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cover story

Craig LaBan, Local Man of Mystery



Restaurateur Greg Welsh

Photo By: Michael T. Regan

With just a few words, the *Inquirer* critic can make or break a restaurant. No wonder spotting him has become a high-stakes game.

By Marc Kravitz

Photographs By Michael T. Regan

Greg Welsh is a restaurateur, a partner in Chestnut Grill and Stella Notte. Craig LaBan is the *Philadelphia Inquirer's* restaurant critic, and therefore the most influential voice on dining out in the region. So it's only natural that the former might be wary of the latter. But wary doesn't begin to describe Welsh's feelings toward LaBan; it would be more accurate to say he loathes him. And such is the intensity of his hatred that he is threatening to blow the cover of the critic, who takes his anonymity so seriously that when he won food writing's most prestigious award two years ago, he didn't show up at the banquet.

"I got a picture of him from one of the major restaurants," says Welsh, "and I decided that what I wanted to do was, as an industry announcement, publicize this guy's picture." He's considering purchasing an ad in a magazine so that everyone can see the source of his and other restaurant owners' agita.



"This guy," says Welsh, "has gone too far."

LaBan believes he can hold the *Inquirer* food critic post, one of the region's most visible journalistic appointments, for 35 years -- the same term as his predecessor, the well-liked Elaine Tait. A major key to that longevity will be the level at which he can preserve his anonymity.

But for any big-time food critic, maintaining anonymity often becomes a game of cat and mouse between the writer and the chefs and restaurateurs. *You think I don't know who you are or what you look like, but I do.* "Your anonymity," says LaBan, "if people take you seriously, starts to erode from the minute you arrive in town. It's always been an important part of what I do and I strive to maintain it, but it's something that chips away over time and there's nothing you can do about it."

Except that LaBan does quite a lot about it. Trying to pull personal information from him is like trying to pull a small animal from the clutches of an anaconda. When asked to confirm that he'll turn 34 in October, he responds politely but firmly, "I'm not going to tell you how old I am, how fat I am or anything like that." He won't even say how many people he takes along on his reviews or if he pays for his meals by cash or credit card. He admits to coaching those he brings along on his reviews how not to draw too much attention, and to having, on occasion, donned a disguise.

Privately, many in the local restaurant business mock LaBan for being so secretive, and spotting him has become something of a game. Rumor has it that a photo of the critic hangs in the kitchens of numerous Delaware Valley restaurants, next to the list of the evening's specials and VIPs. This is not unheard of in the restaurant biz; in the wake of a less-than-stellar review in *The New York Times*, the renowned restaurant Daniel reportedly posted a photo of *Times* critic William Grimes in the coatroom.

"If you've invested \$1.25 million in a project and certain people can crush you like a bug if they have a bad time, you're a fool if you're not trying to find out who these people are, what they look like and when they're in," says Bob Kinkead, a noted Washington, D.C., restaurateur who has heard about LaBan from Philly-area peers.

But all it would take is one pissed-off and determined restaurateur to expose LaBan, whose tough, sometimes brutal critiques have made enemies of more than a few in the business. With 31 years to go to reach Tait's length of stay, LaBan's days as a man of mystery may already be numbered.

Ironically, unlike some food writers, LaBan proudly uses his real name when he pens his columns. "People need to know I'm a real person," says LaBan.

He's also not as serious in demeanor as his obsession with secrecy might suggest. When asked if it were true that the phone at his *Inquirer* desk is equipped with a voice-altering mechanism, as one restaurant insider reported, LaBan plays along. "Sure, I've got it on right now," he says sarcastically. "That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. That's hilarious. Let's go with that one: Yeah, I do. Once in a while I can do different voices. I can do Darth Vader, and once in a while I can do Yoda."

LaBan's typical workweek is hectic. During the week of June 30, for example, he ate lunch out three days and dinner four nights. In between meals, he spent 40-45 hours at the office, transcribing notes, interviewing chefs and restaurateurs, attending editorial meetings, and writing articles. He works on four to five restaurants simultaneously for his weekly review in Sunday's *Inquirer Magazine*. "And somewhere in there," he jests, "I do see my family once in a while."

Most people are shocked to learn that LaBan has yet to reach his mid-30s. His in-depth food knowledge, expansive vocabulary and well-honed writing skills lead many of his loyal weekly readers to suppose he's much older.

Following graduation from the University of Michigan in 1990 with a degree in French, the Detroit native had one goal: to live in France. After his trip across the Atlantic, he wrote about jazz and promoted musicians prior to working at the La Varenne Ecole de Cuisine in Paris, where he translated courses from French to English for his fellow American students and earned his cooking degree.

Following culinary school, and "a bunch of little insignificant kitchen jobs," LaBan moved to Boston in 1992 and began his fledgling career as a freelance food writer, writing for the likes of *Boston Magazine* and the *Boston TAB*. He soon enrolled at Columbia University with aspirations of obtaining formal journalistic training and graduated in 1994 with a master's in journalism. He then worked for a year at *The Princeton Packet* and for a year and a half for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in the South Jersey bureau, covering the Pine Barrens, Fort Dix and McGuire Air Force Base.

LaBan moved to New Orleans in 1996 to report on government affairs for *The Times-Picayune*. His big career break came four months into his stint, when the *Times'* restaurant critic left. The newspaper put out a posting to fill the vacancy, and LaBan got the job. Right place, right time.

At the ripe age of 28, LaBan received his first shot at being a food critic for a major metropolitan newspaper -- in New Orleans, a city rich in culinary tradition. "I sort of rediscovered what I was meant to do," he recalls.

It was also where he discovered the power that a restaurant critic wields, and how quickly others can come to resent you.

Many in the local scene know of the Emeril story. According to the rumor, chef Emeril Lagasse -- yes, that Emeril, the "bam" guy from Food Network -- hated LaBan with a passion. (The rumor doesn't include an explanation, and LaBan never reviewed his restaurant.) Lagasse supposedly obtained and published a photo of the critic, effectively running him out of town.

Repeated attempts to reach Lagasse, or to get his publicists to comment on the rumor, were unsuccessful. LaBan's successor at the *Times-Picayune*, Brett Anderson, says he's heard from various sources that a photo of LaBan was circulated, but nothing about Lagasse or publication of that photo. He also says that, even if the story were true, he seriously doubts that it explains LaBan's departure. Being out is "a drag," he says, but by no means professionally crippling.

LaBan denies that portion of the story as well.

"My exit out of New Orleans had to do with the fact that I got a job at the *Philadelphia Inquirer*," he says. He does not dispute, however, that the Big Bam loathed him. "I think he was certainly afraid of me, and as a matter of fact, I had an acquaintance that worked at [Emeril's Restaurant] who told me they would stick my name on the VIP list to keep the kitchen on their toes. Emeril had zero to do with me leaving New Orleans; it was a personal and professional decision. Nobody can make me leave a job."

"The power of a review is just phenomenal [in terms of] what it can do to a restaurant one way or the other," says Welsh, who soured on LaBan four years ago after the critic gave no bells (out of a possible four) to Solaris Grille, one of Welsh's Chestnut Hill neighbors. "I always felt food critics have much too much power, and for the most part it's unwarranted. They really understand one aspect of our business, and that's the final product.

"We're not talking about saving lives. If a place is serving anthrax, that's one thing. If a place is bad and they're harming people, then go after them. If a place is charging \$85 for a prix fixe dinner, of course they need to be exposed." Welsh says that when LaBan reviewed Old City's Bookbinders in September 1999, he "wasn't terribly upset" because "everyone in Philadelphia knew Bookbinders was a ripoff." But, he says, "I thought the review could have been done a little softer." He notes that when LaBan's former editor, Gerald Etter, Tait and former *Inquirer*, *Philadelphia* magazine and *City Paper* writer Jim Quinn didn't like a restaurant, "they wouldn't write about it. They would let them implode from within."

Welsh recalls hearing LaBan being interviewed one day on NPR. "I rushed to work and called the station and said, 'This guy's full of crap. He's talking out of both sides of his mouth.' They couldn't wait to get me on the air. I got on the air and I just poured five minutes uninterruptedly into this guy, and I said to him, 'You know, they hired you to come to Philadelphia for one purpose, to sell newspapers, and unfortunately, bad news sells.'"

Welsh says that he told LaBan on the air that his contemporaries "pick up the Sunday paper every week with trepidation to see who you're gonna skewer next. I told him he didn't have any idea what we go through, the demanding customers we deal with. I said, 'You have no risk in this industry, yet you feel so glib about writing us up and making or breaking people who have their mortgages on the line, their children's educations' I kept on talking about how he doesn't have a single idea of the business of restaurants and what we go through on a daily basis to put out a product."

As modest as he attempts to be, LaBan cannot refute his power. "I guess it's true because there's not really any other major competition right now. It's a huge responsibility, and I completely understand that."

The duties of a restaurant critic vary in the minds of the experts. There are those who feel the local critic should be a cheerleader, a champion of the civic cause. Others have a different take on the subject. According to John Mariani, a columnist for *Esquire* and *Wine Spectator*, "A weekly newspaper critic is a consumer reporter and should treat his subject accordingly."

Although there are plenty of local restaurateurs who would beg to differ, LaBan doesn't get off on writing negative reviews. "Somebody once accused me of writing negative reviews because it sold papers," he says, remembering Welsh's angry call during the NPR interview. "That's ridiculous. I'd rather write a positive one."

LaBan has set lofty standards for the restaurants of the Delaware Valley. He rarely awards his top rating of four bells for "Superior" (only one restaurant, Vetri, received the top rating in 2001), and three bells ("Excellent") is almost as infrequent. A two-bell rating of "Very Good" (more than half of his 2001 reviews) is more likely, followed by one-bell ratings, for "Average." (Shula's Steak House in the Wyndham Philadelphia hotel received 2001's only no-bell "Poor" rating.)

He doesn't want to hear about the time and energy a restaurant goes through to satisfy its clientele, nor does he want to hear about personal finances. "That's not to say that I don't respect people and their hard work, but what it comes down to is, I'm not writing about their experience, I'm writing about my readers' experience and my experience," he says. "[Restaurateurs] have mortgages to pay, but so does that couple that saves up to go out once a year, and they want my advice on where to spend their money."

Many restaurateurs and dining patrons wonder how he selects the restaurants he reviews. He's not ignoring your neighborhood, suburb or county; you just think he is. LaBan says that he strives to offer variety, to illustrate an entire restaurant scene, but that he knows people especially want his opinion about the latest restaurants, the ones generating buzz. "These are the ones people don't know about, and I do feel obligated ... so a good chunk of my reviews are new restaurants. The big-name ones are the ones that people need advice on because they've been hearing about them, and that's what my role is."

If your surname is Starr, Stein or Perrier, you can be pretty certain your new restaurant will get a LaBan review. And expect Mr. LaBan to pay about three visits within a few months of your grand opening.

Ellen Yin, a respected restaurateur who operates Fork in Old City, says that a critic should help readers make informed decisions about their dining choices. "Restaurants have different personalities, styles, cuisine and service," says Yin, whose bistro received two bells from LaBan in March last year, "and not all readers can afford or have the time to try every single one, so a review helps the reader get a good idea about what the restaurant is about."

So what qualifications should a restaurant critic possess?

LaBan scoffs at those who question his credentials. "I have never claimed to be a professional chef, but I have earned my living for a short time cooking." He says he's held every kitchen job from garde manger to p%otissier to potato peeler, and he detested the task of debearding mussels and shucking oysters. "I'm a

journalist first and a food person second. You really just need to be a good journalist to be a good food person."

"A restaurant critic should be well-traveled and an expert diner," says Sabine Filoni, a partner of Savona in Gulph Mills. To her, critics should have "a background, or extensive knowledge of, cooking and food, wine and service, as well as knowledge of regional cuisine. They should be impartial, analytical and extremely detail-oriented. Having experience working in a restaurant would round out the background. It would help the reviewer understand why a restaurant is doing what they are."

Welsh concurs on the latter point. "A food critic should have the knowledge of the potential for things to go wrong with a restaurant, and I think if you're going to write about the entire experience of dinner, you should know what it's like to be in the kitchen, how food gets expedited, how reservations are taken so people are sat in a timely fashion. You should know A through Z of the restaurant business, not just the end product."

LaBan, predictably, disagrees with Welsh's sentiments. "I don't think it's a necessary quality," he says. "I happen to have a food degree and I happen to have a journalism degree. It's just a matter of knowing background and information. These reviews must be useful to people, and they must be completely fair and they must be completely thorough, and I think I've achieved that."

"I think you should know something about food. There's different ways to get there. Just because I went to culinary school doesn't make me a culinary genius. I know a lot more than a lot of chefs know about some things, because they never leave their kitchens. They learn from a few chefs over the course of their careers, they have a repertoire of dishes, but they don't eat out like I eat out."

"The day of the review, we had three parties cancel their reservation," says Gary Farmer, director of operations for Goldman Properties, which owns Trust. In June, LaBan awarded no bells to the 13th Street restaurant. "It's hard to say how business was affected because it's the summer, and business is slower in the summer. We had two parties that specifically made reservations because they read the review. One woman told me it was because she 'hates that man' and she wanted to see for herself. We've made many personnel changes. All of our customers are very happy now."

Welsh, who blames a LaBan review for the demise of Restaurant Row's multimillion-dollar Le Colonial, took the Trust review harder than Farmer.

"I called [Trust] on the phone after I read the review and told them I wanted to make a reservation because I hate Craig LaBan. ... [Developer] Tony Goldman came to Philadelphia after spending millions of dollars in South Beach and Soho, and he picks one of the sleaziest sections of town that nobody will touch and is willing to pour in God knows how much money. If I was [LaBan], I would have at least gone to the [owners] -- if I cared about the city and its development -- and just said, 'I just went to your restaurant three times and it was horrible. Get your act together and I'll come back another time.'"

Unlike Tait, who had an amicable relationship with local restaurateurs ("Elaine covered the restaurant community almost motherly," says Derek Davis of Main Street Restaurant Group), LaBan appears to have put the fear of God in many he's reviewed.

"I hear that guy's a tough son of a bitch," says Kinhead. "People in Philadelphia really fear him." So perhaps that's why the majority of restaurateurs contacted for this story refrained from inflammatory comments, if they spoke at all.

"We were scared to death when we got the 'this is Craig LaBan, you have been reviewed' call," says Mary Ann Ferrie, co-owner of Chl e in Old City, which received a flattering, two-bell review from LaBan in April 2001.

"When I got the call, I was petrified," says one Center City operator, who asked not to be named. "Although confident in the ability of my staff and our overall performance at that point in our maturation [three months], any given experience can be subpar in the finest of restaurants."

"I felt a little nervous at first knowing that a restaurant critic with Mr. LaBan's influence had reviewed the restaurant," says Filoni, whose highly regarded Savona received a glowing three-bell review from LaBan in June 2001.

LaBan takes these comments in stride, saying the reactions are normal. "Any time a Sunday newspaper calls you and says we're going to do a feature about you, and you have no control over what they say or what their experience was ... I wouldn't blame them [for worrying]. I don't consider this a reflection of my personality or me. Even the people that know they're doing a good job, there's always fear in the back of their mind -- even if it's irrational, because I think that I'm a very fair critic -- that maybe I was there on an off night."

Rating restaurants is inevitably a subjective endeavor, and the level of importance the writer places on the individual elements of the dining experience -- food, wine, service, decor and ambience -- is a matter of personal preference. Some critics consider the food aspect to account for 50 percent of the dining experience, while others find the restaurant's cuisine to be the *only* matter of importance.

LaBan's critiques are clearly dominated by the quality of the food.

"I would say I am certainly a food-focused person," says LaBan. "Service is important as well. It can really help a place and it can really hurt it. In terms of deciding whether or not I think a restaurant is very good or excellent, the food has to be there. That's the bottom line. I wouldn't give a good grade to a restaurant with crappy food."

"As a chef, I'm glad he spends so much time talking food," says Davis, a partner with Main Street Restaurant Group, which owns Sonoma, Kansas City Prime and Arroyo Grille. "But as a restaurateur, I'd rather see him spend more time talking about the service and ambience and the total package of the restaurants. He should really touch on the other items a little more."

One thing is certain: If he's dined at your restaurant, he's sampled much of what your menu has to offer, or at least the dishes he feels are going to tell him something about what the kitchen wants to be and what it can do.

"When I sit down to write a restaurant review, I think about what I had for dinner -- did I like it? -- and then I try to tell the story," says LaBan. "You have to be true to your experiences and your thoughts."

I told LaBan I was dumbfounded by his three-bell review of Country Club Restaurant in May. Although it's a great diner, I find it to be a facility devoid of ambience, whose servers are mere order-takers, not informed guides who can engage in detailed conversation about food and wine.

How in the world does the Country Club diner on Cottman Avenue in the Northeast receive the same grade from LaBan as Buddakan, The Capital Grille, Le Mas Perrier and Savona?

"First of all, this is my rating scale, and this allows me to be a little quirky sometimes. The ratings have always been a combination of restaurants fulfilling their own ambitions and also a sense of context. Every time you do a rating scale, the big danger is you're comparing apples to oranges. I don't go to the Country Club diner even remotely thinking I'm going to judge this place against Buddakan or Le Bec-Fin. I'm going thinking I want to see how good this diner is compared to every other diner I've been to.

"I just don't give away three bells. I will award three bells to a specific kind of place if I feel it's absolutely the best of its genre. The three-bell places are the ones that really struck a little magic for me because they really achieve something I found was very rare, and that's the common bond that the Country Club diner has with Buddakan. In my opinion, it was the best traditional diner in the region, and that's why it deserved the rating it got."

He says a place like the Country Club diner will never receive the ultimate four-bell rating. The Fountain, Le Bec-Fin, Susanna Foo, the aforementioned Vetri and, most recently, ¡Pasión!, are the rare few that have achieved "Superior" status in LaBan's view. "These are the places that step above genre," he says. "Those are the experiences that, when you're there, you're just swept away. You have to give your readers the satisfaction of letting them know you really do love some things."

So what does LaBan dislike? "Name" chefs running more than one facility or those with outside interests, perhaps? Over the past year, he's shredded Treetops (at the time, Jim Coleman was the executive chef, who also had a television and radio show, and multiple cookbooks), Figs (chef/owner Mustapha Rouissiya

has restaurants in Fairmount as well as Cherry Hill) and, most recently, Trust (partner Guillermo Pernot is also chef/partner at òPasi3n!).

"There are a lot of restaurants without 'name' restaurateurs that I didn't like also. I am only taking them to task if they're not delivering the product. I was going to review Trust whether it was good or bad. I wanted it to be good. People who have reputations set high standards. ... The bigger their notoriety, the more people know about them and want to go, and I feel a great obligation to let people know this person that's, you know ..." He hesitates. "This is the thing: It's never personal with me. Ever. It's what's on the plate, it's what's delivered to me during my meals.

"I don't know these people," he continues, a bit heatedly. "I mean, Jim Coleman's on the radio, and he talks and talks and whatever, and he's got all this publicity. ... I don't have any feelings about him as a person, zero. My opinion of his shows doesn't matter. I just hear he's got this spot in a restaurant and, you know, a lot of people listen to that show and are going to go spend their money at Treetops."

LaBan adds that he's "not a mean-spirited person. I know people will always take these things personally, but from my perspective, it's never personal. It's just like,  Dude, if you cooked better, you'd get better reviews.' That's what it's about."

But his chief complaint about Philadelphia restaurants is the service. "There are a lot of restaurants right now that are cooking really ambitious food, and there's just too few servers to match that level of cooking. It's a little frustrating. Rudeness is inexcusable, rudeness in a sense of people taking advantage because they think that diners are too stupid. I can't stand it when waiters say stuff knowing that they don't know what they're talking about. Everybody wants to be treated well, at least with respect and honesty.

"With great service, you feel like you have an advocate. I don't need a best friend. I don't want a best friend. You want somebody whose mission that night is to make sure you have a wonderful time. ... My server should know a little more about the food than just being able to describe it. I hate it when you ask somebody about a wine, and they say,  Well, this one really sells a lot.' I can't stand that. Just because something sells a lot doesn't mean you know anything about it or whether it's good or bad. ... A great server knows the menu and wine list inside and out. They will give you advice if you ask for it, not just sell you the food."

Following LaBan's complimentary two-bell review of Standard Tap in September 2001, co-owner William Reed says his Northern Liberties taproom was flooded with new customers.

"It's funny," says Reed, "I've worked as a server in places that got reviewed, and people would come in and order even the items which were negatively reviewed and then say things like,  He's right, this shrimp is overpowered by the sauce.'

"I have different opinions about some of the stuff, but I think it is the mark of a really good critic that, when reading a review, you can decide independently whether you would like something. An example might be the hamburger roll we use -- he didn't like it. But he didn't just say that, he said he didn't like it because it was too substantial and chewy. Well, I like a chewy roll to soak up a burger's juiciness without going to pieces. So I can read that and think what I like. Providing lucid reasons for opinions you state is responsible, credible behavior for a critic."

One of my favorite bar snacks was chef Ben McNamara's "Montreal fries," a jacked-up plate of French fries topped with demi-glace, mushrooms and gobs of melted cheese at Queen Village's New Wave Caf . But following Craig LaBan's glowing two-bell review in November 2000, it was removed from the menu. Coincidence? You be the judge: "The only ill-spawned creation of the gourmet chef flirting with bar food was the Montreal fries, a mass of mediocre fried potatoes sogged with demi-glace and every other leftover the kitchen could dredge up."

"I think he is very influential," says Reed, "because he has integrity -- as opposed to some critics who seem to be selected to write non-controversial fluff that won't upset the advertisers."

"He's a hard worker, an intelligent guy with a deep impact on the public," says Tait, although she claims not to read his columns with any frequency.

A number of restaurateurs credit LaBan for raising the level of dining in Philadelphia, as well as the public's interest in dining out. "He has tons of people, both in and out of the business, talking about Philadelphia restaurants again, and that's just good for all of us," says Chlöe's Ferrie.

Among restaurateurs whose establishments received favorable reviews, LaBan is considered tough but fair. Those whose restaurants did not fare so well tend to think he's a prick. Nearly everyone, however, agrees that LaBan is very knowledgeable and tediously thorough.

They also agree that he is powerful.

"From my own experience, LaBan is extremely influential," says a restaurant operator who's been reviewed by LaBan twice. "He is widely read. I believe most readers are highly affected by his opinion."

Rouissiya has felt the ramifications of a highly critical review by LaBan. The critic's October 1998, one-bell review of Oberon "was one of the elements that shut the restaurant down," says Rouissiya, who at the time was partners in the Old City bistro with Al Paris and Philippe Daouphars. "After Craig's review, the restaurant's revenue was cut by more than half. He was very personal with Al Paris and me. He griped [about] how Al is a chef that doesn't spend any time in the kitchen. He has a problem when chefs aren't always in the kitchen. His review killed [Oberon] -- he really killed it. People stopped coming in. Oberon was great; it was doing unbelievable before LaBan got there."

Suffice to say, LaBan is unwelcome in Rouissiya's yet-to-be-named Mediterranean bistro, scheduled to open along Chestnut Street in Old City this November. "At my new restaurant, I'm going to put a banner outside letting him know he's not welcome in my restaurant. I'm not going to spend a million and a half dollars for him to come in and review me. I don't care if it's positive or negative. I just don't want him there."

If you spot LaBan dining in your restaurant, don't even think about sending something to his table gratis. He hates that. "Anonymity will not last forever, and I've acknowledged it in certain reviews where I felt they knew who I was," says LaBan.

In his January 2001, four-bell review of Vetri, unquestionably one of LaBan's favorite Philadelphia restaurants, he clearly states his cover was blown. In referring to co-owner Jeffrey Benjamin, he wrote: "Certainly, my secret identity failed to elude his sharp eye, despite my best efforts."

LaBan says in a case like this, there's nothing he can do. "The thing to understand is it's not like a spy game for me. [My anonymity] is just another tool that I use to try and understand what restaurants are like in their natural state. It doesn't mean that I can't tell readers some valuable information about this restaurant."

Still, the man takes his anonymity so seriously that he didn't show up to the ceremony when he was awarded the 2000 James Beard award for top newspaper restaurant reviewer in the country (an "incredible" honor, he says), because he knew restaurant public relations reps would be in attendance.

He is not, however, without error. One restaurateur who preferred to remain nameless told me that when LaBan called his restaurant to make a dinner reservation, his name and home phone number appeared on the caller ID. "That's shocking because I have caller ID block," says LaBan. "Because that's something that happened to me in New Orleans unwittingly. Very rarely would I make a reservation from home, and even if I did, I have the block. It's something that may have happened. Somebody had alerted me to that when I was in New Orleans. I do occasionally make the reservation myself, but I wouldn't do it from home if I had a choice, and even if I did, I'm usually confident that my name doesn't come up on caller ID, that would be ... that's pretty stupid. They must have thought I was pretty stupid that night. What restaurant was that?"

What would the folks at the *Inquirer* do if LaBan's likeness were exposed? "I don't know what the newspaper would do," says LaBan. "I've heard about this guy [Welsh]. He has a strange obsession with me, and I've never written about his restaurant. So is this guy saying he's really going to take out an ad? This guy is so bizarre. He is so strange. He is really unreasonably obsessed with me. And I've gotten weird e-mails about this guy. It's kind of an unhealthy passion, you know what I mean?"

But LaBan doesn't let Welsh's vendetta worry him too much.

"You only have control over so many things in life, and nobody's going to really take away my sense of enjoyment, or judgment, of whether food is good or bad," says LaBan. "People are going to still have to prove themselves, whether they know I'm in the dining room or not."