JEAN
JOHO
LOVING
MICHIGAN

MATTO AND
NOT-SO-MATTO
ITALIAN
FOOD

INCLUDING

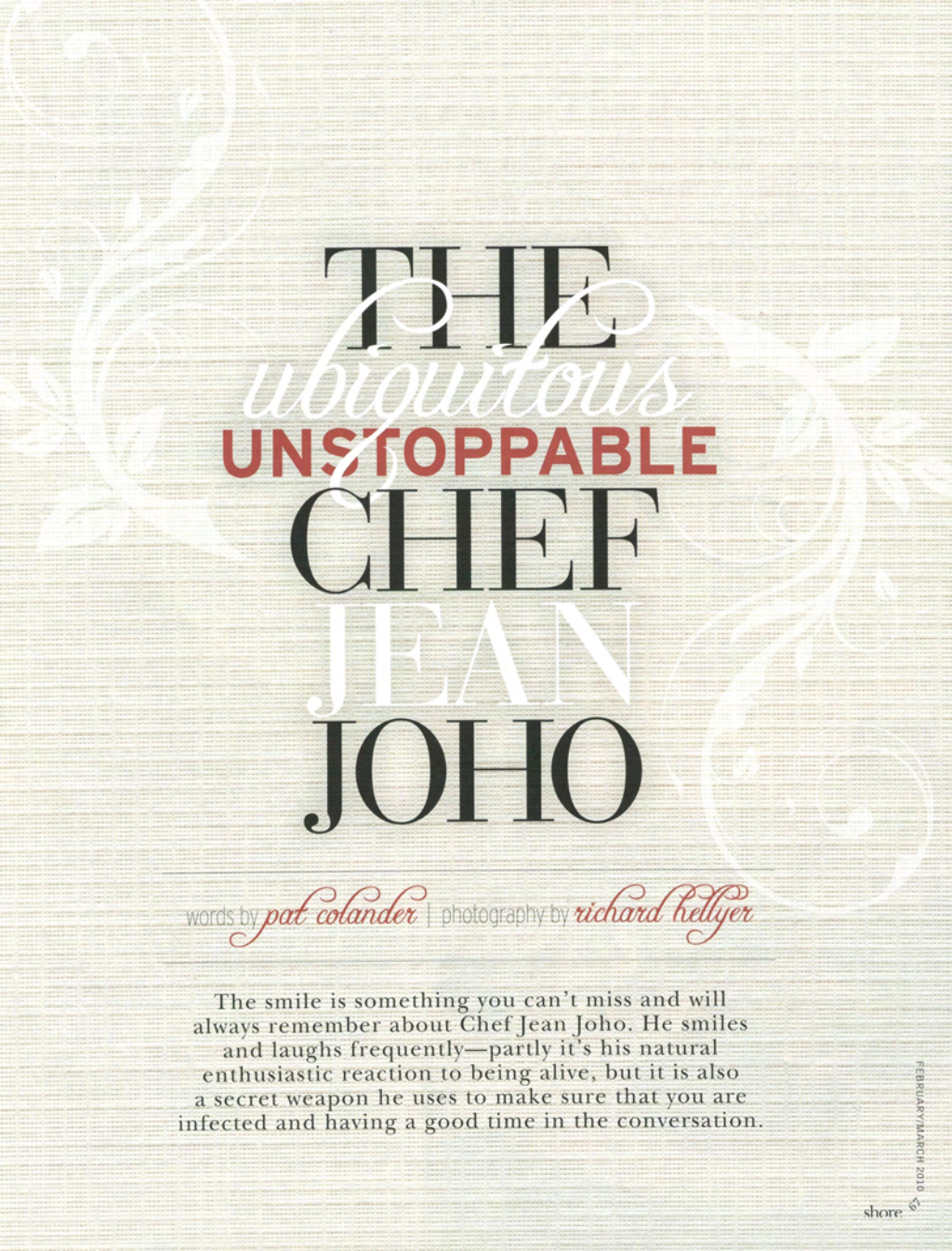
Jane Dunne Goes to CULINARY SCHOOL
Jim Jackson Drives in for a HAMBURGER
Jane Ammeson Talks PEANUT BUTTER

visitshoremagazine.com | 4.95

THE TIMES | nwi.com







THE *ubiquitous* UNSTOPPABLE CHEF JEAN JOHO

words by *pat colander* | photography by *richard kellyer*

The smile is something you can't miss and will always remember about Chef Jean Joho. He smiles and laughs frequently—partly it's his natural enthusiastic reaction to being alive, but it is also a secret weapon he uses to make sure that you are infected and having a good time in the conversation.

"I come to Chicago in 1984. I don't speak a word of English. I have some family, people I know, and a friend of mine took me out for dinner with the family. I see over on the cadenza, six-seven bowls, side dishes. I think they are side dishes for the main courses. And the people start dipping into the dishes. I had never seen this. We don't have dips in France. This is rude."

his eyebrows are up, Chef Joho is creating his incredulosity. I start laughing. But he is just warming up. "... and when I come here, people eat this corn. French people don't eat corn! It was tough. I was shocked at what I saw when I came here. People wanted me to pass them my plate, my dish! I don't pass you my plate when I have my dish! I'm still shocked by the size of portions, the big hunks of meat. I'm still shocked to see a container of popcorn." I am convulsed; he takes the drama up a notch.

"I saw a guy eating in the car. I thought he was homeless. The poor man, he has to eat in a car." I try not to spit my drink of water all over Chicago's biggest celebrity chef. "In

Europe, we sit down at a table like this to eat. We have a conversation. This is a whole different culture. My God, what were they doing? That's what I saw when I came here, so the evolution, how much the consumer knows today, the appreciation of food is at a whole different level. People are traveling so much more, you didn't have the stores you have now 25 years ago.

"Everyone dipping in at the same time, it's disgusting!" Chef Joho is shaking his head in dismay. He has never been exposed to Lipton's powdered French onion soup with dehydrated noodles. Now I am feeling really good and having a great time in this conversation because one of the only subjects I possibly know more about than he does, is bad food.

Chicagoans, NWI Regionaires, Southwest Michigan folks, all of us, have come further than Chef Joho will probably ever know. We learned quickly, we changed, we evolved. I am proud and happy just thinking about this metamorphosis. And that is exactly what Chef Joho is after when he is telling me this story. I am having a great time. He wants all the people around him to be having a great time every minute they are near him. He has nailed it. Again. This, more than any of his many skills, talents and accomplishments, is what makes him a genuine superstar.

I am in a fairly typical situation in relation to Chef Jean Joho: he affected my life long before I knew who he was. It was the early '90s. I was divorced and dating a guy I absolutely knew would take me to any restaurant in the world I wanted to go to, so of course I picked Everest, at the top of the still fairly recently built Chicago Board Options Exchange.

I remember every single detail about that night: the view, what I wore, what I ate and drank. At this point in my life, I was not exactly out of it, either. I had been to all the requisite high-end places—Arnie's, Zorine's, Morton's, Chez Paul, Jovan's, Le Perroquet, the Pump Room, Gordon, George's, Tango, Sage's East, the Cape Cod Room, Avanzare, Rosebud (very hot at that time)—but after you get past who I was with, I can't remember much about the food or the atmosphere at all. So I had my first real unforgettable French restaurant dining experience because of Chef Joho. Of course, I got to know him other ways too, before I met him. I learned about his visual sense by going to the Corner Bakery, where there were stacks of fresh bread and cookies piled to the ceiling with spotlights on them. I learned that he was charming and fun by going to Brasserie Jo when he was having a ladies' hat day and everybody was trying to look like Audrey Hepburn or Coco Chanel. Brasserie Jo is, was, and always will be the gold standard in Chicago for bistros. Luckily, I have been there a dozen times. The detail in the glass on the bathroom doors was as perfect when the restaurant opened as it was a month ago.

Chef Joho had been in Michigan for a few years before I knew about him specifically being there. And the reason I started hearing about him was because he did so much for local charities and arts organizations. The KitchenAid (Whirlpool) people in St. Joe, Michigan, would ask him to do things from time to time, and he likes their products so much he does. (I didn't ask and there is no reason to believe there is a more formal arrangement between the chef





and the appliance people. If there was, it wouldn't matter, because Chef Joho would never speak up about a product he didn't use and totally believe in, anyway.) Would the KitchenAid mixer that comes in a multitude of colors still have been the A-list gift of the moment for the holidays in 2009 if Chef Joho had not used it to make a pastry dish from fresh Michigan peaches at the Epicurean Classic in St. Joe last October? Probably, but we will never know for sure. We know what he was after, though. He was there to promote Michigan peaches, because that's part of his basic mission in life. He loves Michigan peaches. He loves pretty much everything about Michigan, but that's getting ahead of the story,

so many different things. You have to know how a hotel runs, you have to work in a butcher shop. It's important for me to know and touch bases with the winemakers. I never considered myself a winemaker, but I have spent a lot of time in wine cellars—that's the fun part of the hotel and restaurant business."

CHEF JEAN JOHO

To get to Michigan, he had to first get to Chicago, where the story really begins. Born in Alsace, near the Austrian border, Joho began his career at a French restaurant when he was 13 years old. He actually had formal training later, but he was also working at a younger age at a family-owned restaurant. "I had my picture taken in a chef uniform when I was eight years old. My aunt owned a restaurant and when the other kids went to camp, I was spending time in the kitchen. In Alsace, where I was for many years, I learned to cook first."

Chef Joho had three sisters and one brother and he grew up in the middle. "My father was a successful businessman," he explains. "And he always had to entertain, sometimes at home. So I learned very early how to be polite, how to take a customer out in a restaurant. When we made food at home, it was regional cooking. I learned that you always want to give your customer the best, this is very important." On top of the training at home, he got a rigorous food education outside, too. He learned baking, pastry-making, butchering and cheese-making and finally went to hotel school in Strasbourg and business school. "All this learning was to get more experience, because in this business you have to know

Jean Joho began working full-time when he was 13 as an apprentice for Paul Haeberlin of L'Auberge de Ill in Alsace. "You start an apprenticeship at age 12 to 14 at the bottom of the line," he explains, because "you have to build yourself up through experience to be a chef after so many years in a profession." And it is good that Chef Joho started early, because he ended up an executive chef of a Michelin 2-star restaurant running a 35-person staff when he was 23 years old. That has to be some kind of record, but at least it explains why he is way younger than the grand old man you are expecting when you finally meet him. (He is also very humble, but that has nothing to do with lack of experience.) Did he ever feel like he was missing out on his youth? Didn't he want to be off sometimes when everyone else was off having fun? "You are in a profession to serve," he says. "You don't enter this profession otherwise. To be a chef and own restaurants you have so many satisfactions. You are here to serve them and you want them to eat and you want them to smile."

After France, Chef Joho worked in Germany, Switzerland and Italy for almost 10 years. "I ended up with this big back-



ground in Italian food. That region is so different. It's all about home-cooking," he says. He came to Chicago for the opportunity to reopen (you would probably say rebrand nowadays) Maxim's of Paris in Chicago in 1985. That project was then part of the empire of entrepreneur George Badonsky, back in the days when restaurateurs had real marquee value.

Over the course of a few months Jean Joho brought five chefs with him from France and was able to achieve a new level in fine dining in the city. "I was the first person to have a seven-course meal that you could just come in and order. No one had a tasting menu then." So the *New York Times* restaurant critic Craig Claiborne writes about Chef Joho and Maxim's on the front page of the food section. (Joho couldn't read English at the time enough to know what Claiborne was saying in the article, but one of his points was that Joho made the best risotto in the country.) That was a huge unexpected surprise.

So then one night Rich Melman (Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises, a company started in 1971 that now owns, partners with or manages 75 important restaurants, some of the biggest brand names in the business) came to eat at

Maxim's. As Chef Joho recalls, Melman probably came there more than once, actually. But one day he decided it was time to leave Maxim's and he became partners with Melman to launch Everest in 1986 and eventually the Corner Bakery, Brasserie Jo (in Chicago and Boston) and Eiffel Tower in Las Vegas. Joho and Melman have a 25-year plan for success, he explains. And they are on target. "I brought the five chefs because I knew I could not be successful without them. The big handicap in Chicago at the time was where to find all this food. We had to get produce shipped from California and somebody to fly in fish every day. In Europe I was really spoiled. The ingredients were easy to get. Here at first I had to search to find a wonderful organic farm that raised chicken. But I did."

Cheese was pretty much the same story. In 1986, there were two companies making all the cheese and he didn't like either one that much. He kept searching and other cheese-makers came along. Chef Joho sounds very ho-hum about these life changes, and when I

question the lack of drama he says simply, "I like challenge in life and challenging is risky."

Chasing winemakers brought him to Michigan not long after he got to Chicago. (Though there is no Michigan wine on the list at Brasserie Jo, Wyncroft Chardonnay from Buchanan is on his list at Everest. Chef Joho also loves whites from Round Barn, Hickory Creek Chardonnay and the

wines from Domaine Berrien.)

"Many of the good ones [winemakers] are my personal friends," Chef Joho explains. "Each one is an individual who makes what he likes. They stay humble for what they do and they have nice selections. They specialize in somewhat different areas and have good choices."

WHY MICHIGAN

The way he remembers it, Chef Joho first heard about Michigan in 1985, from the Uptons who own Tabor Hill. (David Upton died almost two years ago now.) "So I drove one day to meet a winemaker and that was the first time I realized how close we were to wine and how nice it was to see a vineyard only an hour's drive away." He soon met Jim Lester, the owner and winemaker at Wyncroft. "Wow, they make pretty good stuff here," Joho discovered. "The best way to know a country every place you go is to go outside." And so the chef had no problem meeting people.

"The whole area of the Lake Michigan shore has wonderful people growing asparagus, peas, fresh fruit, beets, potatoes. I have a very good friend, Christine Ferber, and she's one of the top jam makers in the world. She comes in here in the beginning of July and we do jams together. Bit of Swiss is one of the top five bakeries in the country." And regarding the French artisanal cheeses, the Camembert, he says, "You cannot find any better in France. This wonderful little region is real small and it is so great to have this."

Chef Joho knows the history of the Midwest and the story of the agricultural riches and the diversity: "You have not just one kind of blueberry in Michigan, you have many. You have the best kind and that is just the beginning. There's spinach, peaches, pumpkins, squash and walnuts."

"It's about making people happy, and that's why the ingredients are a key point. Creating is a big word, even if you are creating a soup. Edison didn't create electricity overnight, it happens because of an involvement on your daily work. It's something new—it's an evolution of your daily practice of what you are doing. If I have bad ingredients I can make no food."

"Southwest Michigan is so close to Chicago, but it changes when you go to Michigan between the seaside and the countryside. There is so much going on in agriculture. I could never live somewhere where nothing grows and there are no farmers."

We all complain about the weather, but Chef Joho does not. (And this is a person who goes to Las Vegas twice a

"You are in a profession to serve, you don't enter this profession otherwise. To be a chef and own restaurants you have so many satisfactions. You are here to serve them and you want them to eat and you want them to smile."

month.) The weather, he says, makes the crop diversity possible, lots of different trees, lots of different grains. "I like seasons, springtime, and then harvest time you drive around and see the grapes." Anyway, he is used to it. Latitude 47 degrees in Southwest Michigan is the same as Alsace. "Yes we have a winter, nothing wrong to have a season and I want a season to cycle. This is happiness," he explains. "The summer is coming, you get happy. You get more relaxed in winter, sitting by the fireplace and reading a book, spending more time and sharing with other people." The sharing part I get; somehow I can't imagine Chef Jean Joho sitting around reading a book—maybe a computer screen, maybe his iPhone. (He is already on his second iPhone; the battery life is giving him problems. He checks the euro at least three times a day. He shakes his head—it's up today, a tough market, he says.)

SHOW BIZ

Several months ago, Chef Joho was a judge, along with Hubert Keller and Joel Bouchon, on a French-themed *Top Chef*, the one show in the entire series that I think everyone in our world has seen. Of course, he was exactly the same on the show as he is in person. Cocked eyebrow, excellent shag haircut (Keller ought to get the number of Joho's stylist), gorgeous smile and criticism that hit it right on. When Joho answered first, the others just couldn't add much. Chef Joho liked being on the show because it got him together with other world-class chefs, something he can't do that often. He is a member of a few prestigious clubs: the Relais Chateaux / Relais Gourmand, Le Grand Table Du Monde Traditions & Qualité and Maître Cuisiniers de France, small, elite clubs of 120 great chefs from all over the world. Chef Joho attends the meetings when he can. I have a feeling it would be a fun game to spend all day naming cities and having Chef Joho tell you the best restaurant in that city. What a great iPhone app that would make.

Now we are talking about *Ratatouille* (the movie) and getting sentimental. "I just couldn't get over the rats, though," Chef Joho shakes his head sadly. "But it's true that once you have the sensation of a great dish, you want to experience it again. That's the same reason it will never be the same or better. It is something sentimental, you remember where you ate, you can't compare home-cooking.

"I have a dish in my head for the longest time. I was only 3 or 4 years old and my grandmother made scrambled eggs—it had eggs, cream, salt, pepper and chives, and she was at a woodstove, stirring to get a certain consistency. Do I have the same ingredients, the cream, the chive, everything? Of course. But I do not know how much love she puts in the eggs. The smell no matter how you try you cannot produce it, you cannot get the emotional part." (He loves to collect movies about food and wine.)

He likes to do promotions, but has to be very picky about which ones. He was happy to appear at the Epicurean Classic in St. Joe last fall, because "it was great for Southwest Michigan to promote what's happening there. It was part of the education. When you have all this food and beverage and entertaining and people don't know about it, you have

to do more of that." And that reminds him of another reason Michigan is like Alsace. "In Alsace you go see the winemakers and always taste the wine and you know how it ages. And we do the tastings in Michigan like that. [The winemakers] take the right approach; they know where they are and what they can do. Drinking Michigan wine is different than drinking a wine made 10,000 miles away. Diversity always brings life, change, culture and combinations.

"I am healthy. I have a good family. I am happily married, I have a great daughter and it's true. I have everything." Chef Joho doesn't have quite everything yet. He is actually about to get a new stove from KitchenAid that has a steam oven for his Michigan house. He loves to cook there when he is home, which he rarely is. He also has a pizza oven in the finished barn, where there is dining room table space for twenty-four. "My wife is great about stuff like that!"

he says. "You just have to accept yourself, and you have to organize yourself. You have to make sure you spend some time with your daughter, even though you can never spend enough. There is so much you have to do in life that is so difficult that if you have a chance to do what you want to do, you just have to do it." ❧



Great Thoughts FROM Chef Joho

Julia Child was a "fabulous teacher for the audience" and "Jacques Pepin was a perfect technician." A wonderful combination.

At Everest, Chef Joho says, he always wears his "whites." It is a different atmosphere and feeling.

His advice is to stay positive and "work it out for yourself to make it worthwhile."

Chef Joho likes to pair rich and poor: like eggs with white truffle; cabbage soup with sturgeon caviar; and turnips and foie gras.

"I don't do politics. I have never found a great chef who is a politician. And I'm still looking for a politician that has a fabulous restaurant."

"I believe the person has to eat what they like to eat. It's nutrition, but it's also enjoyment about what you like to do. If you are in the mood to eat barnacles, then you have to eat barnacles."