

AN APPETIZING ASCENT

*Chef Laurent Tourondel talks
about LT Steak & Seafood and
upcoming restaurants*

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Chef Laurent Tourondel's New York restaurant, The Vine, at the Eventi Hotel is filling up with the dinner crowd when I arrive for our interview. The intimate space boasts high ceilings and a wall of windows that literally open up to promote an alfresco dining feel. Suspended above most of the dining area is a large artistic rope-light installation. The menu is "creative American" and features breakfast offerings, cocktails, and dishes like Black Garlic Charred Hanger Steak, Octopus Carpaccio, and Hazelnut Cocoa Puff Bar.

Laurent has a reputation and initials that precede him. He is the award-winning chef-restaurateur behind the multi-million-dollar BLT (Bistro Laurent Tourondel) empire with BLT Burger, BLT Steak..., and helms restaurants that include LT Burger, LT Steak & Seafood, Arlington Club... found in New York, Las Vegas, Hong Kong, Kazakhstan, the list goes on. His hallmarks: elevated seasonal cuisine served in a contemporary, relaxed atmosphere. And let's not forget his beyond-delicious oversized popovers.

Laurent, who is dressed in his chef's whites, joins me at a booth. This summer, Laurent transformed Miami's BLT Steak into LT Steak & Seafood—a modern steak and seafood house, whose menu embraces a seasonal, innovative approach. Situated within The Betsy-South Beach, this is only one of the

three culinary concepts Laurent intends to bring to the hotel in the coming months. "I have a special relationship with The Betsy Hotel because I've been here for a long time. I like the hotel. I like the vibe... What I like the most is the approach with the customer—the way they treat people... They have a cool band at the bar with jazz and local music sometimes, very Cuban. From a cultural standpoint, it's a bit more interesting than most hotels in Miami." A native of France, Laurent's words are drenched in a thick French accent.

Those familiar with Laurent's cuisine know that everything on his menus are incredibly satiating and seasoned to perfection, but should you be interested in the chef's recommendations, his LT Steak & Seafood top picks are the "Very South Beach" Heart of Palm Salad with lime jalapeño dressing, Japanese Tuna Taquitos, Grilled Red Snapper with fresh peas and lime-shitake ginger vinaigrette, and the 32 oz. Côte de Boeuf (for two), which is carved at the table. "For dessert, there's a dragon fruit carved in with a bunch of fresh fruit inside, and it's made with a lemon ricotta ice cream with warm honey." The restaurant serves breakfast, lunch, and dinner. And if you're in for brunch, he suggests their version of avocado toast: Avocado & Green Pea Toast on 7-grain bread with feta cheese, sprouts, and lemon zest.

With restaurants all over the globe, Laurent, who resides in New York, is often traveling back and forth between them. Expect to see more of him in Miami since he's opening up three more concepts in The Betsy this winter. "The Betsy is expanding their hotel with The Carlton on the Collins side. They will build a bridge in between both hotels, and they're connecting it with a beautiful new tower next to The Carlton... Basically, it's an Italian restaurant with an open kitchen—we'll be doing pizza, pasta, lots of salads... In the lobby of the hotel, we will serve light fare. When you enter the restaurant on the side, there's a small grab-and-go where I will serve coffee in the morning, breakfast sandwiches, the menu to-go, salads, pastries... Behind that, there is a little window where you can order, pastry, gelato, and crepes," he explains.

A love for what he does and an immense interest in developing new concepts like these are what drive the prolific restaurateur. He also credits hard work as well as "the passion I have about food, traveling and eating, creating different things" for his monumental success. For inspiration, Laurent spends about an hour a day combing through social media and magazines. And though he's a restaurateur, he works in the kitchen every day. "I was in the kitchen for lunch today. Tonight I'll be at L'Amico. Tomorrow I may be upstairs at The Vine, because we have a

WE WANT MORE!

What is something you dream of doing that you haven't done yet?

It's always the dream of making a better restaurant or coming up with a new concept of something that doesn't exist in New York, which is hard, everything is in New York. But there is a bunch of stuff that does not exist in New York, not a lot, but there is. And one of them, if I found the right space and the right partner, I may consider doing it.

But that's not the upcoming project?

Right. Right Right. The one coming up is an amazing project (slated to debut in two and a half years). Exciting thing to work on. I only do projects I really want to do. I don't do everything and anything —only whatever is fun, ya know? Has to be fun. It can't be things you don't want to do. I'm passed that. I can choose and be happy with what I want to do.

What is your best piece of culinary advice?

That's a hard one. You know, I think I've worked with, from a young age, with people who are so dedicated about what they are doing; I think the drive of what you do. If you live it, if you breathe it, this is how I think you become successful. Advice will be, maybe, keep trying, keep doing it until you succeed, or you find something interesting. Some people find it at a different level. I have people who work with me who were maybe not inspired as me with those different concepts — but they were successful in one concept and they just followed it, and believed in it. I think like anything in life, you have to believe in it. If you don't believe it, then I don't believe you're going to be successful.

What would you prepare if you had company over?

I would probably do a mushroom risotto with sage and garlic brown butter —that's one of my favorite. I would do a braised short ribs maybe. I never cook the same, basically. You know? I always find something new to cook.



THE PERFECT POPOVER

We love that your popovers are so large, because normally popovers are small.

"Yeah. I wanted to have the 'wow' when they went on the table. Ya know? The thing is how to make them bigger —that was actually my research behind it. How do I make this thing become gigantic like a mushroom?"

Was that hard to do?

"Yeah, it was very hard. It took me awhile to figure it out though. More than two months, trying 2-3 times a day —could not figure it out. I really wanted that. That was my goal to have them that big. So, one of my sous chef used to work at Neiman Marcus. I went to Neiman Marcus, it was amazing, they're serving this big bread, and I would like to come up with my own bread, so I started with cheese on top, onion, and black pepper, and it became a popover. When they're fresh baked and come out of the oven, it's really a great product."

new menu here." What do you cook for yourself at home? "That's funny you ask me that. I cooked last night," he says with a big smile. "I made a curry dish last night because it's the only thing I don't do for a living, so I tried to do something different. I made Thai chicken curry with coconut sticky rice." Ooh, that sounds good, I coo. "Yeah, it was good! I was very happy with the result." He laughs.

As we chat, a man approaches our table to shake the chef's hand, then slips away. Laurent reveals that he does not know this man. I'm sure that happens often, I comment. "A lot." Now that it is autumn, Laurent leans toward preparing more mushroom-based, heavy dishes —and of course he famously gravitates toward whatever is in season. Deciding on the menus of his myriad of restaurants is a collaboration with his chefs. "After that, it's up to the chef to be creative." At the time of our talk in late August, Laurent had not planned any of the restaurant menus for fall yet. "It's on my list. I'm actually starting tomorrow at 12 pm. I have a meeting with one of my chefs. We're going to cook a couple of dishes together." You are so busy; how do you juggle it all? "I know it's crazy." Do you sleep? "Yes," he laughs. "Today was a rough day. Yesterday too. I'm busy, that's for sure." His calm demeanor does not reveal any of this, especially considering the generous amount of time he spent with me.

We wrap up our interview and he invites me to L'Amico (his other restaurant next door) which serves "non-complicated food," and is where he's working tonight. The Italian concept is meant to inspire people to come in at least three times a week, he tells me, for "pizza, pasta, great salad in a very relaxed atmosphere. I can accommodate business people. I can accommodate the traveler from the hotel. I can accommodate the people who live in the neighborhood, and they can come for lunch, dinner —also, it's affordable." After we snap a photo together, the chef and I walk next door. I take a seat at the fully occupied bar, and he tells the bartender to take care of me before he heads over to the open kitchen. I order the White Mushroom Truffle Pizza, since Laurent was recently nominated for second best pizza in New York City. And throughout my stay, he sends over Smoked Ricotta Gnudi, charred string beans, a prosciutto appetizer, and Watermelon with lemon ricotta gelato for dessert. And as expected, everything was absolutely delicious. ML

*LT Steak & Seafood is located at
1440 Ocean Drive, Miami Beach, FL.
For reservations, call 305-673-0044.*

*For more information,
visit www.thebetsyhotel.com/dining
or <http://laurent-tourondel.com>.*