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Dining Features Article

KITCHEN CONFIDENTIAL

We could hardly wait to check out L'Espalier's new state-of-the-art digs at the Mandarin Oriental. So we didn't. Behold: our exclusive sneak peek.

BY J. KENJI ALT



SEEING DOUBLE: The old L'Espalier kitchen, above, and its big league upgrade (below photos). Kitchen photos by Bob O'Connor.

Wearing a hardhat instead of his usual toque, Frank McClelland runs his hand over the smooth, spotless surface of his Athanor cooking island like a proud father. After two and a half decades in L'Espalier's tastefully appointed yet woefully cramped townhouse on Gloucester Street, the chef is taking his refined French cuisine across the way to the hotly anticipated Mandarin Oriental Hotel—and into the 21st century.

Slated to open by month's end, the new space—by New York-based architectural designer Martin Vahtra—looks to be the most high-tech (and most extravagant) kitchen in Greater Boston, at an estimated total cost of \$1 million. Gone are run-of-the-mill mainstays like traditional cooktops and ovens. In their place is culinary gadgetry that seems futuristic by comparison. "All our equipment is designed for delicacy and precision," McClelland says. "We're using all this fancy stuff to make our food more simple—to really let single items sing on their own." With an accompanying orchestra like this one, even a stripped-down tune should earn bravos.

French cooking is only as good as its foundation: complex, long-simmered stocks. Given the capacity of the new dining room, at 95 seats, a basic soup kettle won't cut it. The 40-gallon **Groen Tilting Braising Pan** is a \$13,000 floor-mounted behemoth that can put out a small hot tub's worth of stock every few hours, or braise a hundred pounds of lamb shanks at a time.

Any standard cooktop can pull off high, medium, even medium low. But if it's a perfectly calibrated 237 degrees you want, an old-fashioned open flame becomes a blunt tool. Part of the Athanor cooking suite (sticker price: \$101,500), the **Vitro Ceramic Radiant Hob** uses electromagnetic induction to lock in specific temperatures between 140 and 1,022 degrees. Translation: ethereally soft omelets, perfect crèmes anglaises.



With a flame that resembles a jet engine's afterburner, the Athanor's **Volcan High-Output Burner** takes 20 gallons of seawater from room temp to 212 degrees in minutes. And it can cook 15 lobsters simultaneously without losing a boil, which means that unlike at some restaurants, where the critters are par-cooked and then held for hours, yours is alive and pinching until the chef gives the call.

Waiting two full minutes for the sauté pan to reach proper searing temperature is so Old L'Espalier. Athanor's **Versatile Cooking Plate**, a 3/4-inch-thick slab of solid steel, maintains a constant 800 degrees for the entire dinner service. Those diver scallops begin to sizzle immediately, meaning you'll savor their dark, buttery, caramelized crust that much sooner.

In traditional ovens, delicate fish fillets, thick chops, and whole birds can dry out on the surface before the interior is done. The **Winston CVap**, with a microprocessor-controlled low-temperature thermostat and steam injector, uses moist heat to slow-cook food to precise temperatures through and through. File under: legal poaching.

The Food Network has turned cooking into a bona fide spectator sport. Full-height windows (which were still under construction when we took these shots) between L'Espalier's kitchen and the walkway connecting the Pru to the Mandarin let prospective customers scope out that day's grub before trying to score a table.



The menu at the new L'Espalier will still feature McClelland's signature marriage of French technique and seasonal ingredients—it'll just be that much easier to ensure perfection. An opening-night dish to keep an eye out for: **Muscovy duck breast** seared on the Athanor cooking plate, with black quinoa, scallions, and watermelon (part of the restaurant's \$78 three-course prix fixe menu).

The **Irinox Blast Chiller** (not pictured) cools fully cooked meat twice as fast as your average Frigidaire, which is a boon for efficiency. But McClelland has other, more half-baked plans: Placing a partially done chocolate savarin inside this space-age icebox puts the cake into the optimal state of suspended animation, allowing pastry chefs to finish the job to order.

Perhaps the handiest gadgets? The individual **PDAs** that give cooks instant access to a wiki-style database of editable shared recipes. When McClelland's away from the kitchen and suddenly realizes his Lillet-poached peaches might taste better with a hint of ginger, his crew will know about it in real time.

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