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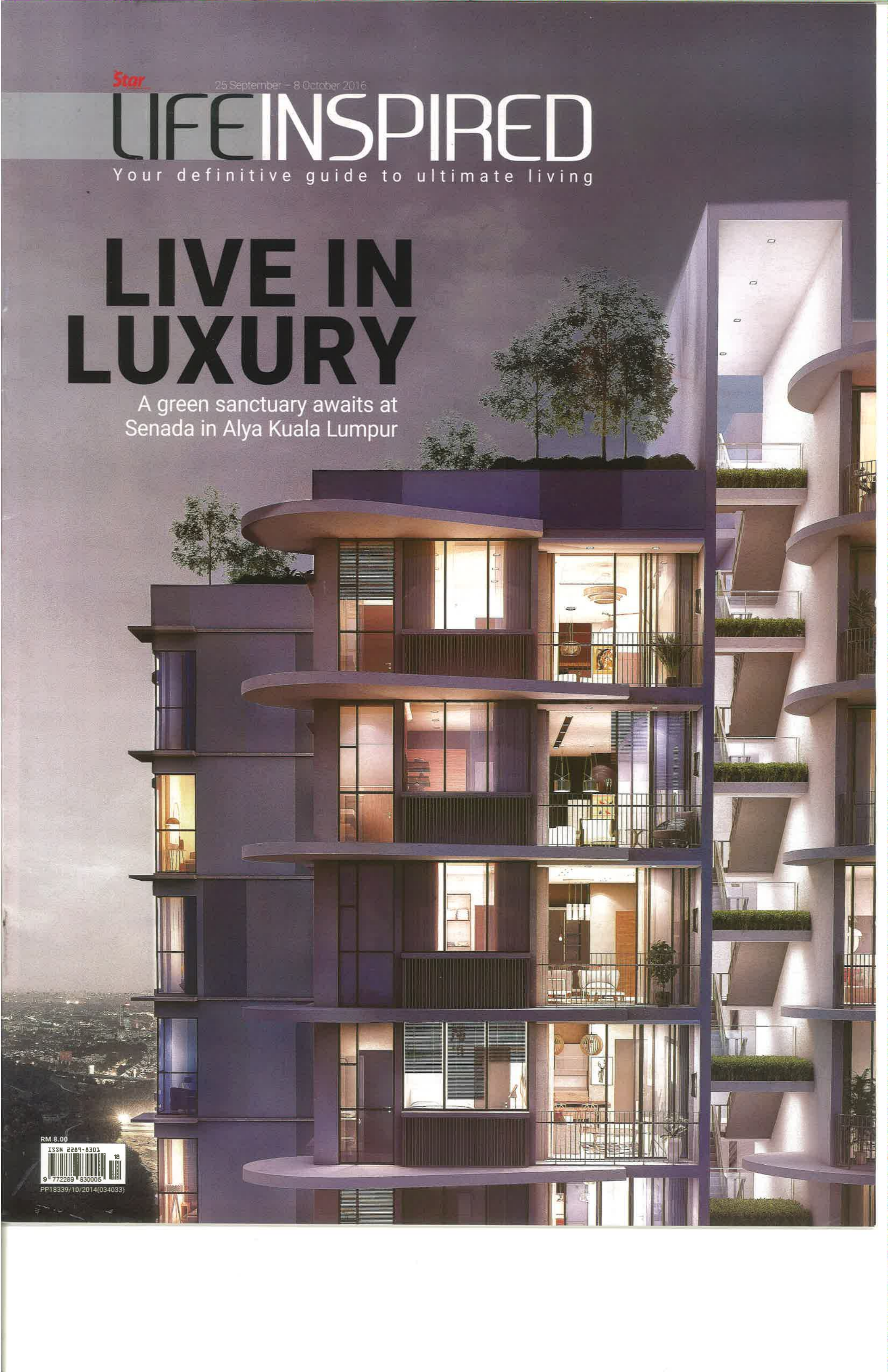
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# LIFEINSPIRED

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## LIVE IN LUXURY

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RM 8.00

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Opulent and romantic L' Assiette



A 50-minute drive from Kuala Lumpur, you'll find L' Assiette at The Chateau Spa & Organic Wellness Resort, KM48 Persimpangan Bertingkat Lebuhraya Karak, Bukit Tinggi, Pahang. It is open daily from 6pm-11pm. For reservations, call 09-221 3888



Chef Roland Hamidouche

# ORGANIC FINE DINING

An inventive new chef puts his spin on The Chateau's fine dining restaurant L' Assiette

High up in Bukit Tinggi lies a gastronomic find called L' Assiette (which loosely translates to "The Plate").

The moment you enter The Chateau Spa & Organic Wellness Resort (which houses the restaurant), there is a prevailing sense of peace and an overwhelming quality of stillness, broken only by the sounds of birds and insects.

L' Assiette itself is divided into an outdoor and indoor dining area, one totally different from the other. If you sit outside on a clear evening just as sunset blooms over the horizon, the untrammelled beauty of the surrounds will amaze and inspire – the majesty of the dense forest around you, the chattering of the monkeys in the distance and the hornbill that swoops past on its way to a neighbouring tree.

As night descends, the sky turns an inky black and crickets begin striking up a boisterous symphony, providing an enthusiastic soundtrack to your night of eating, drinking and (no doubt) merry-making.

But that's if you choose to dine outside.

Inside, an altogether different narrative emerges. Chairs are decked out in plush lame gold, chandeliers hang ceremoniously from the ceiling and there are even candelabras on some tables. In a corner, classically-trained Ukrainian pianist Mikhail Grigoriev plays a medley of classical and contemporary tunes, each one designed to accentuate the ambience of the place.

If this isn't a prelude to a night of romance and seduction (*wink, wink*), I don't know what is.

The restaurant is helmed by Parisian chef Roland Hamidouche, who has worked in Michelin-starred restaurants like La Ferme Saint Simon in Paris and Mint in Dublin. Hamidouche took on the mantle of executive chef at L' Assiette a few months ago and has since set about stamping it with his own mark

You'll find, for instance, that he likes

amplifying the usage of single ingredients. So you're likely to find something as unremarkable as cauliflower turned into a puree or cous cous and a pickle in one plate.

"I work a lot with different textures on the plate. Often, they're the same ingredient but I work it in different ways and give it different flavours," he says.

Hamidouche, whose cooking style fuses French techniques with Mediterranean influences, also enjoys cooking meat sous vide style, so he places everything from duck to beef in sous vide water baths, ensuring flavour and moisture is retained in the meat, which in turn, yields tender, juicier carnivorous offerings.

One of the restaurant's main highlights is the fact that it uses organic vegetables, sourced from its own organic farm, which lends additional farm-to-table appeal. Hamidouche works closely with the head farmer, telling him exactly what he needs and when he needs it. As a result, the menu is bursting with fresh organic vegetables like zucchini, cauliflower, sweet potatoes, tomatoes and lemons.

Hamidouche says the fresh, robust flavours of organic vegetables are evidenced in the tasting. "It tastes better! Before I was a sceptic as well – why pay more for organic? But since working with organic produce, I can taste the difference," he says.

Hamidouche took about four months to premiere his new menu, tasting and testing until he was satisfied that the quality was at the highest level. After lots of hard work, his dream menu was unveiled about two months ago.

At L' Assiette, you can only sample food from the tasting menus – either the three-course Culinaire menu (RM250), the four-course Epicurean menu (RM350) or the five-course Gourmand menu (RM450). You can't place à la carte orders at all, but Hamidouche says there is a reason for this.

"For me, it works better this way. If not,

By **ABIRAMI DURAI**

Photos by **YAP CHEE HONG/The Star**



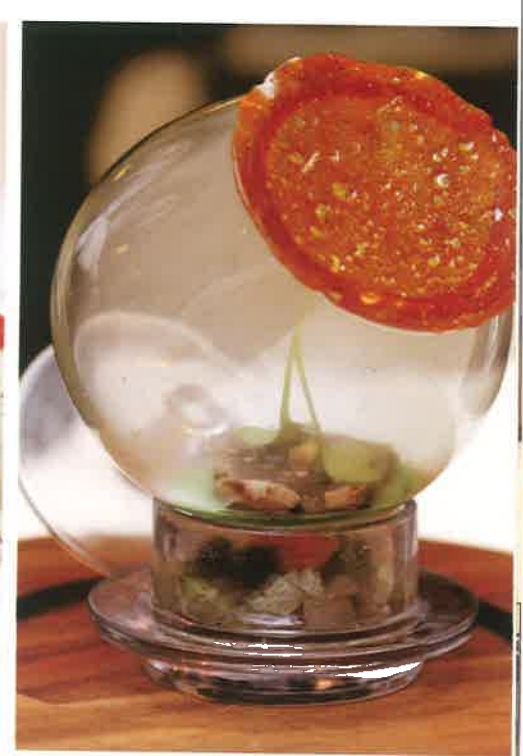
Wagyu Beef Marble 9: beef so perfect, it makes your heart skip a beat



Roasted Scallops with Warm Skate Terrine



Break through the chocolate box and sweet pleasure awaits



An amuse-bouche of Smoked Tuna and Tuna Tartare served with Fennel Panna Cotta

sometimes one person orders starters, and the other person orders a main course, so it's not harmonious. This way, there is progression and balance in the meal," he says.

We had the three-course menu, which provides the opportunity to try an appetiser, a fish or meat main course and a dessert. Although the menu advertises three courses, there are plenty of bits and bobs in between to ensure you are very, very full after.

To begin with, your meal starts with complimentary house-made bread, in the form of crispy shards of paprika lavosh crackers, ciabatta twists, soft rolls, wheat bread and rye bread, served with organic salted butter and salmon mousse. The breads are made using organic flour and are really, really good. The lavosh is crispy, with hints of spicy paprika and the ciabatta twist is truly a thing of beauty – plump, soft and doughy and the perfect counterpoint to the rich butter, which you must slather all over the bread. (Don't even think about bringing your diet to this restaurant).

There are more delights in store. The amuse-bouche – a Smoked Tuna and Tuna Tartar served with Fennel Panna Cotta offers a powerful lesson in theatrical appeal and sets the tone for just what Hamidouche is capable of.

Arriving in a glass structure, whose opening is sealed shut by an orange crisp, you can see wisps and tendrils of smoke curling inside the glass, like the mist in a forest just before daybreak. To release the smoke from its enclosed chamber, you have to pierce the orange crisp. As soon as you do, your nostrils are tantalised by the smell of smoked fish, which perfumes the air around you. And it tastes as good as it smells too – the smoked tuna is beautifully smoked and tender as velvet. The burst of freshness from the fennel panna cotta provides contrast to the rugged smokiness emanating from the fish. And underneath all that is the tuna tartare – a fresh, zesty offering that truly does

its job of preparing your palate for the meal ahead.

For your appetiser, try the Roasted Scallops with Warm Skate Terrine, Glazed Slices of Duck, Cauliflower and Shallot Rings (the dish is apparently a crowd favourite). The extra-large Hokkaido scallops are pan-fried and cooked in fennel oil, then glazed with a burnt butter sauce, giving it a herby, nutty taste that goes the extra mile in the flavour quotient. The scallops are cooked perfectly – pillowy soft, translucent in the middle and lightly seared on the outside. The skate terrine is stuffed with a duck mousse inside while the slices of duck have been cooked confit-style for 10 hours. The duck terrine proves that masterful execution and deft flavour-balancing can in turn, produce pretty amazing food while the duck confit is well-executed and melds well with the rest of this delicious dish.

For mains, it's hard to tear your attention away from the Wagyu Beef Marble 9 and Oxtail Terrine, Smoked Morels, Declination of Sweet Potato and Claret Sauce once you first set sight on it in the menu. Although you have to pay an additional RM90 to sample this dish, it is definitely money well spent.

The Wagyu beef in this instance is cooked in a sous vide water bath, then pan-fried with rosemary, garlic and butter. As a result, the meat is buttery soft, warm, trembling and like satin in the mouth – totally worthy of its high marbling score. The beef is perfectly seasoned and enlivened by the woody succulence of the morel mushrooms and the lushness of the claret sauce. In fact, the whole dish is so superlative that it's incredibly hard to dislodge it from your memory.

You'll find yourself having to regale (read: bore) people with tales of its magnificent wonder again and again just to relive that moment when you took that first magical bite.

Also, the dish offers an up-close and per-

sonal look at Hamidouche's inventive ways with single ingredients, in the different incarnations of sweet potato played out here. There's sweet potato crisp, puree and confit, all of which boast different flavour and texture profiles, but are the product of the same sweet potato!

You might think things can't get any better after this, but you'd be oh-so wrong! For dessert, try the Pistachio Box, Basil Chantilly, and Organic Passion Fruit Ice Cream. The dish that arrives in front of you is so gorgeous, it wouldn't look out of place in an art gallery.

The latticed chocolate box needs to be broken open to reveal the chocolate cake and pistachio mousse lurking within. It is one of those desserts that is both decadent and refreshing at the same time – the richness of the chocolate is tapered off by the nuttiness of the pistachio mousse and the wildly invigorating passion fruit ice cream.

And folks, that's not the end of your meal. Because it all ends with a selection of complimentary petit fours – in this iteration, this means little homemade chocolate balls made with organic chocolate.

There are four flavours available – coconut, hazelnut, blackcurrant and passionfruit. Each one offers different sorts of flavour explosions, but the hazelnut is probably the most hedonistic of them all – a little ball of chocolate goodness that tastes a little like Nutella.

Hamidouche has clearly put his heart and soul into his food and this is what has emboldened his ultimate goal: to make L' Assiette one of the best fine-dining restaurants in the country.

"It's all about discipline and quality of the products and the food. There is no space for mistakes – it's about perfection on a plate. Hopefully we work on it and get recognition for the food we do here. That is my goal – to do one of the best fine dining experiences in Malaysia," he says.