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## GREATER NEW YORK

# Tao Chef to Join Philippe Chain

BY CHARLES PASSY

Philippe, an upscale chain of Chinese restaurants, named John Villa its president, hiring him away from a rival Asian-restaurant group as it eyes expansion in New York and around the U.S.

Mr. Villa, 45 years old, is a senior executive and corporate chef of the Tao Group, which operates more than 20 restaurants and nightclubs worldwide, including at least a dozen in New York.

He starts his new job in May. Tao declined to comment.

Philippe, whose founding chef Philippe Chow remains the company's executive chef, opened in 2005 on East 60th Street. Last year, it opened a summer-only location in East Hampton.

Acquired in 2013 by Merchants Hospitality, a New York real-estate-investment firm, Philippe is planning a second midtown location, as well as expanding to Miami, Chicago and Atlanta, it said.

It is also starting Philippe Noodle Shop, a nationwide, lower-priced chain of restaurants, with two Manhattan locations planned for the coming year in midtown and the Wall Street area.

Merchants Hospitality executives said they are committing at least an eight-figure investment into growing the Philippe brand. It was that level of financial backing that convinced Mr. Villa that the move "was too good an opportunity for me to pass up," he said. He has worked at Tao for

nearly a decade.

"John is going to bring a lot of managerial talent that will allow us to expand effectively and intelligently," said Abraham Merchant, chief executive of Merchants Hospitality.

Mr. Villa said that the Chinese-centric approach at Philippe is "totally different" than the one at the Tao Group, whose Asian restaurants incorporate Chinese, Japanese and Thai cuisines.

Tao, like Philippe, has become a celebrity magnet at its Manhattan locations, and under Mr. Villa's leadership, a moneymaker as well. Four Tao Group restaurants, including Tao Uptown and Tao Downtown in New York, rank among the U.S.'s 10 top-grossing independently owned restaurants, according to Restaurant Business, a trade publication that tracks the industry.

Upscale Asian-themed restaurants have found success in New York City over the past few years. Many of them, like Tao and Philippe, incorporate nightlife elements, blurring the lines between restaurant and club. In December, Stratis Morfogen, the restaurateur who opened Philippe with Mr. Chow, unveiled Jue Lan Club, a contemporary Chinese restaurant in the space previously occupied by the club Lime-light. Mr. Morfogen is no longer associated with Philippe.

Restaurant-industry experts say the trend plays into a demand for "experiential" dining. "It's having an evening out as opposed to just having a meal," said Arlene Spiegel, a hospitality consultant in New York.