

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK LESLEY CHESTERMAN

Highlights Festival takes on a Catalonian flavour

Masaharu Morimoto is the biggest name as restaurants open their doors to the world

For three weeks in the coldest days of winter, thanks to the Highlights Festival, Montreal becomes the most exciting culinary destination on the planet. All the jaded local gourmets are whipped into a frenzy, scanning the SAQ program for names and faces of well-known chefs who fly in from the far reaches for as little as 24 hours.

Yet despite the excitement, there are a few curmudgeons who grumble about high prices, events being sold out before they are even publicized, and star chefs coming up short when the plates hit the table.

I don't agree with the first two complaints. Meal costs are usually less expensive than what chefs charge at their home restaurants, and though some events do sell out within days, every year I've attended, some of the best meals were far from booked (in 2001, I had a superb

dinner prepared by one of New York's top chefs on a Monday night with only two other tables filled). If you're really desperate for a reservation, ask to be placed on a waiting list. Due to high demand, some restaurants have resorted to a reservation lottery to play fair.

The third complaint, though, has merit. Despite high expectations, there's no guarantee you'll walk away satisfied. In that respect, the guest-chef events can be a gamble. To help you walk away a winner, here's a list of some of the pricier events I'd be willing to put a dent in my bank account to attend.

Though the 2003 festival features Catalonian chefs, the biggest name to grace this year's lineup is Masaharu Morimoto. Food TV aficionados will recognize him as the Iron Chef Japanese. Having made his name at Nobu New York, Morimoto now

owns a wildly popular restaurant in Philadelphia. He will be at Soto Vieux-Montréal on March 1 (seven-course dinner \$175, a draw will be held for reservations).

Sushi devotees should also be interested in one of Canada's top sushi chefs, Hidekasu Tojo. Owner of Tojo's in Vancouver, he will be squeezing rice and slicing fish at Mikado Laurier on Feb. 20 and 21 (price per diner approximately \$130).

Two world-famous pastry chefs are on tap: **Jordi Butron** of Espai Sucre in Barcelona, renowned for his sweet/savoury desserts, will be offering a tasting menu at Chez l'Épicier March 2 (five-course dinner with wine about \$150), and Christophe Michalak, head pastry chef at Alain Ducasse's Restaurant Plaza Athénée in Paris, will be enhancing Le Lutétia's menu with Spanish-inspired desserts from Feb. 18 to 22 (four-course menu \$40).

Also at Le Lutétia will be French chef Laurent Gras of

San Francisco's Fifth Floor restaurant on Feb. 24 and 25 (four-course menu \$95). Several other top French chefs will be in town for the festival. Michel del Burgo, formerly of Taillevent, will be at Nuances at the Montreal Casino Feb. 25 to March 2 (\$150 with wine). Régis Marcon of Hôtel Restaurant Auberge et Clos des Cimes is slated for the Institut de Tourisme et d'Hôtellerie du Québec from Feb. 20 to 23 (\$85 including one glass of wine).

This year's honorary president of the Arts de la Table part of the festival, Santi Santamaria of the three-star restaurant El Raco de Can Fabes in Sant Celoni, Catalonia, will host one of the two costliest dinners, the Diner des Relais Gourmands et Relais & Châteaux on Feb. 18 (price per diner, \$300 with wine), along with Quebec chefs Anne Desjardins of L'Eau à la Bouche, and Alain Labrie of Auberge Hatley. The other pricey dinner will be at Chez l'Épicier and will feature a 15-course food-and-wine pairing by chef Laurent Godbout and

Spanish wine producer, Juan Maria Torres, with commentary by sommelier François Chartier on Feb. 25 (\$300, with wine). Over at Toqué!, avant-garde up-and-comer Xavier Pellicer of Barcelona's Abac restaurant will offer Catalonian market cuisine on the Feb. 25 and 26 (price to be announced).

Local chefs are also cooking up some swell events. Highlights include Mark de Canck's Foie Gras en Cinq Temps, a five-course foie-gras dinner with eight matching wines at La Chronique on Feb. 26 (\$165).

Claude Pelletier of restaurant Cube, in conjunction with wine agents Groupe Rézin and Aux Trois Sommeliers, will join forces on Feb. 27 for a wine tasting of close to 30 of the world's top organic wines (\$105 with amuse-bouches). And for those up for Mardi Gras revelry, Peter Pryor of Savannah is planning a Southern meal with live jazz on Feb. 25 (\$65).

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