

Montreal Chefs Are Fuming Over a Casino's French Import

Written by Administrator
Friday, 17 March 2017 12:46 -

"I welcome competition — if anything, I thrive on it, and I'm still around after 25 years," David McMillan said in an interview at [Le Vin Papillon](#) . "But this is very much disrespectful, rude and a slap in the face to very many young people who have made a life decision to work in our restaurant community." Mr. McMillan is a co-owner of three restaurants, including Le Vin Papillon and [Joe Beef](#) , in the Little Burgundy neighborhood.

Long before the casino's branch of [L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon](#) opened in December in a renovated space, Lesley Chesterman, a freelance food writer, began raising questions about both the lottery corporation's selection process and the new restaurant's cost to the government agency.

Photo



Éric Gonzalez, the executive chef, in the restaurant's kitchen.

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Yannick Grandmont for The New York Times

To her, the choice made little sense: An open-kitchen restaurant that exists in 10 other cities and has its headquarters in Paris seemed like a return to the first days of her career, in the early 1990s.

Back then, she said, "there was not one chef in Montreal who was Québécois. They were all French, all French maître d's, all French wines, all French suppliers. France owned the city gastronomically until the moment when we started to do our own thing our own way."

The Casino de Montreal, a soaring, 657,849-square-foot complex on an island in the St. Lawrence River, is not an obvious setting for a pricey restaurant. It is housed in what was the [French pavilion](#) of [Expo 67](#)

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, the 1967 world's fair. Much of the former fairground has been turned into a Formula One car racing circuit, and reaching the isolated casino from downtown involves an unsightly tour of concrete grain elevators and port buildings.

Exactly whose idea it was to franchise Mr. Robuchon's restaurant is unclear. Loto Quebec declined to make anyone available for an interview. In a written statement, it said that "despite the unquestionably impressive culinary talent pool that exists in Quebec, we wished to set ourselves apart on the international scene in order to enhance our already exceptional Quebec offerings."

Mr. McMillan and other chefs, including Normand Laprise of [Toqué](#) (between them, the two men run three of the top five restaurants in [an annual Canadian ranking](#) by chefs, restaurateurs, journalists and others), began challenging the decision on social media. They not only feel insulted, but they also see the government agency's financing of the renovation and its financial arrangements with Mr. Robuchon as an unfair competitive advantage.

"Quebec has a lot of international-caliber chefs and creative newcomers," Mr. Laprise wrote in an email. "All of us would have welcomed an investment such as the one offered to the casino for our different endeavors."

Photo



The open kitchen area.
New York Times

Credit Yannick Grandmont for The

Just how much money is involved remains a mystery to the public. A figure of 11 million Canadian dollars for the renovations alone is often cited, although its source is unclear. In its statement, the lottery agency said only that the cost to build and outfit the restaurant "is below what has been suggested." (Provincial information laws allow the lottery organization to keep contracts secret.)

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As is the case with many of his outposts, Mr. Robuchon is largely absent from the Montreal branch. The 56-seat restaurant, one of several in the casino, is in the hands of its executive chef, [Éric Gonzalez](#). Born in the south of France, he earned a Michelin star at the age of 27 at the restaurant Clairefontaine in Luxembourg.

After four years in New York, he came to Quebec in 2000; when he was named to head the Robuchon restaurant, he was running the restaurants at the government's casino in the Mont Tremblant ski area.

Photo



David McMillan, who opposes the choice of Mr. Robuchon to lead the new casino restaurant, at Le Vin Papillon, one of several restaurants of which he is an owner.

Credit

Yannick Grandmont for The New York Times

One recent afternoon, as his staff began setting places and preparing dishes for the evening service (the restaurant is open only for dinner, and is closed two days a week), Mr. Gonzalez praised the Quebec farmers who supply his lamb, cream and a small portion of his cheese. And his praise extended to several of Montreal's chefs, including Mr. Laprise.

But Mr. Gonzalez was also adamant that the Robuchon franchise fills a void in Montreal's restaurant scene. "I think Montreal now is more interesting because Mr. Robuchon has come into the city," he said. "It is a very huge endorsement. I think what they needed was the big name."

Over the past few weeks, criticism of the business relationship between the casino and Mr. Robuchon has escalated. Mr. McMillan and Ms. Chesterman appeared on ["Tout le Monde en Parle,"](#) a Sunday night talk show that draws about 1.3 million viewers in a province with a population of 8.3 million. And Carlos J. Leitão, the Quebec finance minister, has been peppered with questions

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about the arrangement during two sittings of the province's legislature.

When challenged by lawmakers, Mr. Leitão repeatedly defended the decision by Loto Quebec to team up with a prominent, if French, chef. "Is it a problem that a world-famous chef is promoting Quebec gastronomy elsewhere?" he asked. "My God! If these are the kind of problems we have to deal with, Mr. Speaker, bring them on."

As irritated as Mr. McMillan is about what he sees as a government subsidy for Mr. Robuchon, he is equally adamant that neither he nor any of the other dissidents want to run the casino restaurant. If he had his way, the casino would have consulted all of the city's principal chefs and hired a young cook they recommended.

"I'm just disappointed," Mr. McMillan said, pausing to ask an employee, whom he called "brother," to close a service door admitting a blast of cold air into Le Vin Papillon. "This was a great opportunity. What lack of vision, what lack of thought."

"Quebec is sometimes a small town," he added, then stopped himself. "Aah, can't go there, I don't want to be burned in effigy in front of my restaurant for saying the wrong thing."

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