

□ INTERVIEW

In The Heat Of The Kitchen

For *Shark's* Jeri Ryan, French really is the language of love

Story By LISA ARCELLA // Photography by ERIC CURTIS



It's hard to imagine a better formula for a potential breakup: gorgeous couple fall in love; gorgeous couple open a restaurant together in the fickle food culture of L.A.

Throw into the equation a starring role for her in a weekly television drama. So, he's putting in endless hours stressing over the menu and sweating over a hot stove. She's getting up at 5 a.m. every day to film her TV show with a high-maintenance costar. (Oh yeah, throw in a precocious 12-year-old son from her previous marriage.) The stress level should have thrown a wrench into this relationship a long time ago.

Instead, actress **Jeri Ryan** and French-born chef **Christophe Émé** are thriving on the challenges and planning their intimate wedding in the Loire Valley.

"I am in a really good place right now," Ryan says. "I am very lucky, and I know it."

Ryan, 38, met her "romantic Frenchman" in L.A. nearly four years ago, when he was the chef at the now-shuttered L'Orangerie. The attraction, she says, was instant.

"He was hot!" she laughs. "He looked so good in that chef hat, and he has this ornery little spark in his eye that I really enjoy."

Two years later, the couple opened the elegant *Ortolan* on West 3rd Street in Los Angeles. Named after a small (now endangered) bird that was once considered a delicacy in France, the restaurant features haute cuisine in a city that's often more interested in just about anything else.

"I have always been a foodie, and L.A.'s restaurant culture is growing," Ryan says. "But it hasn't completely matured yet. I think it would have been easier to open a sushi restaurant — people are always dieting here. Or, they're interested in going someplace where the paparazzi are always camping out."

Émé, 37, adds that L.A. is also a city where many are able to stay at home and still get the kind of experience he's creating at *Ortolan*.

"It's not always a culture where people go out for fine dining," says Émé, who trained at the culinary temple Taillevent in Paris. "So many people here have really good chefs at home cooking for them. But we have some very loyal customers."

Included in that bunch are some famous faces like **Tyra Banks**, **Sharon Stone**, **Jodie Foster** and **Rene Russo**, lured in at least in part because of that lack of lurking shutterbugs. Guaranteeing their return to the restaurant are its enticing dishes, like the lamb pastille with white beans and rosemary, or the roasted langoustine with quince, black truffle and hazelnut emulsion. Even picky food critics have agreed with Ryan's assessment of her fiancé's specialty.

"Christophe makes the best foie gras terrine I have ever had anywhere," she says. "And I am not just saying that because I love him."

Yes, the actress, who famously made geeky Trekkies' eyeballs nearly explode out of their heads as the sexy Seven of Nine on *Star Trek: Voyager*, does, in fact, actually eat every creation on the menu.

"I could eat his escargot every single day," she says. "I don't diet. I am lucky to have a good metabolism, but I would rather work out until I die than give up food. It is one of life's great pleasures. I started doing Pilates recently, but I really don't exercise. I'm a lazy sloth."

Her version of lazy, of course, doesn't really apply to the rest of the population. Ryan spends at least two or three nights at the restaurant; she'd be there every day, but she also gets up at the crack of dawn to make it to the set of the CBS legal drama *Shark*, where she plays L.A. District Attorney Jessica Devlin opposite **James Woods**.

"He is just a force of nature," she jokes about her costar. "He never sits still or is quiet for more than twenty seconds at a stretch...ever! He has more energy than my son did when he was two years old."

Right on cue, 12-year-old Alex bounds into the room and takes a seat between his mom and soon-to-be stepfather. Alex knows that he might soon become a big brother: Ryan and Émé's want their next collaboration to be a baby ("as soon as possible," Ryan says.)

When asked if he'd prefer a baby brother or a sister, Alex thinks for a moment and says, "I'll take one or the other."

These future plans started, of course, with Émé's proposal, which was as elaborate as only a Frenchman could get away with.

"We knew we were going to get married, but Christophe wanted to find some



way to surprise me," Ryan says. "He met me one night after work at home, and he covered my eyes and took me to our bedroom. He had Champagne ready and candles everywhere. He had bought a big canvas and painted on it in French, 'And You Come With Me Forever.' He mounted our first picture together on it and wrote 'yes finally' in French. Of course I said yes and then cried. It's now mounted over the fireplace where I can see it every morning when I wake up."

The 100-guest wedding will take place in France's Loire Valley in June, where Émé is from.

Ryan describes her **Vera Wang** gown as very simple and ethereal.

"I can't say exactly what it looks like," she says, "with him sitting here."

Giddy words for a bride who once thought she'd never get married again. (She was married to politician **Jack Ryan** for eight years.) Now, the busy fiancée is studying French and spending as much time as possible during her busy day with Alex.

"I am going into it this time with my eyes wide open," she says. "I knew, from not that long after I met him, that I wanted to be with Christophe forever. He's romantic and kind."

Émé chimes in, "We really are each other's best friends."

The one wedding detail that has yet to be worked out is who will do the cooking. But it definitely won't be Émé.

"We are hiring someone out of Paris," he says. "I want to eat and drink and dance. For me, it will be a day to really enjoy someone else's food." □