

The Italian Job

Hospitality hot shot Sean MacPherson will re-light the fires at eating institution Orso **BY DEBORAH SCHOENEMAN**

West Hollywood gets a fresh wave of hotelier and restaurateur Sean MacPherson's magic with the re-opening of the legendary Italian eatery Orso on West Third Street, early this fall. "It's a really personal project for me," says MacPherson, who grew up in L.A. and is an owner of the impenetrably hip Waverly Inn, The Maritime Hotel and the Bowery Hotel in New York, and Jones, Swingers, El Carmen, Bar Lubitsch, The Roger Room and Good Luck Bar in L.A. "I'm building it very carefully, as if it were my own home," he says.

The last restaurant he opened in L.A. was Jones—and that was 17 years ago. "I was in my 20s, and I opened a place that I would want to go to in my 20s," he says. "Now I'm building one that I want to go to in my 40s."

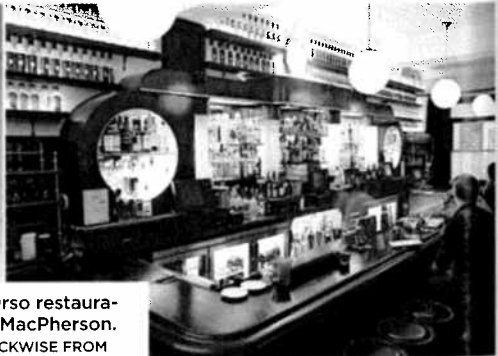
MacPherson was a frequent diner at Orso, which opened about 20 years ago and was once a Joe Allen restaurant. With its central location and sprawling patio sheltered from the street by a wood fence and greenery, the promise of alfresco dining at Orso was perennially a big draw. (Certainly for MacPherson, who bemoans the lack of outdoor seating at L.A. restaurants since Michele Lamy closed Les Deux Cafe.) "I want to have a beautiful, romantic garden," says MacPherson. He lives primarily in New York's West Village but is spending about half of his time living in L.A. while he works on Orso, and hopes to close a deal for approximately \$55 million to take over the Magic Castle property in Hollywood, which includes the Japanese restaurant Yamashiro.

With Orso, he's taking his time, interviewing chefs and building a 100-seat restaurant at what he calls an Italian pace. "The whole thing is relatively organic," says MacPherson, who has yet to come up with a new name but has an idea or two about the menu.

Like at the old Orso, he plans to serve straightforward Italian food and keep the wood-burning oven churning out pizza. After all, it was good enough for a devoted celeb clientele that included Hollywood heavy hitters like Anjelica Huston, Warren Beatty and Annette Bening, Al Pacino, Peter O'Toole and Mel Brooks, who used to have his weekly lunch with the guys there. More recently, it was a hot spot for Jennifer Lopez, Orlando Bloom, Colin Farrell and Kate Winslet.

"I don't want to change it dramatically; I'm just going to give it the love it needs," McPherson says. "The building was originally a residence. I really like restaurants in former homes, like at the Waverly. I want it to feel like the 1920s Mediterranean house it was."

MacPherson insists the new Orso will have a published phone number—and diners will not require a personal relationship with an owner to book a primetime table. (Waverly co-owner Graydon Carter, Editor of *Vanity Fair*, has an assistant in his office that handles reservation requests). "I want to do something that's a classic," MacPherson says. "I'm hoping this will be a lasting incarnation. It's not going to be exclusive." ●



TOP New Orso restaurateur, Sean MacPherson. **BELOW, CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT** His other hot spots, L.A.'s Bar Lubitsch, and The Maritime and Bowery Hotels in New York.

