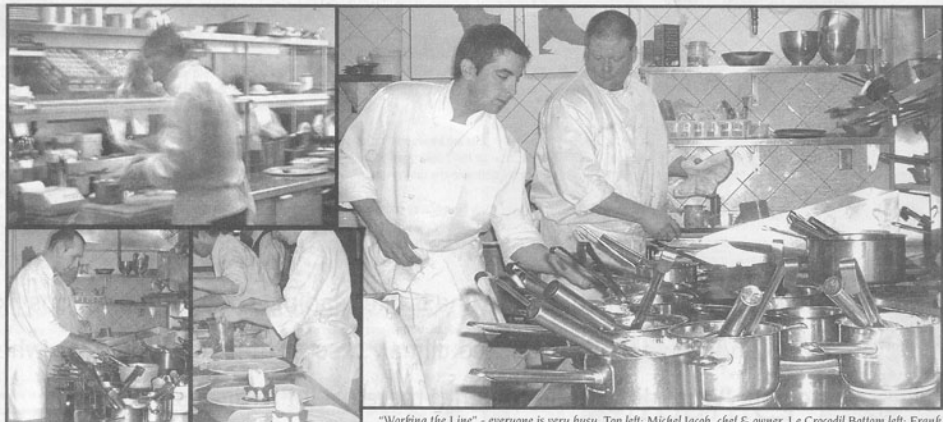


MY NIGHT ON THE LINE

Food writer and chef Jane Mundy spends an evening behind the scenes in the kitchen at Vancouver's legendary Le Crocodile Restaurant. It's a whirlwind dance of pots and pans. Can she keep up?



photos by J. Mundy

"Working the Line" - everyone is very busy. Top left: Michel Jacob, chef & owner, Le Crocodile Bottom left: Frank Berthelon, chef Middle: dessert time Right: Sean & Jeff

Le Crocodile recently celebrated its 20th anniversary, to much fanfare and hoop-la by loyal customers and industry professionals alike. One thing that makes Le Crocodile legendary is that it's impervious to change in many regards. Guests have been known to fly in from all over the world to have the Alsace onion tart they had 15 years ago. And the memory never disappoints. It's like that old adage "if it ain't broke, don't fix it." And you can be assured that Michel has sourced the best possible ingredients, and has a friendly yet professional staff, both in front of house and his kitchen brigade.

Michel Jacob trained at the famous Strasbourg Hotel School for 1969 to 1971, worked as a qualified chef in several European countries, then "I did what everybody had to do in France - spend some time in the army - in the kitchens at the Officer's Mess." Michel moved to Canada and by 1980 he found Vancouver, and like most chefs at some time in their life, worked for Umberto Menghi. He opened Le Crocodile originally on Thurlow Street, and moved to its current location on Smythe Street 10 years ago. Consistency and integrity are two words that come to mind when describing Le Crocodile.

I BEGAN MY CULINARY CAREER IN A MEXICAN RESTAURANT WEARING A tank top, shorts and apron, cooking taco chips in a deep fryer late at night, while my comrade shredded cheese and chopped onions in between drags on his cigarette. After that short stint, I cooked on catering trucks for the film industry, baseball caps and jeans, stuffing pancakes in my bra to keep warm in remote locations. But tonight, even though I've done my time in kitchens for many years, I'm nervous, because I'm going to work at Le Crocodile, where it's all business, where they are all professionals.

First, I should tell you something about Michel Jacob, chef and owner of Vancouver's Le Crocodile. He is a master of French cuisine. Chefs have earned their chef toque under him—"culin-ebrities" such as Rob Feenie and David Hawksworth—but we'll get to that later. Michel is always focused, intense. Just like his food. "The day you see me happy, smiling, in which my defences are down," Michel Jacob tells me a week before I'm scheduled for my night on the line. Yikes, this is serious stuff.

Friday, 6 p.m.

I arrive, like the new kid on my first day at grade school, at the back door, and chef Frank Berthelon ushers me into a postage-stamp-sized room where I change into whites—a chef jacket and apron. He quickly apologizes on behalf of Michel, who had a late invite to the Diana Krall concert and it's the first Friday night he has had off in 20 years. I'm not upset.

Frank explains to me that the way things are set up, the kitchen needs six people at all times. Everyone has his or her space. Frank is chef du cuisine in Michel's absence—a rare occasion—and each afternoon he prepares at least 28 sauces for that evening. After all, French food is known for its sauces. "There eez two criteria," Frank says. "Taste eez the central part of coo-keeping. Presentation eez a part, but eetz not so eempontant . . ." I crane my head forward, trying to decipher his thick accent. Everyone in the kitchen understands every word he utters. Kelly, the entremetier, sidles over and tells me about himself. "I have no intention of leaving," he says. "Chef will have to kick me out, 'cause the standard here is higher than anywhere." That Sinatra song goes through my head, "if you can make it there, you can make it anywhere . . ."

Frank takes a minute off the line to interrupt Kelly. "We're here to cook what sells; the customer [decides the menu]. For example, the other day I made veal tongue and tripe—I knew some French customers were coming in . . ." Three orders of foie gras shuffle out of the printer-central dispatch. When the steel pan is smoking hot, Frank sears the foie gras, just enough time to crust the outside; too long and it will fall apart. He places the pan on the cold station for Kendra, the garde-manger, to finish. Kelly is in charge of starches and hot appetizers; he passes Kendra a potato lattice to place atop the foie gras, then she finishes it off with a tangle of frisée.

6:30 p.m. I'm going on the line, in more ways than one. I'll do my best to help, follow orders, not get in the way. I count eight in the kitchen and they aren't wearing nametags. The orders are coming in fast and furious. The kitchen brigade is like the National Ballet performing in Das Boot; there's a graceful economy of movement in this kitchen. It is very quiet, like the eye of the hurricane. The only sounds are coming from the dish pit, where Tung and her sister "rule the roost" as Kelly tells me. Tung has been washing dishes at Le Crocodile for more than 10 years, and before that, her brother worked here. I soon discover that some of the staff have been here even longer.

Tik tik tik . . . order chits turn into one long streamer. Frank takes a cursory glance and says, "One scallop, Sean, one bacon, Vincent." This is assembly-line style. For any item, two or even five cooks may have contributed to your order. Their rationale: instead of one person taking seven minutes to assemble the scallop salad, this way it takes three people 30 seconds. "We figure out how to produce a high standard with high volume," Frank tells me. The importance of this style won't register until a few hours from now. So far there are 70 "covers" or orders on the reservation list. But that can all change . . .

Julie, pastry chef extraordinaire, is standing at attention with Kendra and Vince at the cold station, backs straight, arms behind their backs, all eyes on Frank. Soldiers at arms. Seventy-five percent of Le Crocodile's customers order desserts, and this means Julie is one of the busiest pastry chefs in the city. Tonight she has 20 choices, including crêpes suzettes, banana and chocolate strudel, and a vanilla-white chocolate cake with passion fruit parfait

CONT'D ON THE NEXT PAGE