

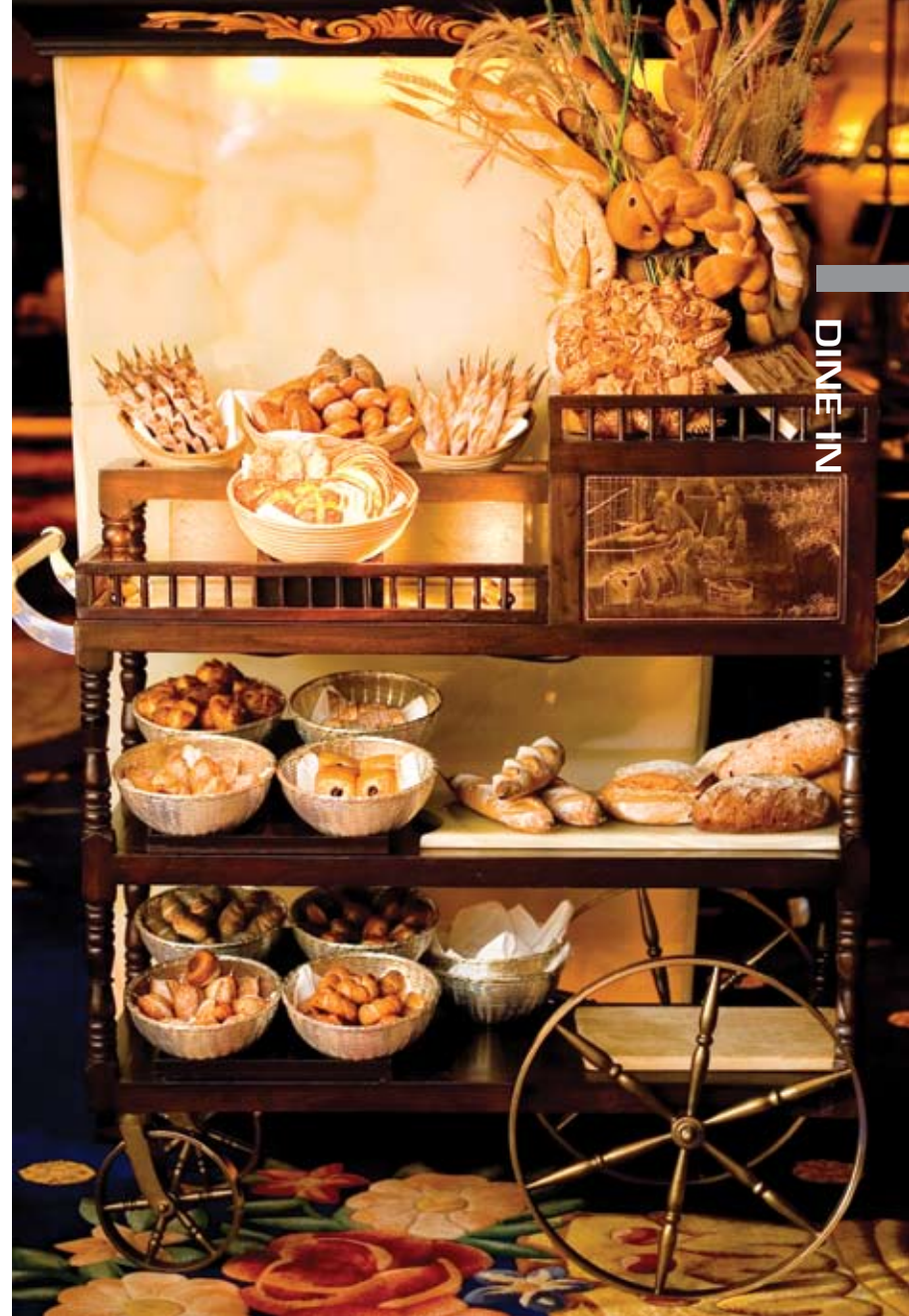
# *Feast Fit For Royalty*



WOULD YOU GIVE UP THE CHANCE TO DINE AT AN ESTABLISHMENT WHICH BEARS THE NAME OF A CHEF WHO WAS NAMED 'CHEF OF THE CENTURY' BY THE GUIDE GAULT MILLAU IN FRANCE IN 1999? ROBUCHON À GALERA IN MACAO IS THE ONLY PLACE IN SOUTH EAST ASIA WHERE ONE CAN TASTE THE CUISINE OF WORLD-RENOWNED CHEF JOËL ROBUCHON, AND ALTHOUGH HE'S RETIRED, HIS FOOD LIVES ON.

It was the first time I've been offered a menu featuring 14 courses at a food tasting and I must admit the thought of surviving the gastronomic marathon seemed daunting. But when you're shown a listing of creations that included masterchef Joël Robuchon's signature appetiser— caviar in a fine jelly with cauliflower cream that has been made famous the world over, somehow your worries start to dissipate and the curiosity begins kicking in. For one, Robuchon à Galera looked more like a posh, resplendent museum at first glance. The carpeting was an opulent royal blue, made up of red and yellow ostentatious bouquets, while the furniture comprised structurally-European upholstered chairs and plush armchairs dominated by oriental-inspired flower motifs, all covered in rich shades. But of greater interest were the gold cherubim that could be seen clinging onto the neck of a forest green porcelain vase, a white falcon sculpture perched on a raised platform and surprisingly a couple of statues that bore semblance to Chinese deities in the private dining room. On every dining table, you'll find a uniquely crafted ornament of single colour gradations made of a luminous, semi-translucent material. Some are teapots characterised by bamboo designs while others looked like pieces of intricate Chinese artifacts. Look up at the ceiling and you'll be dazzled by flashes of white Christmas light bulbs arranged in the shape of a star, glimmering in a symmetrical pattern, served to imbibe that sense of grandeur to the whole dining experience.

Boasting more than exquisite interiors, Robuchon à Galera has an extensive wine list that would seduce even the most widely travelled wine connoisseur. In a leather-bound 300-paged compilation, you will find more than 3,200 wine labels listed on the wine list that is updated when the need arises. In the mood for an 1847 Château d'Yquem rated a 100-pointer by Robert Parker? If you have the means, then HKD162,000 (about S\$32,000) may seem like peanuts, or if the 1961 Bordeaux Red, Pomerol, Pétrus Magnum that is worth a staggering HKD220,000 (about S\$43,000) is more your cup of tea, then you're at the right place. According to one of the staff, such extravagant purchases are not as rare as one might think at the Robuchon à Galera. It is no wonder the establishment won the Wine Spectator Award Of The Year in 2006 for its wine list that reads like a who's who of the winemaking world. Other than the wine list, there were other fixtures that caught my eye. This was another first for me, because I've never had breads, cheeses, ice creams, desserts or sweets served to me on separate trolleys, or rather on any trolley for that matter. As my photographer and I sat down to dinner, we were greeted first by the bread trolley, after which we had made our choices, the breads were warmed and served. For a restaurant that has only ten tables with a seating of 55, including the one in the private dining room, it is shrouded in exclusivity. And on that evening when we were there, the only company we had were a middle-aged Chinese couple and a small party of business associates.



Our dinner commenced with the L'Amuse Bouche, where we had the Spanish pata negra 'Joselito' ham on tomato toast. According to Francky Semblat, chef de cuisine of Robuchon à Galera, pata negra is the best ham in the world and no doubt, it tasted a whole lot like wagyu beef, especially since it was sliced as thinly as how a wagyu beef carpaccio would be portioned, right in front of us on a trolley. When coupled with the sweet tomato toast, the fatty flavours of the ham went harmoniously well with the crusty bread and was a joy to savour. Next up was the long-awaited caviar in a fine jelly with cauliflower cream presented in a shotglass on a plate surrounded by tiny dots of green basil oil, which I later realised was a recurrent signature design with several other dishes. Consisting of three layers, the bottom layer is filled with Iranian caviar called oscietra, the middle layer is made up of clear lobster jelly and the top most layer being cauliflower cream. I was later told by Chef Semblat that the lobster jelly was made by roasting the lobster shell and boiling it with veal feet jelly to derive a gelatine textured jelly for this appetiser. An acquired taste must be developed for this dish because in the beginning, it didn't seemed like much but when the strong mineral flavour of the caviar started to hit my palate and complemented the mild innocuous taste of the cauliflower cream, together with the squashy jelly, the combined textures were delightfully playful on the mouth and I made sure I finished every last bit.



lamb au jus



fried pigeon eggs  
with caviar & salmon

this page (left to right, top to bottom):

- lamb au jus with a salad of herbs served with mashed potato
- wouldn't this be just the perfect teapot to brew an aromatic cup of tea?
- crispy outside, soft inside, fried pigeon eggs with caviar and salmon

page 68 (left to right, top to bottom):

- the table blooms with floral flair
- specially made cheese and bacon baguettes
- chef de cuisine of Robuchon à Galera, Francky Semblat
- one of the many exquisite and precious wines stacked at the establishment
- mille feuille of tomato with crabmeat
- a sexy and provocative sculpture to tantalise the senses

page 69:

- a trolley of freshly baked breads



The other hot number that has been popular on the Robuchon menu since the 1980s is the mille feuille of tomato with crabmeat, which we were about to receive. Delicately tiled in the shape of a diamond, the mille feuille rested in a pool of tomato jus, once again surrounded by tiny dots of green basil sauce. Decked in a presentation that was clean and sleek, it was initially challenging to send in the fork to destroy the towered masterpiece. But once we did, there was no time left for regrets. The slight tinge of sourness in the tomato slices immediately opened up my palate and the freshest of crabmeat would make any seafood lover satisfied, at least for a while. Since it was white truffle season, a couple of dishes were topped off with shavings of this most treasured ingredient. Imagine our surprise when we saw sautéed frog legs in congee with gold leaf and white truffle on the menu. A traditional Cantonese staple but served by a French chef. It looked and smelled acutely familiar, just like my mother's home-cooked porridge. Egging me on was the congee that had the texture of a puréed pumpkin soup, smooth like silk and it tasted comparatively well, although I wished the chef had ladled more than just the proportion of a base sauce. The frog legs did well on the side, but could have impressed me more if it was stir-fried with dried chillies, just how most Asians like it. Personally, the white truffle shavings did little to boost the overall piquancy of the dish, although it was an extravagant touch.

Moving along, we sampled the pan-fried scallop with fresh corn mash and grilled endive, a beautiful combination for a dish; crayfish in a château chalon bouillon with young vegetables, something I found classically French because of its rich, luscious broth accompanied by miniscule balls of vegetables meticulously carved out and swimming in the bouillon, and the unforgettable crispy outside, soft inside, fried pigeon eggs with caviar and salmon. Chef Semblat said he prided himself on this creation because it highlighted all the elements of a complete, balanced fare and he chose to use pigeon eggs over quail eggs because the former is smoother and springier. The pigeon eggs were encrusted in a light batter, deep-fried to resemble the tentacles of a baby octopus and the oscietra caviar was artfully placed on top. One bite into the egg and the bright yellow yolk oozed out, drowning the caviar in the milky substance. Personally, I found it a tad too overwhelming because I'm one who prefers my sunny-side up well-cooked and together with the caviar, it was just overbearing. However, for those who like to dip their toast in partially-cooked egg yolk, this dish might just top your dining experience.

Alas, after the pan-fried amadai fillet with crispy skin in black truffle bouillon with young vegetables and lamb au jus with a salad of herbs, served with mashed potato, we braved through the desserts, featuring warm walnut molten with caramel ice cream which was a decadent sinful treat and the creamy Jivara chocolate in vanilla cappuccino with coffee jelly and almond crumble. If you are craving for more sugar, like I did, browse the ice cream trolley for a variety of home-made ice creams and sherbets. For recommendations, the coffee hazelnut and cognac, and passionfruit, mango and banana concoctions would serve to end your dinner on a high note. But that's not all. Just when you thought the feast is about to wrap up, you'll see the colourful sweets trolley pushed up the aisle. Opt for the raspberry jelly, madeleines or green tea marshmallow but I can assure you, that even the last man on the street who usually frowns on desserts will find the little parcels irresistible. TH

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