

# LA

TITANS OF DESIGN  
Frank Gehry, John Lautner,  
Philippe Starck, J. Mays

## Santa Barbara Ranch, Sunday Lunch

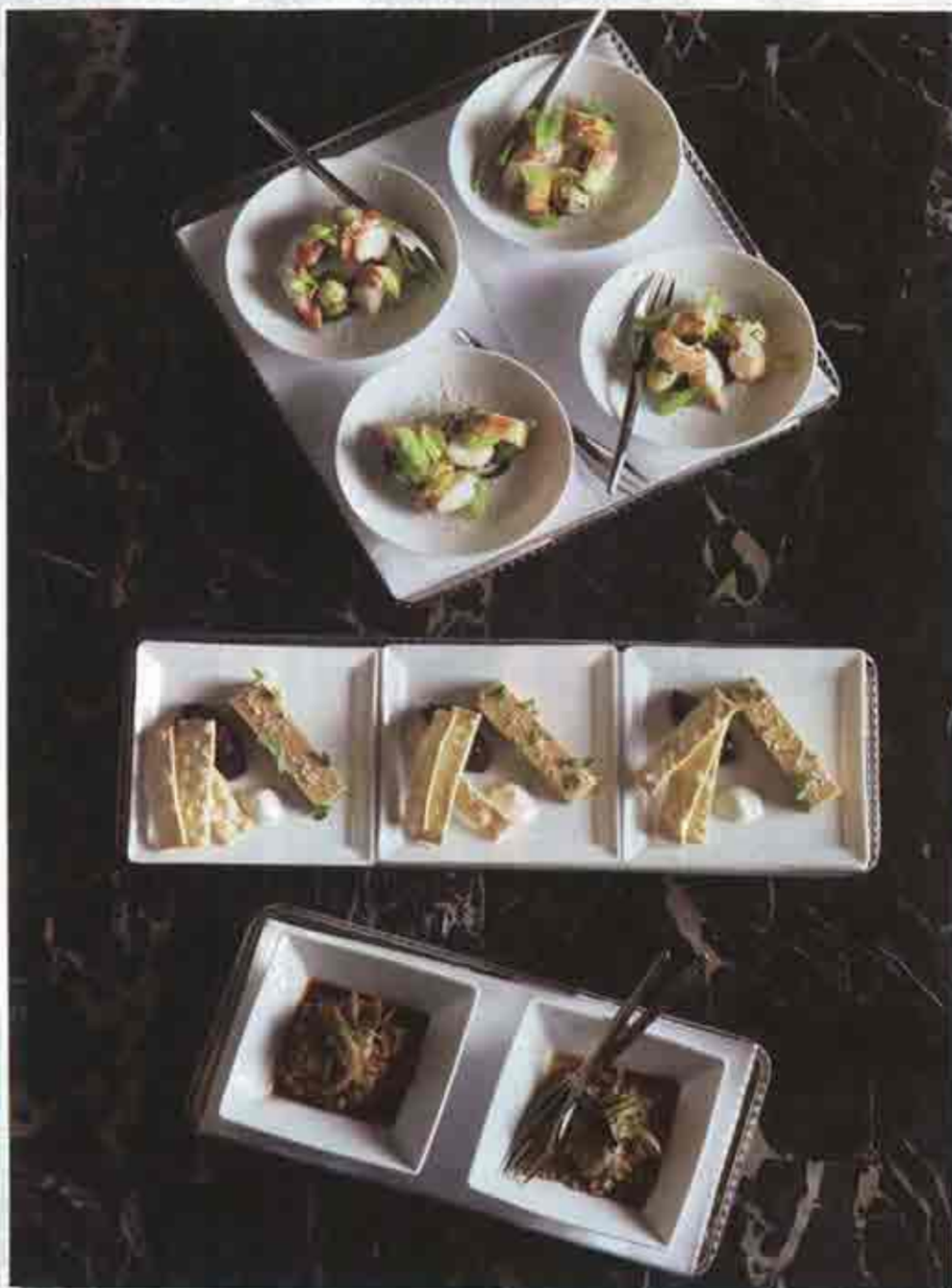
*by Amanda Chantal Bacon*



LORA  
ZARUBIN

I'M STILL  
HUNGRY

86



A different kind of family fare: Orders for the table arrive in toothsome portions and (opposite, from top) Starck and Mina prepare to make it all happen at XIV.

may seem in conflict with the name of his new hot spot, but Mina explains that one of the listings, the Clock Bar, is actually classified as a bar/lounge, not a restaurant.)

Mina and Andre Agassi, his partner in Mina Group, together with Sam Nazarian's SBE group, are set to open XIV in October. And if that's not enough star power, Nazarian has Philippe Starck on the project, which has been in development for five years.

Mina welcomes me to the restaurant's walk-through with his trademark smile and a big hug. A lot to undertake? He seems calm and happy, but in truth, he says, he's "nervous, really nervous."

XIV is about food, of course, but the design is a major part of the atmosphere and concept. The interior is inspired by Louis XIV: Imagine the inside of a 17th-century European chateau, with three walls making up the dining room, one of which includes four fireplaces, bookshelves, mirrors and paintings. Starck's trademark twist juxtaposes this scene with a modern element—in this case, a stainless-steel-paneled wall with a 30-foot white marble bar set in the center. Off to one side, diners can see the large open kitchen.

The restaurant seats 190 guests—120 in the main dining room and 70 on an adjacent sheltered patio and bar. As we walk through the dining room, Starck yells out, "We need to change the patina of the wood—it looks too new." Another perfectionist tweaking the details before the doors open, and we can see why it has taken this long to create what is sure to be the newest L.A. hangout.

Because it's not just a masterpiece of design—there's the food. At XIV, Mina has a new concept keeping him up at night, which is saying something for

## Chef d'Oeuvre

Culinary artist Michael Mina turns XIV on the Sunset Strip

When I hear Michael Mina is opening a restaurant at the foot of Laurel Canyon, my first thought is, Another restaurant? Doesn't he already have more than a dozen? I've always been dubious of chefs who want to expand their empires. Doesn't one eatery keep you busy enough? How is it possible to oversee the food and all the details that go into running a top restaurant? This prejudice is one I've carried around for a long time. That is, until I meet Mina.

I already feel like we are neighbors, since I drive by his picture every night on the way home—it takes up the entire side of the scaffolding of the building. And I'm still obsessing about how many restaurants this excellent chef actually has. Mina—smaller in person—says simply, "Thirteen, and this makes 14."

Coincidentally, that's the name of his newest venture: XIV. (His site, michaelmina.net, already lists 14 up-and-running establishments, which





Avant-garde desserts from XIV pastry chef Kahn include (from top row) a Bitter Chocolate Cream assemblage and Blueberry Ice Spiral cups.



my prejudice turns into respect. Mina is an excellent talent scout. Yes, he's a nice guy, but he's a perfectionist, and he demands the same from whoever works for him. He finds the best young talent, trains them well and turns them into great chefs. The method must work; his team has been with him for years. So, when he decides to open a restaurant, he always knows just the right person to helm the kitchen.

The kitchen at XIV is headed by Mina, with Steven Fretz as chef de cuisine, Michelle Retallack as executive sous chef, Jordan Kahn as pastry chef and Rajat Parr as wine director. As for the menu, Mina is still developing, tweaking and perfecting it.

I beg for a taste as we set up the shoot of the food. And what I sample is sublime. Some of my favorite dishes: the Foie Gras Terrine, Cranberry, Cardamom, Greek Yogurt, Flatbread; the Sake and Maple Cured Kanpachi, Apple, Cippolini Onions, Shiso; and the Chilled Maine Lobster, Potatoes, Celery, Chestnuts, Truffle. (Mina eschews the word *and* in his descriptions.)

A primo dessert is the Blueberry Ice Spirals, Violet Cream, Burnt Clove Meringue, Hibiscus Cellophane (pictured above). It's a visual puzzle. I don't know where it begins or ends—or for that matter, how to eat it—but somehow it works, and it's absolutely delicious.

XIV opens its doors October 16. Things have come full circle for Mina, considering his first job in 1987 was as a pastry chef at the Hotel Bel-Air. He knows the stakes are high, but so far, his gambles have paid off. As I leave him in the parking lot as it is being graded, I ask again how he feels about everything. "Nervous, really nervous." But he looks excited to me. And so are we.

someone who has opened so many successful restaurants. Mina wants his food to play as the restaurant does—classic with a twist—by updating the concept of "family dining," where all the dishes are placed in the center of the table and everyone shares.

At Mina's family table, the food is served already apportioned for diners in an extensive selection of smaller dishes from different categories—"tastes," if you will. For example, if a table of customers orders tapioca tempura bay scallops, cauliflower, passion fruit and almonds, the dishes will arrive already divvied up. There will also

be a complete vegetarian menu, with such dishes as horseradish panna cotta, celery root, tomatoes or caraway and sake maple-cured tofu, apple, onions, sesame and shiso.

The concept, the design, the attention to detail—all impress and also puzzle. How is Mina able to oversee so many restaurants and maintain the quality and integrity of each? For him, it's clear: "Once you get past the first two or three, it becomes easier, because things fall into somewhat of a routine. The secret, of course, is having the right people in place. Without that, it's a nightmare."

So that's the secret, I realize, and