

Class Time



Aubergine's spacious interiors and open kitchen

A Class Act at **AUBERGINE**

ISCAHM gives its students the chance of a lifetime to train at Aubergine, the school's fabulous new restaurant at The Fort.

By **Anne Marie Ozaeta**
Photos by **Christian Regis**

WHEN CO-OWNERS **HANS SCHALLENBERG** AND **CHEF NORBERT GANDLER** DECIDED TO SET UP A RESTAURANT FOR THEIR STUDENTS AT THE **INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL FOR CULINARY ARTS AND HOTEL MANAGEMENT (ISCAHM)** TO TRAIN IN, AMBITIONS WERE DECIDEDLY LOW. "OUR FIRST IDEA WAS A COFFEE SHOP," RECALLS **CHEF GANDLER**. Nothing grandiose. But then, life has a way of bringing you to a place you didn't think you'd end up in. "There were so many coffee shops already, so we had to do something a little different," he adds.

The end result is a far cry from the casual spot the owners first envisioned. Instead, they have come up with **Aubergine**, a restaurant that seems destined to make a mark in the country's fine dining scene.

Open since December 2007, Aubergine is located on the 2nd floor of the 32nd and 5th Building in Fort Bonifacio, with McDonald's on the first floor as its most recognizable neighbor. Aubergine, though, is anything but fast food. The dining experience, to the say the least, is a fine dining class act.

The lucky ISCAHM students who get to train at Aubergine are in for an intense experience, not to mention a real world taste of fine dining at the highest of levels. According to Chef Gandler, around 70-80% of ISCAHM students will end up training at Aubergine, with the rest working at other establishments. "We choose the best and most interested," he says. ISCAHM's certificate culinary program guarantees all its students two months of on-the-job training, giving the school a lot of pressure to find proper internships for everyone. So, it made sense for the school to establish its own restaurant to

guarantee slots for the students, as well as to better control and ensure the high quality of training given.

While Aubergine's *raison-d'etre* is as a school restaurant, it is sometimes hard to tell. As one enters the restaurant, the muted interiors of maroons, browns and purple

accents, designed by top restaurant interior designer **Noel Bernardo**, exude low-key luxury, inviting diners to relax and forget, at least for a moment, the high-pressure hubbub outside. The place is thankfully quiet, where conversations can be comfortably heard, and where tables are spaced generously apart.

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WHAT'S ON THE MENU?

Aubergine serves modern Continental cuisine, upgrading classic French dishes, with a blend of Asian ingredients thrown in. **Chef Stefan Langenhan** takes charge of a menu brimming with promise.

To sate Manila diners' fascination with foie gras, for appetizers, there's the calorie-busting Duck Foie Gras Sampler of duck foie gras terrine, seared duck foie gras on apple tarte tatin, and home smoked French duck breast served with mesclun salad and raspberry dressing. For those with no budget, Aubergine serves top-of-the-line Russian Osetra Caviar. Or else, the Oyster Sampler, made of fresh oyster on the shell, oyster gratin, oyster tempura and oyster dumpling, is a lighter treat. Classic soups, from a Cream of Asparagus to a Tomato Bisque, are modernized with foams, fizzes and froths, while pastas are not run-of-the-mill, whether a Forest Mushroom Risotto or a Tagliolini (a cassoulet of mushrooms, Parma ham and mascarpone).

A standout among the seafood dishes is the melt-in-the-mouth Grilled Fillet of Chilean Sea Bass with tomato fondue and petite salad leaves served in bouillabaisse fizz. Main dishes are a tough choice between such classics as French Duck Confit, Roasted Pineapple-Glazed Australian Rack of Lamb, or Oven Roasted Dutch

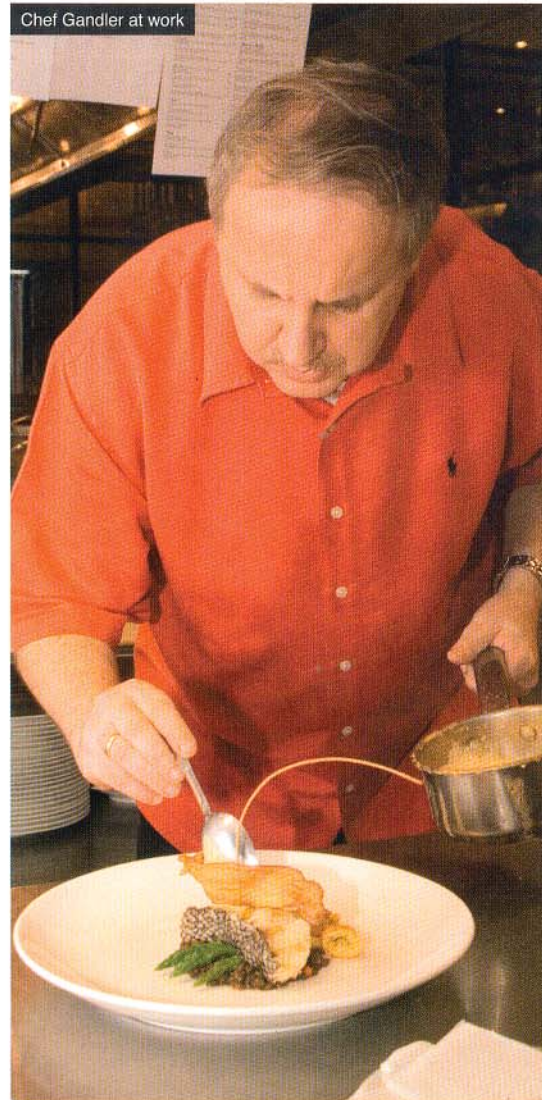
Milk-Fed Veal Tenderloin. Grilled items, ranging from U.S. Angus Beef Ribeye to U.S. Wagyu Sirloin, are just as tempting.

Desserts are expertly prepared by **Pastry Chef Frederic Scalteur** and ISCAHM's **Chef Ernie Babaran** (also a *Baking Press* contributor), whether a decadent Warm Chocolate Fondue Cake with Rosemary Ice Cream or an equally rich Crème Brulée with Stewed Pineapple and Nougat Ice Cream. Exquisite chocolate pralines, shiny and smooth to the palate, prepared by Chef Scalteur, cap a truly wonderful meal.

The beverage menu is both extensive and impressive. Non-alcoholic blended juices like Side Salad (made of carrots, celery, orange, ginger) and Vitamin A&C Bomb (apple, orange, carrot) are a healthy counterpoint to a calorie-laden meal. The wine list, specially selected by Schallenberg and housed in a spectacular floor-to-ceiling glass cellar, is filled with Old and New World vintages from unusual vineyards, and at surprisingly good prices too.

Aside from the restaurant, Aubergine boasts a Patisserie or cake shop, open all day, where one can purchase fresh breads, elegant cakes, chocolate pralines, and among the best macaroons in town, lovingly prepared by Chef Stefan.

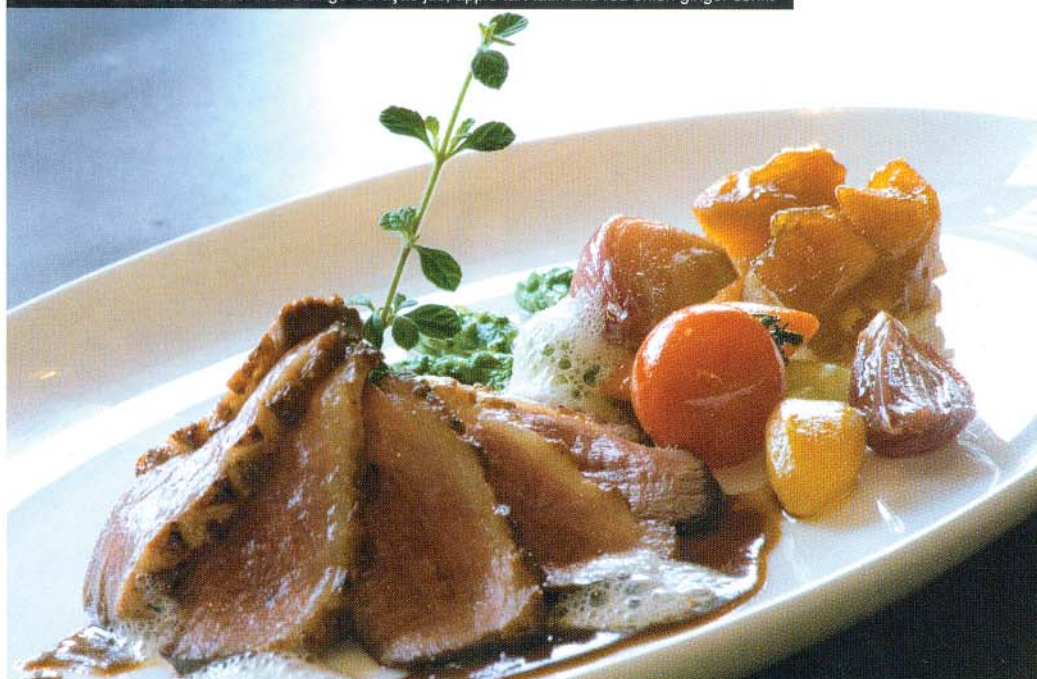
Chef Gandler at work



More often than not, it is Schallenberg who greets guests as they arrive, putting his many years of experience as F&B Director (most notably as part of the opening team of **Makati Shangri-La**) to good use at the front of the house. Guests are seated at a refined table, set with stylish cutlery and highlighted by a modernist glass centerpiece (each table has a unique piece) designed by glass artist **Bobby Castillo**. Dressed to the nines in signature purple, the wait staff hovers nearby, making sure wine and water goblets are filled, and offering a fresh grinding of pepper for those who want it. (The high-tech, push-button pepper grinder is a big hit among guests.) As expertly-created dish after dish is brought to the table, one tends to forget that young chefs-to-be are contributing to the overall enjoyment of the meal.

Only when one glances towards the kitchen, does one realize that the real show is happening inside. Compared to other restaurants, Aubergine's kitchen is huge at a 120 square meters, to better accommodate the students who make up about half of the entire kitchen staff. Diners can see the clean and brightly-lit kitchen via large glass

Roasted French Duck Breast with Orange-Curaçao jus, apple tart tatin and red onion ginger confit



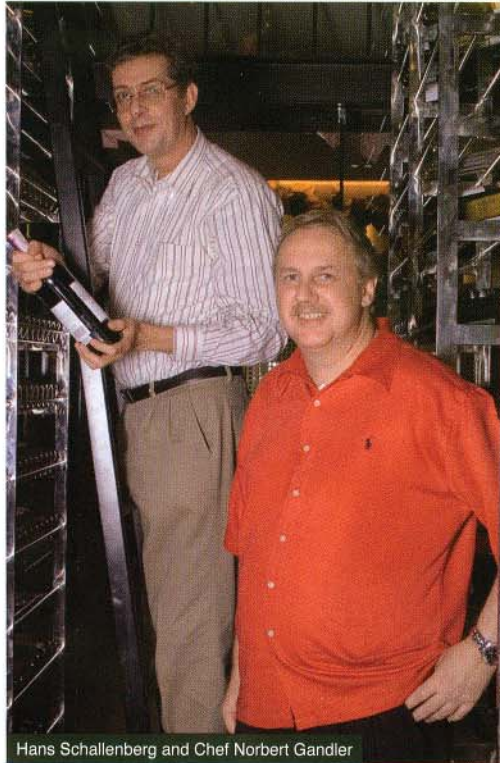
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windows, and spot the kitchen crew dressed in their crisp white chef's jackets and toques. "The students were so excited to work here, I had to force them to go home," admits Chef Gandler. The students' families are just as excited, with parents and even grandparents booking tables at the restaurant for a chance to savor, firsthand, their loved ones' work. Although students help prepare the dishes, Gandler and Schallenberg make sure that professionals still run the show. In the kitchen, **Chef Stefan Langenhan** keeps the students in check, with Chef Gandler and ISCAHM's other chef-instructors lending a hand when needed.

Students training at Aubergine are fortunate to be working under a team with decades of hotel and restaurant experience under their belts. And the five-star experience shows, whether it's the spot-on execution of the dishes, the personable service, and the attention to every detail. Without much fanfare or advertising, word of mouth about Aubergine has spread, keeping the place constantly busy during lunch and dinner. But Chef Gandler is not about to rest on his laurels, admitting that much work still needs to be done. Dishes have to be refined, service improved, among other things, to ensure that operations are pitch perfect. And ISCAHM's young student-chefs are lucky to get a first row seat to see exactly how this is done. 🍴

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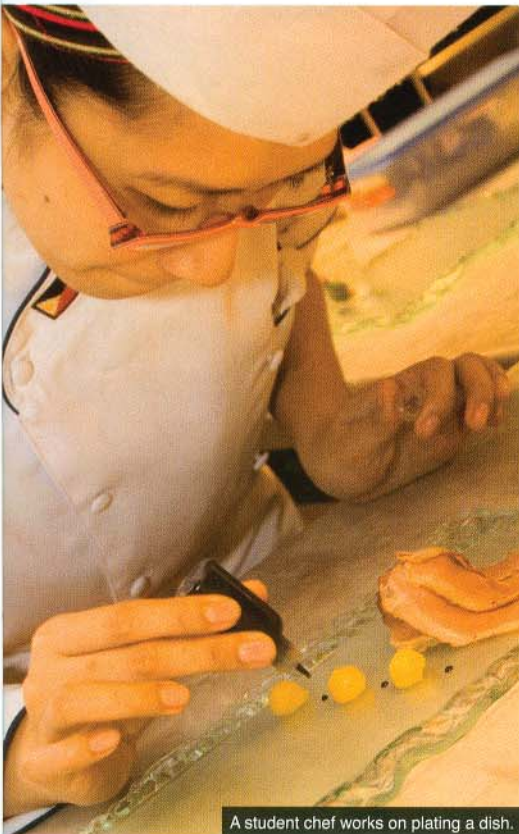
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Hans Schallenberg and Chef Norbert Gandler



Grilled Fillet of Chilean Sea Bass



A student chef works on plating a dish.



Oyster Sampler