

LA BELLE VIE AUBERGE

Bringing the good life to Saint John, N.B.
BY BRIAN MCLAUGHLIN

CHERIF ABBAS is writing a new chapter on New Brunswick hospitality. As president and owner of La Belle Vie Auberge, Abbas has been able to combine culinary perfection with meticulous detail to create an oasis of traditional French cuisine and hospitality in New Brunswick's largest city.

The three-storey Victorian mansion, situated on Lancaster Avenue, houses three dining rooms with 146 seats for regular dining and dinner meetings. In addition, 12 bedrooms provide accommodation for those wishing to stay the night.

Ideally situated overlooking the Reversing Falls and the mouth of the Saint John River, the restaurant has made a difference in the way this city perceives itself gastronomically. Since joining the local Board of Trade, the restaurant has become a favored networking spot for corporate gatherings, business groups and political leaders. Open six nights of the week, Tuesday evenings are the busiest for groups, while Thursday, Friday and Saturday attract more couples and smaller parties who prefer an intimate setting. And La Belle Vie has prepared dishes which have tickled the palates of both local and international political figures.

Award-winning chef Patrick Masset is responsible for setting the culinary tone of the quaint French restaurant. Masset, a native of the French Alps, takes full liberty in experimenting with the knowledge and experience he has acquired while working with other award-winning international chefs.

A perfectionist, Masset takes pleasure and pride in creating "nothing less than culinary artwork." Not one to use fancy names for his creations, he likes dishes "so appealing to the eyes that you don't want to disturb it when you see it on the plate." The restaurant's specialties are fresh local

seafood, including braised lobster La Belle Vie, fresh Atlantic salmon with mint sauce, fillet of fish (smoked in house) or Atlantic bouillabaisse. Adventurous dishes include sea wolf in

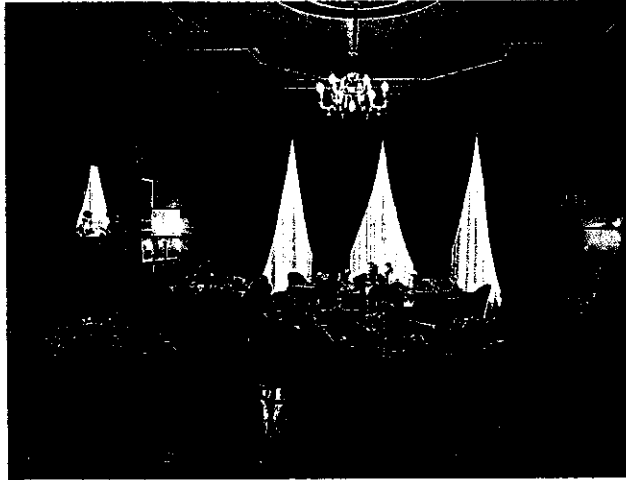
ey, one of Abbas' assistants. "In reality we are very reasonably priced."

But Abbas was undaunted by the initial setback. He quickly launched a major media campaign and spent \$45,000 to break through the wall of resistance. "Customers are finally starting to come around and feel right at home."

The restaurant has received many accolades from its myriad guests. Recently the Governor of Venezuela, Eduardo Morales Gil, visited La Belle Vie and immensely enjoyed the experience. He wrote a full page of compliments in the guest book and has told staff he wants to stay overnight if he ever returns to New Brunswick.

Abbas places great importance in satisfying customers. "We try to make everybody happy. Whatever the customer wants, we try to make possible." The establishment is only as good as the staff who sell it. And sell it his staff does. Employing 10 full time employees, Abbas has covered all the bases in human resource planning. "All staff here have a responsible function." And the customers notice. "People come here for the good food, good service and the very interesting staff."

Looking back on the past two years, Abbas has persevered through the scary hurdles. Now with his heels firmly planted in the Saint John market, he is concentrating on increasing La Belle Vie's tourist market appeal, looking to the potential tourists from the U.S. border and east from Ontario and Quebec. This past September La Belle Vie played host to 60 of the 400 members of the Society of American Travel Writers and a 50-member U.S. business delegation who followed shortly after. And though Abbas presently has his hands full, he does entertain thoughts of expanding La Belle Vie experience to other major Canadian centres. ♦



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pastry or frog leg mousse with chives and cream sauce.

Like Masset, owner Abbas is also an immigrant. His first experience with Canada was during a holiday in Quebec. Upon his return to France, he decided he wanted to return to Canada to open his own business. Believing the Quebec market to be saturated with similar establishments, he decided to try Saint John. He purchased the historic mansion, along the elm lined avenue and quickly found his niche.

The first year was difficult. Abbas faced many obstacles, including some local misperceptions. "People perceived us as too plush because we were so different and new," says Nancy Hick-