

TIME

THE POPE
CONFRONTS

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How Benedict XVI's first visit to a Muslim nation could reshape the debate between Islam and the West

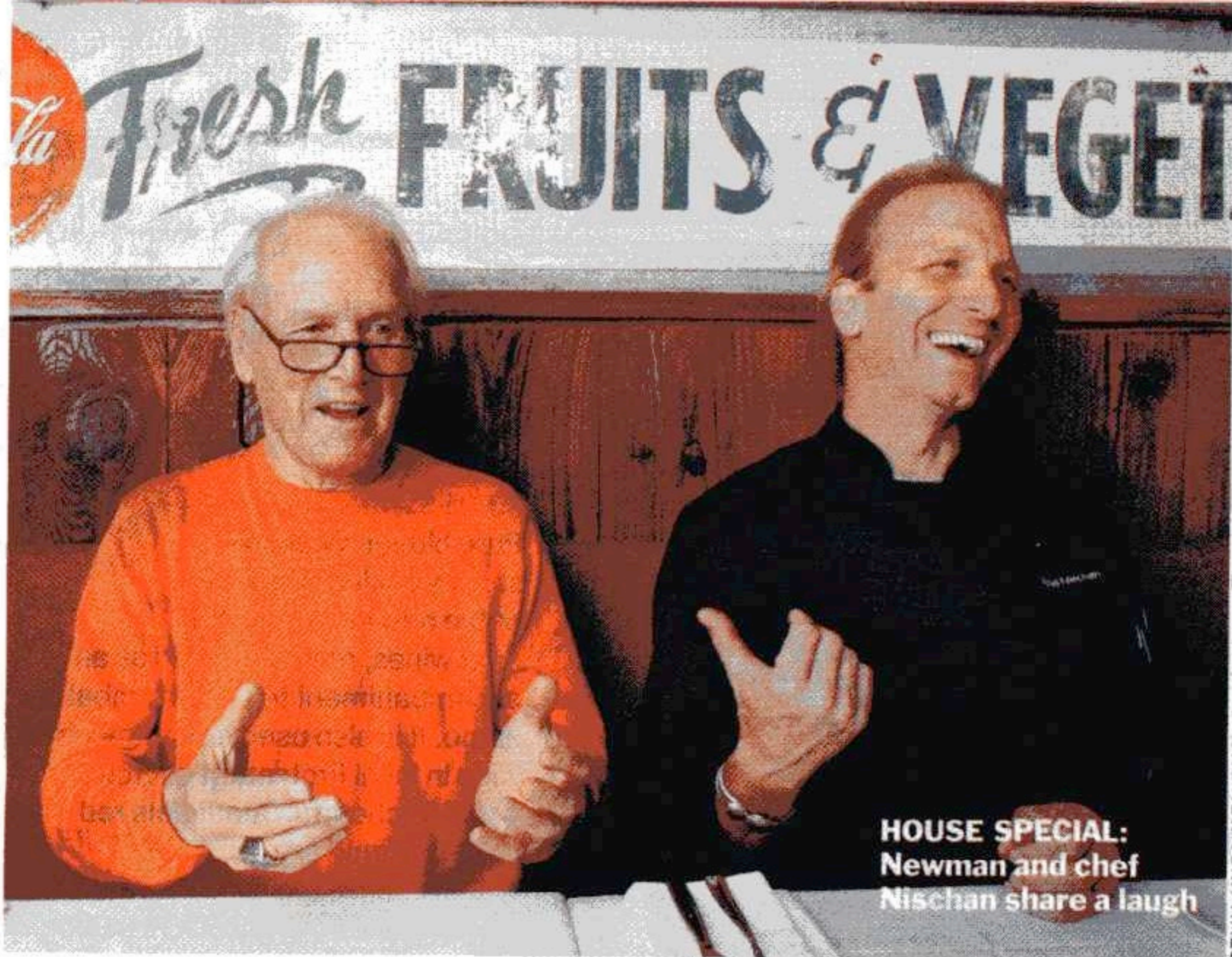
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CURTAIN RAISER

DINNER THEATER

By JEFF CHU

PAUL NEWMAN KNOWS WHAT HE WANTS. SO WHEN the legendary actor decided to create a top-notch restaurant adjoining the Westport Country Playhouse—the renowned Connecticut theater run by his wife, actress Joanne Woodward—he had ideas for what one should see, smell and taste. One architect sketched plans for a stark space, all stainless steel and alabaster white. “Paul flipped out!” says chef Michel Nischan. “He wanted very country and very warm.”

And so a homey waft of vanilla greets you as you walk into the barnlike Dressing Room. There are exposed beams overhead and flickering candlelight everywhere. The walls are paneled in warm woods “that came from a friend of Paul’s in South Carolina named Bucky,” Nischan says. “We call it Bucky-board.” And the place may be new, but it’s made to feel lived-in: the Bucky-board is adorned with posters advertising long-past productions—“Olivia de Havilland (in person) in Sir James M. Barrie’s Classic Comedy *What Every Woman Knows*”—like family mementos in the home of a very thespian clan. In the bath-

room, you’ll find copies of LIFE magazine from the 1950s.

The menu reflects Newman and Nischan’s shared passion for organic and sustainable farming. That means

A homey waft of vanilla greets you as you walk into the barnlike Dressing Room

many of the vegetables in, say, the “Use a Spoon” Salad (so named because Newman wanted a salad you didn’t have to cut or stab at) come from Connecticut growers. The fish are all sustain-

ably harvested types like trout (pan seared, dished up with a bracing, intense Pippin apple puree). Much of the produce is bought at the weekly farmers’ market that takes place in the playhouse parking lot from spring to fall. And the offerings are consciously seasonal—chestnuts, squash and hardy greens like kale have settled in for the winter, and you won’t see another heirloom tomato until next spring.

The only off-putting thing is the menu’s achingly earnest foreword-cum-manifesto: “We strive to raise awareness of a more sustainable food future...” But that’s quickly forgiven once the consistently fine food is on the table. And all the preachiness is totally forgotten by dessert. The heavenly sweets—hot chocolate soup, a “conversation” of apple tarts and sorbet—are listed on the menu under the utterly appropriate heading “Encore.” That’s exactly what you’ll be cheering after a couple of hours in the Dressing Room. ■

AMUSE-BOUCHE

A ZEN PALETTE

Molly Ringwald’s sushi lunch was oh-so-sophisticated in *The Breakfast Club*, but that was 1985. Now that sushi has gone mainstream and Nobu has metastasized into a low-fat Hard Rock Cafe, Europe is ready for a lesson in kaiseki. At least, Ichiro Kubota, Umu’s executive chef, thinks so. Kaiseki is a formal banquet of a series of exquisite courses showcasing cooking techniques and seasonal sensitivity. It’s the highest edible expression of Japanese aesthetics, with prices to match.

At Umu, London’s most ambitious kaiseki restaurant, Kubota goes to extraordinary lengths to bring a Kyoto accent to the land of fish and chips. That means flying in speciality vegetables and Kyoto’s soft water for the signature clear soup. He trawls from Iceland to Madagascar for fantastic fish. Grated Shizuoka wasabi—not that fake electric-green paste—accompanies the tsukuri, a sashimi course elaborately composed on handmade ceramics. Fragrant matsutake mushrooms evoke autumn, while Kobe beef



LIKE BUTTER Umu’s Kobe beef is a delight

melts in the mouth like foie gras. Dishes like sesame tofu are nods to Kyoto’s Buddhist vegetarian cuisine. At the end comes the spiritual heart of the meal: rice, pickles and the best miso soup around.

If Umu sounds traditional, it isn’t. The reinvented Kyoto flavors are restrained, but the trendy London setting is not. A hidden door on the streets of tony Mayfair glides back at a touch on a lighted panel. Inside, it’s opulent yet relaxed, designed to make everyone look rich and beautiful.

Don’t worry if you can’t pronounce anything, because most of the wait staff are just learning themselves. They’re happy to help navigate the extensive kaiseki, sushi and à la carte menus. Today’s Bond Street sushi princesses take lunch breaks for \$48, but a kaiseki set course costs between \$170 and \$245. Steep, but cheaper than flying to Kyoto for dinner. tel: (20-7) 499 8881; www.umurestaurant.com —By Lydia Itoi