It's hard to believe, but not 20 years ago there were as many gallons of ink being spilled about Ed Debevic's as there were this past year about Alinea. Local and national press fell over themselves trying to explain what exactly the restaurant was, where precisely its "fakeness" lay, how to pronounce the name, and where the resurgence of meat loaf fit into new American cuisine. Times have changed: Ed's creator, wizard restaurateur Rich Melman of Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises, is not the biggest restaurant story in Chicago anymore.

But he is a crucial part of a bigger story. A handful of names come up over and over when people describe Chicago's current role as the best and most experimental restaurant city in the United States—groundbreaking chefs Charlie Trotter and Rick Bayless as well as the newer chefs engaged in avant-garde cuisine, chief among them Alinea's Grant Achatz, Avenues' Graham Elliot Bowles, and Homaru Cantu of Moto. But Melman, whose name is generally excluded from the discussion, deserves major credit for our thriving restaurant scene, including the current emphasis on the individual chef and culinary experimentation. Believe it or not, there is a connection between the trays of meat loaf at Ed Debevic's and the bacon on a swing at Alinea.

Lettuce began in 1971, when Melman and his (now deceased) partner, Jerry Orzoff, opened R.J. Grunts, a Lincoln Park hippie/hamburger boîte. (It's still hanging in there, a corporate talisman like that yellowed first dollar bill taped behind the bar.) Grunts was the start of a continued on page 26

By Elizabeth M. Tamny
practically raw, a fourth is miss-
chunks of peppercorn, a third is
of fish. “You repaired it, but you
of one otherwise perfect specimen
ition on the sauce,” she pronounces
scale. “There’s a slight overreduc-

KENDALL continued from page 24
present the results, and Sikorski
KENDALL continued from page 24

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chunks of peppercorn, a third is
of fish. “You repaired it, but you
of one otherwise perfect specimen
ition on the sauce,” she pronounces
scale. “There’s a slight overreduc-

Another is marred by large
chunks of peppercorn, a third is
of fish. “You repaired it, but you
of one otherwise perfect specimen
ition on the sauce,” she pronounces
scale. “There’s a slight overreduc-

Sikorski turns to the question—each
a pale dumpling of fish aloft on
a sea of vibrant green broth. She
greb one and it repels it to show
how presentation can affect per-
ception. She takes bits of two
in her hands and runs a
finger softly over the surface of
each. One is velvety smooth; the
other, she points out, has a bro-
ken, mealy grain.

When the grading’s done she
looks around. Despite all the bells
and whistles of the new facility,
it’s suddenly clear that cooking
still comes down to knives, heat,
and a lot of sweat. “I’m not sure
the banh mi dish station looks like
shit!” she snaps, gesturing in the
direction of the sink. “Look at that! It’s a moun-
tain! Who’s on sanitation?”

As the students jump on the
pile of dirty dishes, she walks
across the room and into the cafe-
teria, where a lone student from
the class has been dispatched to
serve the sol to his peers.

“How is it?” she asks a table
of students, sipping the result of
the past six hours of learning half-
eaten by the group.

“A little underseasoned,” one
replies.

“Then,” says Sikorski. “They’ve
all had Fish already, so they
know.”

MELMAN continued on page 1

new kind of restaurant chain:
every eatery Melman invented
would be radically different from
the ones that came before. After
hamburgers came a singles joint,
then seafood, then Italian. “I
didn’t just want to do prints,”
Melman told Crain’s Chicago Busi-
ness last year. “I wanted to
do original artworks.” Even now,
instead of putting its energy into
duplication, Lettuce tends to sell
off the cloning rights to its cre-
as, as it did with Ed
Debevic’s, Maggiano’s Little
Italy, and Rock’n Bowl (which
the company recently bought back).
Melman is often credited with
inventing the “multiconcept”
chain as well as having a
magical ability to know what the
public wants before it does.
Each successful Lettuce restau-
ran has packed in the diners
but also pushed the industry
toward new ideas: one of the
first salad bars was at Grunts, the
first tapas were at
Cafe La Victoria.

Currently Lettuce has more
than 60 restaurants under its
ownership and management,
including such long-term suc-
cesses as Shaw’s Crab House,
Ambria, Scoozi!, Brasserie Jo,
Mon Ami Gabi, Wildfire,
Everest, Tru, and, most recently,
Mon Ami Gabi, Wildfire,
Everest, Tru, and, most recently,
Moto.

As the last decade ended,
Chicago was “emerging as a cra-

NEW YORK TIMES

MELMAN continued on page 28

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turous diner is, according to Charlie Trotter, the biggest dif-
ference between being a restau-
rateur now and when he first
began. “People were intimidated
back then,” he told me last year.
“Now... they’re more savvy and
understand things, which is
great for all of us who are trying
to cook and push the envelope.”

Lettuce restaurants have
played a role in bringing diners
out and encouraging them to try
new things, but they’ve also
prepped us, with their rich the-
ater and painstaking attention
to detail, for the excesses of the
new cuisine.

Every one of Melman’s restau-
rances is sewn from whole cloth.
Each is a carefully designed din-
ing experience, modeled at the
smallest level to re-create the feel
of a French bistro or 1950s diner
or what have you; there are heavy
layers of varnish on the wood-
work at Shaw’s, just like at a
Baltimore crab house. All the set
direction and mood setting has
led critics to call Melman the
Steven Spielberg or Andrew
Lloyd Webber of dining; descrip-
tions of the Lettuce dining experi-
ence often include the word the-
ater. But Melman has said over
and over that his main inspira-
tion comes from the kitchen. “I
don’t say to myself, ever, ‘I want
to do a place that looks like a
zoo,’ and plan it all out, and then
at the end say, ‘Well, what kind
of food can we serve?’” he told a
public radio reporter in 1996.
“It’s the other way around. I start
with the food.”

Achatz and Bowles say similar
things when they’re accused of
experimenting with their food
just for shock value. And on
some level, the micromanaged
world of the new cuisine—like
Alinea’s appetizer with the hot
potato suspended above a spe-
cially designed bowl on a pin that
you slide out to drop it into the
cold potato soup below—in’t
unlike the carefully designed set
of a Lettuce restaurant. The sassy
waitress at Ed Debevic’s, too up
in your business, isn’t that differ-
ent from the server at Moto,
required to tightly direct how
you should sip, chew, or slurp
each course to best effect. The
difference, of course, is that at
the haute restaurants the special
effects are mostly gastronomical.
The food itself is theater.

At Moto every dish is
explained to you in detail by a
lab-coated waiter; at Vong’s Thai
Kitchen, another Lettuce hold-
ing, you don’t really want to
know how your food was made.
You want to sink into the dining
experience without thinking
about it. The Lettuce world is
fun but safe. You know you’ll be
well looked after, and that the
food won’t be terrible; in fact,
chances are it will be good and it
might even be great. The experi-
ence will probably cost a little
more than you wanted, but it’ll
feel special.

The new cuisine is challeng-
ing, but it’s also fun in some of
the same ways that Melman din-
ing is fun. It doesn’t take itself
nearly as seriously as the media
does—how could it, when the
food explodes and gushes and
vaporizes and elicits squeals?
Melman’s restaurants have
helped diners expect and enjoy
fun while dining. When I asked
the Adrias to sum up the various
tenets they use to define their
role in the new cuisine, they said
that their cuisine turns on two
major axes: investigation and
playfulness. “The latter means
understanding that gastronomy
is part of life and, as in life itself,
one shouldn’t lose the spirit of
playfulness, irony, pleasure, and
pursuit of happiness,” they wrote
in an e-mail. Rephrased with a
less philosophical bent, this
could be on the wall in a Lettuce
kitchen next to rules about slip-
resistant shoes.

Melman is now only chairman
of Lettuce, having relinquished
the positions of CEO and presi-
dent to his protege, Kevin
Brown, in recent years. Melman
is a “free radical,” according to
Brown, able to explore new ideas
more unencumbered in an era in
which you could argue that
Lettuce has started to lap itself
in the exploitation of nostalgia:
it recently purchased the Magic
Pan, the chain of crepe restaur-
ants from the 70s. Melman has
often said that he doesn’t like
“thinking big.” He makes his
progress by “taking a small step,
making sure the ground is firm,
and then taking the next small
step,” he told Crain’s in 1993.
It’ll be interesting to see where
he goes from here.
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