

Delightful, delicious...

De-Luxembourg? Chef Léa Linster pushes a tiny nation’s big cuisine

By RHEA WESSEL

Frisange, Luxembourg
Léa Linster, considered one of the best chefs in the world, was experimenting with the humble potato on a recent Monday afternoon at her one-Michelin-star Restaurant Léa Linster. She intently examined the thin slices, looking for clues about their starchiness. “People underestimate how difficult it is to achieve the perfect combination of crispy and chewy,” she says.

A favorite vegetable in Luxembourg, the potato appears in many forms in Ms. Linster’s other restaurant, the home-cooking eatery, Kaschthaus, in the town of Hellange. At her signature Michelin-starred spot, a couple of kilometers east in Frisange, it incarnates in more noble ways that befit a French gourmet. In fact, the menu still includes a potato dish that won Ms. Linster first place in the 1989 Bocuse d’Or, a prestigious biennial competition for chefs from around the world: a saddle of lamb wrapped in a crisp, wafer-thin potato pancake. Ms. Linster browns the potato pancake on one side before she wraps it around lightly breaded lamb and bakes the duo.

At both her restaurants, Ms. Linster has long made a showcase of her native Luxembourg cuisine, which includes such specialties as *kniddelen*, a type of flour dumpling, and *bouneschlupp*, a green-bean roux-based stew garnished with pork sausage.

Now, some 20 years after Ms. Linster became the first and only woman to win that coveted Bocuse d’Or prize, she has become a formal ambassador of her country’s cuisine. At ITB Berlin, a tourism trade fair that draws more than 170,000 visitors over its three days (this year ending March 12), she will officially represent Luxembourg, preparing dishes right at the country’s booth.

Luxembourg tourism authorities hope to position their country, a Grand Duchy that leads the world in Michelin stars per capita, as a culinary destination. With a population of less than 500,000, its roster of starred restaurants includes Manoir Kasselslay, known for the creative use of regional products and its setting inside one of the country’s parks; Toit pour Toi, with its eclectic interpretation of French gourmet cuisine; and Restaurant Yves Radelet, also focused on regional ingredients, including some organic products.

Restaurant critic and publisher Holger Gettmann, whose Guide Orange offers restaurant and shopping recommendations, calls Ms. Linster’s official appearance long overdue. “Ms. Linster embodies Luxembourg’s charm and peculiarities,” he says. “You can see it when she’s on German television. She’s highly skilled and recognized for her experience.” Ms. Linster appears frequently as a guest chef on cooking shows “Lanz Kocht” (“Lanz Cooking,” hosted by Markus Lanz) and “Küchenschlacht” (“Kitchen Battle”).

Ms. Linster, 55 years old, has trained alongside the world’s best chefs, including Paul Bocuse, Joël Robuchon and Frédy Girardet. Yet she hasn’t let go of the down-to-earth principles that manifest in her personal style and cooking. She says she prefers dishes without overbearing sauces, such as scallops grilled with perfect brown trim and tossed in a salad of endive and artichoke.

She strives to let individual ingredients speak for themselves and retain their original character. “Molecular cuisine,” which uses chemical transformation to produce familiar flavors in unfamiliar forms—from liquid olives to espresso foam—is a trend to which she refuses to adapt. “If you change food too much, you kill the soul of it,” Ms. Linster says.

Her choice of decor and the way she runs her kitchen reflects her philosophy as well. She offers guests a sleek but unpretentious environment, and she says she avoids waste—not an easy feat for a gourmet.

While sticking to her principles, Ms. Linster is in the process of expanding and transforming her culinary empire, which includes the two restaurants, a media brand



(TV appearances and a food column in the German women’s magazine Brigitte) and a publishing enterprise (six cookbooks so far). She is looking for a partner with whom to open a restaurant in Manhattan—she has a home on the Upper East Side.

She is also remodeling her 60-seat signature restaurant. As part of the transformation, Ms. Linster has increased her marketing efforts. The facade of her restaurant in Frisange, a village of several thousand people a 20-minute drive from the country’s chief city, also called Luxembourg, is now decorated with a billboard-style photo of her face. Years ago she wouldn’t have been so bold, says Ms. Linster, who laughs as she comments on the oversize photo, a stark contrast with the rural environment.

“It’s big enough so that people won’t actually take it seriously,” she says.

Ms. Linster’s father was a chef, and she grew up playing hostess at the family’s restaurant in Frisange; at the age of 16 she made her first meal for guests: chicken in a Riesling sauce and a prune pie. She went to university to study law, but returned abruptly when her father fell ill nearly three decades ago.

Ms. Linster says it was from her father that she acquired her good taste and cooking intuition. “He had the palate of a god,” she says, adding he had a knack for refining Luxembourg specialties with French touches.

Connoisseurs will point out what gives Luxembourg’s cooking its own character: Fresh-water delights, such as frog legs and pike,



Chef Léa Linster and a few dishes: above, bouneschlupp, a green-bean-and-sausage stew; left, from the top, warm lobster salad, potato patties and pumpkin soup (in the making)

Riesling sauces and a good dose of garlic to honor the country’s large Italian population (from a wave of immigration more than a century ago), as well as newer Portuguese arrivals. And although Luxembourg cuisine resembles potato-rich German cooking, with a dab of French finesse, it is more than a mélange. Maximilian von Hochberg, the general manager of the Hotel Sofitel Luxembourg Europe, says, “The French are attracted to Luxembourg because of its Continental touch, while Germans appreciate the French overtones.”

At the same time, the business crowd is increasingly an Anglo-Saxon troupe, says Mr. von Hochberg. Luxembourg, long a banking hub and home to European Union institutions, is becoming a center for information technology. Skype, the Internet-telephony company that’s now part of eBay, and Amazon.com both have their European headquarters here.

Restaurants in the Kirchberg district, home to the European Court of Justice and the European Investment Bank, do a brisk business at lunch. At night, diners seek out the smaller, cozier restaurants (and nightlife) in the cobblestone alleyways of the Grund area of Luxembourg’s ancient city center—a Unesco World Heritage Site for the remains of fortifications put up by a series of European powers that held the city over the centuries.

This expansion as a haven for high technology bodes well for restaurateurs. Back at her signature restaurant, Luxembourg’s patron chef continued working on her potatoes, which she dramatically drizzled with sea salt. As she performed her magic, Ms. Linster mused about people and her own journey from girl hostess to celebrated chef.

She says the way people evolve is more important than first impressions: “I love to give people a chance. I love it even more when they know how to take it.”

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