

The Hippopotamus chef

French chef Laurent Loudeac reveals how the laidback Kiwi way has influenced him in the kitchen of this quirky, fine-dining restaurant.

By Kathy Ombler

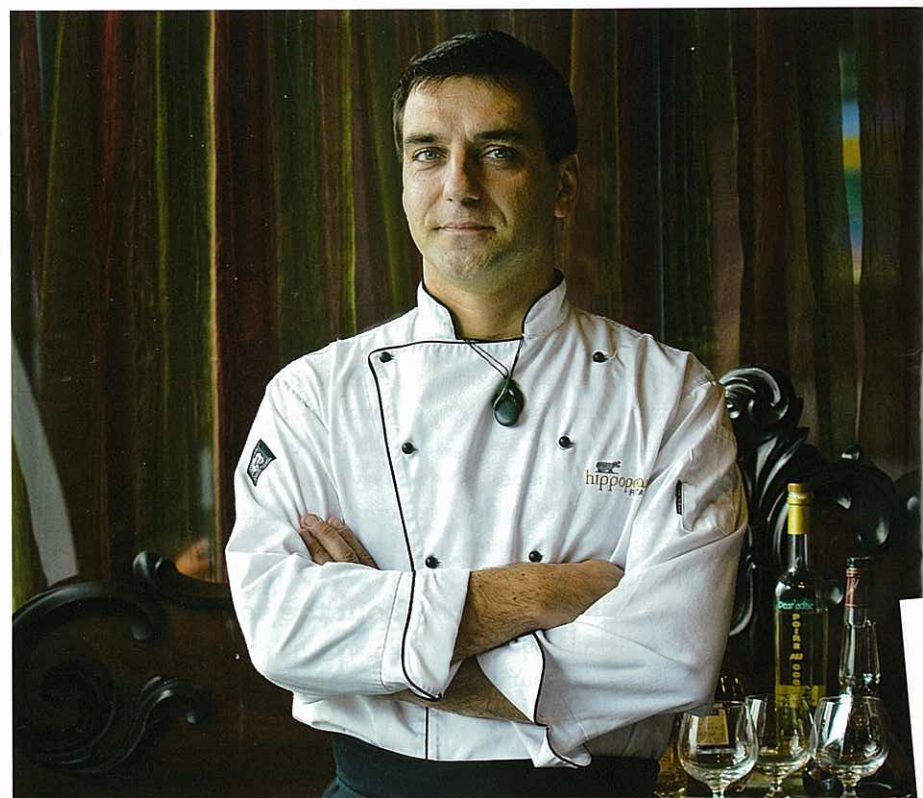
WITH so many interesting eateries within easy walking distance in downtown Wellington, city hotels struggle to hold their guests in-house or to lure locals through their restaurant doors. Bucking the trend is Wellington's luxury, quirky Museum Art Hotel, where the curiously named Hippopotamus Restaurant is earning kudos for its French influenced fine-dining, innovation and creativity.

At the helm is French chef Laurent Loudeac. After 24 years of cooking in France, Switzerland, Britain, Australia and Wellington; in kitchens ranging from five-star hotels to corner cafes; he seems to have found a happy Hippopotamus niche.

Chef Loudeac is credited with transforming the restaurant away from its stuffy, traditional hotel-style predecessor. After all, it takes more than a stunning harbour view, Versace-style décor and wacky name (the result of a public competition) to keep discerning patrons coming back.

How has he done this? Loudeac shrugs – not with Gallic indifference more in a modest, understated manner as he talks about keeping things simple, using seasonal produce, offering decent size portions and looking after your staff. It sounds so, well, simple.

Perhaps it's partly because the understated Loudeac has also been influenced by the laidback Kiwi way. He says he's had to slow the frenetic pace he was used to in European kitchens. "Different nationalities have different work ethics. Kiwis don't rush. When I first came to New Zealand I was 'let's get on with it' then you realise you're the only one stressing, so you calm down a bit. Chill, they told me, you're in New



Zealand now. As a chef in France I'd probably be working twice as hard and be twice as old!" Loudeac has also enjoyed being given a free hand to run the hotel restaurant. "It's a good feeling. I make the place work for myself and that's good for my sense of self-satisfaction. I can be as creative as I want. Making my customers happy is the biggest reward. If I have a bad day at work it's because I don't think I have provided good value for my customers." Front-of-house is also critical to the restaurant's popularity, he adds. "I always believed the kitchen was more important but that's not true. If you have great food and bad service the customer won't come back, average food and great service and they are more likely to return. It's even. It's teamwork." And while Hippopotamus Restaurant has developed its own identity in its own right, apart from the hotel, Loudeac is quick to concede that the "eccentricity" of the independently owned property also works in his favour. For example, once the restaurant name was decided,

owner Chris Parkin installed a sculpted, full-sized hippopotamus on the veranda roof. It's just one of several bold pieces of Parkin's private art collection on public display throughout the hotel that helps to draw the patrons.

"Once we get people here it's our job to make them want to come back. If you do a good job, then word of mouth makes it happen," says Loudeac.

He's used to working for owners with the wild factor, having previously run the kitchen of John and Mary Coleman's perennial Hummingbird Cafe in Courtenay Place. Was a cafe – albeit it a stylish one – a bit of a come down for the five-star hotel chef?

"When I returned to Wellington after two years in France, Hummingbird was the only job I could find. I had never worked in a cafe before and never worked with small plates. So I gave the small plates a French twist. It was interesting, a great thing to learn and it's a nice, social way to dine."

On Loudeac's watch Hummingbird also collected national culinary fare awards.



"Again I was working for owners open to ideas; they gave me the freedom to do things and wanted something a bit different, with that bit of a wild factor. Loudeac's philosophy has continued at Hippopotamus. "I just do what I do best – do the food I like to do. I trained in France and have worked in Switzerland and Australia so my menu now is a bit of a mix. There's not much Asian influence, except I use a little wasabi, a little soy, and there's sashimi on the menu." Here's that understatement again. "Salmon sashimi my way" is Loudeac's signature dish. The starter, served on a long platter, offers a line of raw cubed salmon, each cube added to progressively until the final cube, which is presented with a taste of soy jelly,

cucumber, marinated wakame and sesame seeds. Loudeac's dinner menu is set out on a single page, deceptive in its diversity. There are two chef degustation menus (five or six courses), starters, five or six a la carte mains and a rotisseur selection of meats. Current a la carte selections include "catch of the day bouillabaisse style with crayfish, saffron gnocchi, rouille and corn crouton" and "rack of lamb with lamb brain and braised shanks tortellini with pea puree and garlic jus".

"With our rotisseur selection we appeal to the business traveller. We just started a new menu with classic rib of beef, béarnaise and fries and on the first night one third of our covers were for this. In

the winter I like stewing and braising, getting those strong, rich flavours.

"It's my style, simple. Nothing too over the top but portion-wise trying to make people feel they have received value. I think too many places now are offering too small portions."

Portion size brings costs to mind. You also have to consider your costs and the way to control costs is minimal wastage, says Loudeac. "Use everything in your kitchen, for example, we offer an amuse bouche so we can incorporate something we've used during prep so it doesn't need to be thrown away. The degustation menu also presents the opportunity to use different things. And we only use seasonal produce, which doesn't cost as much."