

Dining review: Simplicity speaks delicious volumes at Village Bistro

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Don't let the accent fool you. It may be thick and charming and very French, but Gerard Robert, chef and proprietor at the Village Bistro, is an American success story.

It started, this tale of success, when Robert found himself on American soil, a traveling chef doing a two-year stint at a hotel. He built a reputation with his cooking. He married and started a family.

Time flew by as he sliced and stirred and seasoned and tasted. The children grew up. Our chef in question, these days, looks up, looks back, and, as he told me by phone, "The next thing you know, I've been here 40 years."

He's put his time to good use. Everything on his menus – lunch, brunch or dinner – is reliably delicious. Some, however, are even better than that, like the beef Wellington we had on the special Valentine's menu. Regulars should beg or cajole the chef to serve it more often. It was so tender, so perfectly cooked and so flavorful, this thick steak covered with duxelles (mushrooms and shallots minced and then sautéed in butter) hiding inside a golden brown pastry. I'd plead for more of his crab cakes, too.

The vegetables are simple. So are the sauces – simple but not easy – the kind that take time to build flavors.

My rustic omelette for brunch was loaded with mushrooms, bell peppers and spinach. It was full of colors and, thus, many flavors. One more pinch of salt at the outset would have made it perfect.

Even a simple salad – mixed greens, citrus fruit, thin slices of kiwi, a few fresh raspberries – was an amazing starter, so lively on the palate.

The age-old French cooking skills and contemporary California wherewithal come together in equal measures at Robert's bistro, tucked away on a side street in Fair Oaks Village – that odd and quaint place where the roaming, misfit multitudes of feral chickens always have the right of way.

The Village Bistro is many things – an expression of good food derived from classic preparations, the story of a family working together and an example of how a low-key business can, six years in, add so much to a community's sense of place.

There are plenty of regulars who think of this as a second home.

The smiling face that greets you is likely to be Nicole, daughter No. 1 (daughter No. 2 is away at college and the eldest, a son, works for Verizon). The chef's wife, Tina, also is a regular presence.

I have made it something of a mission to track our French chef-proprietors in the area and watch what they do, how they think and how they put together their restaurants. There's plenty to be learned, but it all comes down to simplicity.

Their menus feature cooking that is refined yet approachable. The ingredients are fresh and the prices reasonable.

That's the case with the Village Bistro, where only one entree costs more than \$20. But it's not for everyone. If you're pressed for time, on your way to something else and don't appreciate that everything is made from scratch, you may not appreciate this way of eating.

One night, we ordered as French as could be – a seafood boudin that was quirky and creative, subtle yet spicy. Think of a sausage, thinly sliced, but delicate – very nearly like a crepe. And instead of beef or pork, it's composed of scallops, mussels and spinach, served with angel hair pasta and a beurre blanc sauce. It was a surprising dish.

I also enjoyed a small plate dubbed "cannelloni" on the menu, but it was, it turns out, two crepes loaded with nicely seasoned ground veal and topped with Alfredo and marinara sauces.

It takes awhile to figure out that the chef can be serious and/or playful with his approaches. He's certainly not a stick-in-the-mud. And he's not limited to being French.

Chicken picatta is Italian. Robert likes the dish enough to add his own interpretation – thin slices of chicken, breaded zucchini and lemon butter caper sauce. There also is a tribute to his wife's Filipino background – chicken adobo that is light and lean, yet spicy. It comes with rice and a relish of tomato, cilantro and onion.

My colleague Allen Pierleoni already has given a thumbs-up to the Monte Cristo here. We had it for brunch and concur. It's a sandwich that sounds like a lot of work, and it is – three layers, two meats, one cheese, dunked into an egg batter and then cooked beautifully. Desserts, too, as limited as they are, are good, from the zesty Key lime pie to the dense, yet tender, chocolate flourless cake on the Valentine's menu.

The wine list is small, but there are enough bottles and by-the-glass options to satisfy. The French bistro proprietors around here, I've come to realize, don't feel the need to have showy wines at showoff prices. They tend to favor low-alcohol, even-tempered and approachable wines, and that's what we found here.

The shortcomings at Village Bistro are minor. The décor could use some new touches to bring out the personality of both the restaurant and the village. Service was mostly good, but one visit during brunch took longer than it should have.

If you are looking for a place to be a regular, you'd do well to elbow your way into the regular rotation at this delightfully simple and sensible little success story.

Village Bistro

7894 California Ave., Fair Oaks

(916) 966-6384

www.village-bistro.com

Hours: 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday, 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. Tuesday, 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. and 5-9 p.m. Wednesday to Saturday, 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. Sunday.

Full bar? Beer and wine only, but some wine-based cocktails.

Takeout? Yes.

Vegetarian friendly? Yes.

Overall (good)

Skillful cooking, sensible menus and plenty of fusion of French and California charm add up to a cozy bistro that deserves its loyal following.

Food (good)

If you love food, close your eyes and point at the menu – everything is good. Try an omelette. Splurge on a Monte Cristo sandwich. Try the steaks, beef Stroganoff or the variety of seafood dishes. Try something quirky like the "cannelloni" or the biscuits and gravy (no, the chef is not from a French part of Alabama). The small wine list has affordable French and California offerings.

Service (good)

The person waiting on you is likely the chef's wife or daughter. That's how it's done in France, too.

Ambience 1/2 (pretty good)

It's nice enough, but it could use some updating to reflect the personality of the bistro and the quaint village atmosphere.

Value 1/2 (very good)

Good quality cooking and nice portions. Impressive that all but one dinner entree are less than \$20. Breakfasts and lunch are very reasonable, too, as are the wines.

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