

Remembering Jean-Louis Palladin

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By Judith Weinraub
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Great chefs are not always associated with generosity. Arrogance, yes, secretiveness too, even dictatorial behavior. Just the opposite is true of Jean-Louis Palladin, the French chef who made Washington his home. Palladin died last month at 55 at the McLean home of his former wife, Regine, after a battle with lung cancer.

Sunday some 200 people gathered at the Omni Shoreham to honor the friend and mentor who in this country paired French technique with contemporary flair and the best and freshest American ingredients. "It's a celebration of what Jean-Louis was all about," said Regine Palladin. "Friendship, a commitment to others, and the impact he had on people.

The event, which featured guest speakers, videos and snapshots of family and friends, was emceed by Chef Jimmy Sneed of the Richmond Grill. Guests included renowned chefs from all over the country -- and a handful from France, where Palladin, who began cooking when he was 12, had already earned two stars for his restaurant in France before he came to the United States in 1979. Most of the guests had made their way here before to eat at the place that put Washington on the culinary map: Jean-Louis at the Watergate, the 42-seat restaurant that Palladin ran from 1979 to 1996.

"When I was a young cook, I saved money to come here from New York, eat by myself and stay at the Howard Johnson hotel across the street," said now super-star chef Thomas Keller, the owner/operator of The French Laundry in California's Napa Valley. "He lived what you need to have to be a chef -- the work ethic, the passion, the focus. He set so many standards for me. To have him first as a role model, then a colleague and then a friend has got to be one of the greatest things that has happened to me in my life."

"His was the first kitchen in America I stepped into," said Daniel Boulud, who was the chef at the European Economic Commission in Washington 20 years ago. Now the much-honored chef/owner of New York's Daniel, Cafe Boulud and the French-American bistro DB, Boulud was just starting out in America then. "I had worked with people he admired in France, but here I was a private chef. When I decided to go to New York, he said, 'If you need anything, let me know.' He always supported me -- when he heard the Westbury Hotel was looking for a chef for the Polo Lounge in late 1982, later when I interviewed to go to Le Cirque, he was always behind me."

Roberto Donna, owner/operator of Galileo in the District, visited Palladin regularly after Palladin returned to Washington last year from Las Vegas and New York, when his illness prevented him from working any longer.

"Then we only saw him in bed. It was not Jean-Louis any more. This is a way to wash away all those months, a way say goodbye to him in his style, with friends and with food."

For pastry chef Ann Amernick, Palladin represented acceptance as a professional chef. "He authenticated me," said Amernick, who worked for him at the Watergate. "He was never threatened by anyone. He let me do what I wanted."

Other restaurant professionals praised Palladin as well. "He was the most important influence in my life professionally," said New York and San Francisco restaurateur Drew Nieporent. "Daniel Boulud sent me to have lunch at the Watergate in 1984. I had been to France to all 18 three-star restaurants, and this was a better meal. It started a great friendship."

Customers came too. Longtime Watergate patron Edgar Weinrott, traveled from Philadelphia, to honor Palladin, just as he had 143 times to eat at Jean Louis, first in November 1980, and then finally in May 1996, just before the Palladin closed the restaurant. "We met in France in 1977," said the 81-year-old Weinrott. "He always decided what we would eat and drink. I will really miss him."

Looking around the room, Thomas Keller summed up the day. "He had an impact on everybody here and untold numbers of other people," he said. "His legacy will live on forever."

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