**The Bossa Nova, L’Art de Vivre, and The Watergate Hotel**

*Sébastien Giannini, Executive Chef*

Glamour, celebrity, and notoriety are nothing new at the Watergate Hotel, where scandal rocked the country and Nouvelle Cuisine took the capital, along with the nation, by storm. Executive chef Sébastien Giannini, brought on by the new ownership following a major renovation and high-style re-design of the illustrious property, was born after both these watershed events – on another continent – but his understanding of his own role in the story could not be more clear: “Dining here must be worthy of the prestige of the location, and the exceptional quality of the new space. It must celebrate and support *l’Art de Vivre*, with all the excitement and chic of *la Nouvelle Vague*,and the glamorous era of the Watergate's origin.”

A native of the southern French port city of Toulon who grew up within view of the Mediterranean coast, Giannini has a grounding in that gracious way of life that derives from the bountiful and alluring luxury of the French Riviera. At the height of an impressive career, his standard of excellence still stems from the local outdoor market stretching down to the sea, where his grandmother brought him daily to shop for produce, seafood, and flowers. As a small child, at eye-level with the colorfully laden tabletops, he learned each ingredient’s essence, its seasonality, and its optimal moment. His formative years continued among the most glittering watering holes of the international jet-set: at age fourteen, he began his restaurant training at Ile Rousse Hotel in Bandol, a classic Côte d’Azur resort town in France; from there, he traded *sea* for *ski* at Le Kilimanjaro, an exclusive hotel in Le Courcheval, in the French Alps, whose restaurant had earned two-Michelin-stars.  He then returned south to Château Hotel La Vignette Haute, a Relais & Châteaux property near Cannes; further along the coast, in Nice, he became executive chef at Le Méridien. More recently, in Montreal, he served as executive chef at The Fairmont Queen Elizabeth. He arrived in the United States in 2017, taking the helm of the kitchen at the St. Regis, Washington, DC.

Tall and personable with an engaging French accent, chef Giannini notes, “The Watergate in its glory days, in the 70s and 80s, was an urban American equivalent of Saint-Tropez, an environment that was chic, powerful, and festive. There was a constant parade of celebrities, and the cuisine of Jean-Louis Palladin was, of course, legendary. The grand renovation returns the property to that ultra-fashionable status, and the food and drink are right in-step.” He equates the playful, luxe-contemporary design of the hotel, and the striking views from its principal restaurant, Kingbird, with the relaxed mid-century-modern glamour of the Côte d’Azur.  “The feeling is upbeat, with a cool *bossa nova* vibe, a place where you could eat comfortably with your boss or with a group of friends.  Close your eyes and – hey! – you could be at Senequier, in the port of Saint-Tropez.”

Giannini characterizes his own cuisine as – how else? – French Riviera style, which embodies many influences from the Mediterranean Coast. A roster of culinary mentors includes Alain Ducasse, Frank Cerutti, Philippe Joannès, and, most of all, Guy Gedda, the ‘Pope of Provençal cuisine.’ “When you have excellent local product, as we do here in Washington, DC, as they have in the south of France, you work around the product. Celebrate it. Keep it pure and simple. That is how the local cuisine in Saint-Tropez is so very international and sexy, appealing to the French, the Italians, the Russians, and the Americans.” Giannini’s mastery of his cuisine has earned him numerous awards, including a place as finalist in the prestigious Bocuse d’Or in 2010.

The integrity of ingredients so vital to Giannini’s menu means clear, well defined complementary flavors, revealing a fresh and sophisticated sensibility.  Starters might include *Fig Confit* on a toasted slice of bread with simple syrup, orange zest, and Italian pine nuts; or *Eggplant Caviar* with goat cheese and fresh basil.  Giannini is pleased to be introducing his guests at The Watergate to *La Cade*, a simple crisp-baked salted cracker beloved throughout the Côte d’Azur, made of chickpea flour, presented with olive oil, and traditionally enjoyed with a glass of rosé. Rockfish from the Chesapeake, tagged to certify its sustainable sourcing, is cooked simply *a la plancha* with olive oil from south of France and *fleur de sel*, and seasoned with a bright blend of carrots, parsley paste, and lime juice. Giannini’s *Lamb Shoulder Confit* is a rich dish, executed simply: pounded and rolled to ensure the fat is distributed throughout, the tender meat is cooked with lime zest for seven hours and served with buttered polenta and a flavorful quenelle of *chermoula*, a Moroccan herb sauce of chopped parsley, olive oil, tomato confit, and orange blossom water.

A consummate creative professional, Giannini brings the values of hard work, respect, and knowledge to all aspects of his professional kitchen.  He takes pride in his impeccable standards, and in building up younger chefs on his staff. “At this point in my career, I have earned the stability I need to spend the time that I want with my wife and my little girl,” he says; one of their favorite pastimes is visiting the farmers market in Arlington on Saturday mornings, fondly recreating his early training with his grandmother. “As a chef,” he notes, “the way you live your life emerges in your work: when you are generous in your life, you are generous on the plate.”

For Sébastien Giannini, that generosity of spirit is integral to his own *art de vivre*.  That, and plenty of *bossa nova*.

For more information:

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