

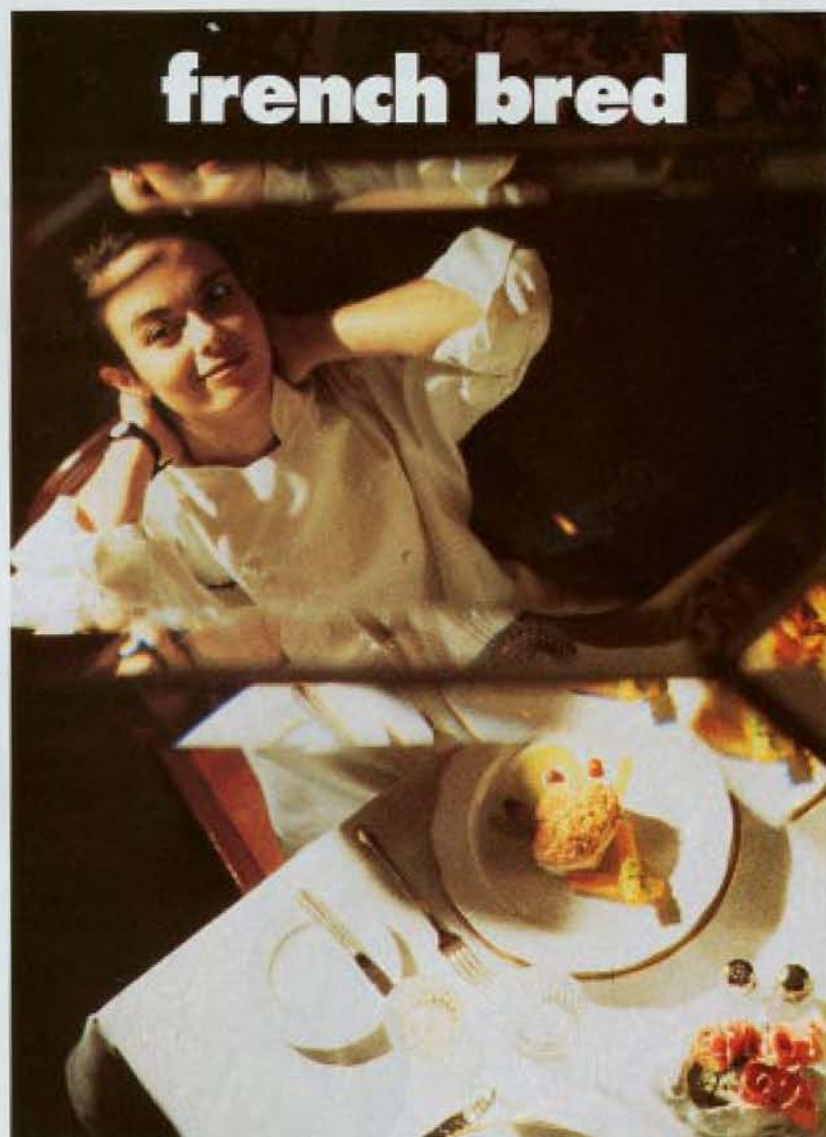
Trained on the Continent and by one of the world's most renowned chefs, Lafayette's Marybeth Boller is now making her own mark.

Stop by the restaurant Lafayette in New York's Swiss-owned Drake Hotel, where an attractive young American is impressing everyone as the new chef de cuisine. Coming out of a tradition that is both male and European, 27-year-old Marybeth Boller is more than just another culinary upstart—she's a seasoned expert.

"I've been fortunate in that I've worked in some great places," says Boller, who trained in top kitchens in New York, the South of France and London. "It's still extremely unusual for a woman to have worked in one of the three-star Michelin restaurants. All the guys thought I was crazy. They thought I should get married and cook for my husband. Now that's crazy!" she adds, laughing good-naturedly.

Boller, who has been cooking professionally only a little over five years, got an early start whipping up batches of toll house cookies for her six siblings. "I always knew I wanted to cook," says Boller, who describes her mother as "a very capable cookbook cook." After growing up in a suburb of New York, and with a degree in business administration, Boller arrived in Manhattan in the summer of 1986 in search of a restaurant job. A mutual friend introduced her to master chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten, whose brilliance boosted Lafayette to four-star heights that year, and he hired her on the spot.

Boller started at the bottom, doing prep work and salads. During the day, she learned to make Vongerichten's unique dishes under his watchful eye, while at night, she studied the traditional method at the French Culinary Institute. In 1988, Vongerichten sent her abroad to gain classical cooking experience: at the *Au-serve de l'III* in Alsace, Boller toiled in the same demanding kitchen where her mentor had earned his reputation. "It was extremely hard work," she recalls, "but ended up learning a tremendous amount."



Cheese wiz. Above: Chef de cuisine Marybeth Boller and one of her specialties—halibut fillets with a light crab and cheese soufflé. Below: The restaurant's comfortably elegant dining room.



something to amuse the mouth—that Boller prepares and serves on-the-house to wake up the palate. Her tiny vegetable tart topped with goat cheese goes wonderfully with a glass of wine. Boller makes a particularly savory treat with mimolette, a deep orange variety that tastes like something between a farmer cheese and a cheddar. Her "mimolette and bread pudding" is irresistible, and comes in miniature porcelain cups you wish you could take home for a midnight snack.

A luncheon dish of halibut fillets smothered in an airy soufflé is equally ambrosial. Boller uses a cheese called tête-de-Moine to

After a brief stint at La Palme d'Or in Cannes, Boller landed a plum spot at Le Gavroche, the legendary London restaurant created by Albert and Michel Roux. Le Gavroche is the sort of intense kitchen that weeds out the dilettantes. Boller was on her feet 85 hours a week, tackling all the unglamorous chores reserved for the lowly apprentices—scrubbing floors and lugging 20-pound sacks of potatoes. "Some people said I couldn't become a chef because they thought I wasn't strong enough to lift heavy pots," says the slight brunette.

They were wrong; these days Boller has all the help she needs. In June, she was appointed head chef of Lafayette, after serving as sous chef for one year. The hotel's owners are hoping she will restore the restaurant to the glory it enjoyed under Vongerichten, who left to open Jo Jo on Manhattan's Upper East Side. And she does seem to be blazing a path all her own, judging by her new kitchen staff—all women. "Even the pastry chef," she says, smiling.

Boller's light, classical cuisine is earning high marks from food critics, particularly her unique way with French cheeses. A favorite with Lafayette's patrons are the little *amuse-bouchées*—literally

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