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GREATER NEW YORK

Bistro Abides Wasted Opportunities

For restaurateur Remi Laba, brunch isn't all about the food. Bistrot Bagatelle, his French-style restaurant in the Meatpacking District, built its reputation on its lavish party atmosphere with flowing Champagne and thumping music. Mr. Laba, who is 36, claims to have pioneered the Champagne party brunch in New York, counting such celebrities as Sofia Vergara and Jeremy Renner as fans. "It's a luxurious escape to Saint-Tropez," he said.

After opening in 2008, Bagatelle closed its doors in April 2011 following a legal dispute with a minority partner. Mr. Laba and his co-owner, Aymeric Clemente, filed a trademark infringement suit and the trio settled out of court. Now he and Mr. Clemente are partnering with hospitality brand the ONE Group to bring the bistro back, this time with a different chef and a new location on Little West 12th Street.

The Journal spoke with Mr. Laba last week. The new Bistrot Bagatelle opens its doors to the public on Wednesday.

Why go to the trouble of keeping the name of a restaurant that is less than four years old?

Bagatelle is our first flagship brand and the most important. We nurtured and thought through the concept for a long time prior to Febru-



Neil Rasmus/BFA

Remi Laba

ary 2008, when we opened. When we closed a year ago, our business was 25% higher than the previous year. It really entered people's weekly routine; the brunch became such a phenomenon and people kept asking for it. And right before that happened, we had expansion plans but there's no way that the brand could survive without a flagship in New York.

Your "Champagne brunches" sometimes end with people dancing on the tables.

The music was good, some people started dancing and it caught onto the next table and the next, and then people thought they were in Saint-Tropez in the middle of July and they were starting to order big formats and the party turned wilder and wilder.

How do you keep everything under control?

We want it to be true to experience and very authentic. We want you to come to brunch. We don't like the Champagne sprays, it's not what we want. Maybe you have someplace to go after, you know?

Now that you've moved, will you force people off the tables?

We've always had dancers and performances. It's something key to Bagatelle. For example, we created a Superman. A waitress would put linen around her neck, and two waiters would carry her, while the "Superman" theme played. They'd fly her across the room carrying this magnum Champagne bottle. We're going to do a lot more things like this that keep people mesmerized. We want to take it to another level when comes to interactivity, the brand and gimmicks like this.

Are gimmicks the best way to attract a clientele?

What I mean by gimmicks, they are of the moment. We are not going to go out of our way to order a "Superman" costume or Roman chairs. We're going to keep it novel.

How so?

We're looking to work with artists and partner brands in fashion to bring a different ex-

perience to the brunch course. Like have previews of a new collection. We're not going to give into the commercial aspects of things. Like, if a big spender comes in and wants to change the music, that's deceiving what the other people are coming for.

Restaurants in New York come and go. Do you think this brunch is enough to make Bagatelle an institution?

There are many institutions in New York and we aren't one of them yet. We can be one if we maintain a strong connection to clientele base. What may die is that party theme. There are a lot of places, especially the trendy ones, where the customer feels like he has to be thankful to the management for getting a table.

You recently opened a Bagatelle in L.A. and in St. Barts, with plans for more by the end of the year. What will happen to those if this move doesn't work out?

Being in New York is a big key to our success. If Bagatelle was to fail in New York, I think it will be the death of the brand.

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