

# POPPING THE CORK

THERE'S MORE TO UNASSUMING LE BOUCHON THAN MEETS THE EYE ■ BY DIANA PETERFREUND

**CONFESSION: I'VE LIVED** down the street from this bistro for years, and I never ate there until this past week. After a while, everyone develops

**Le Bouchon Bistro**  
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11 a.m.-10 p.m. Mon.-Sat.

blindly toward his or her own neighborhood. The establishments you visit are as familiar as your own home, but right next door there may be a place your eyes simply glide right over. Le Bouchon ("The Wine Cork" in French) was a treasure hiding in plain sight. I'd never noticed it before, and after a quarter century, I never thought to question my somewhat spotty mental directory of restaurants in a 5-mile radius of my house.

I've learned my lesson. This cozy corner bistro has a fabulous wine selection and a menu riddled with some stunning French specialties. The casual décor of the eatery includes a pastry case near the back, chalkboard menus lining the walls and a wine bar constructed of wooden wine import boxes, but what it lacks in trendy ambience, it makes up for in friendliness and flavor. My dining companion and I spent most of our recent meal there oohing and ahing over each successive course, and fighting over bites of crepe. In fact, the high quality of the majority of Le Bouchon's dishes makes its few missteps even more pronounced by juxtaposition. At another restaurant, I might have termed a few of these dishes merely "middling," but when compared with the fabulous cuisine found elsewhere on the menu, I was surprisingly disappointed. When Le Bouchon is good, it's very, very good, and when it's bad, it's mediocre.

It is impossible to adequately review this restaurant without a mention of its wine selection. In keeping with the French Bistro theme, Le Bouchon chooses a select group of wines from some lesser-known Gallic vineyards. During our visit, we spoiled ourselves with a bottle of exceptional,

non-vintage JB Michael Rosé champagne (\$32.50, and for a good rosé, that's a bargain). This wine is a rarity in the area, both at wine shops and on restaurant menus, but its light, elegant flavor and subtle fizz proved an excellent accompaniment to everyone's order. One of my dining companions, an admitted oenophile, was delighted with the selection, and impressed that it was available to order.

Though Le Bouchon has a constant menu, one of its most charming characteristics is its comprehensive nightly special menu. At a small restaurant of this nature, it's often a good idea to order from the special menu, since it's made up of dishes the chef either (a) is in the mood to cook or (b) found some fabulous ingredients to include. I tried to sample equally from both the regular menu and the nightly specials menu during my visit to get a good overview of items that would always be available, as well as the chef's daily flights of fancy.

Two of my favorite menu items would work perfectly as a shared appetizer or a filling lunch. One consisted of fluffy, paper-thin crêpes wrapped around a wonderful, wine-flavored beef stew with wild mushrooms and vegetables (\$5.75). The tender braised beef chunks practically fell apart in the rich Bordelaise sauce, but did manage to keep

inside the confinement of the seemingly flimsy pancake. The crêpes were served with a side of green salad drizzled with a delicious, homemade Dijon vinaigrette. Every entrée also comes with a larger version of this salad.

Another winner was the homemade pizza (\$8.50). Made in a French Provencal style with a thin crust, lots of olive oil and fresh herbs, every pizza on the menu possesses a unique, gourmet touch. We tried the pizza Nicoise, which features plum tomatoes, basil, piquant goat cheese and a spattering of black olive slices.

We sampled a few appetizers, including a cup of the excellent soup of the day (\$3) and the crab pot (\$6.95), a disappointing and overpriced mix of flaked crabmeat and herbs served with toasted slices of bread. The flavor was nothing to write home about, and I wished for more texture or at least larger chunks of crab in the mix. The appetizers were each outshined by a basket of fresh French bread (the bistro has an excellent bakery) served with an extraordinary "Burgundy butter," a pat of white butter tinged with a delicate Burgundy grape flavor. Unlike some of the sickly sweet flavored butters that seem to be on tap at every area eatery, this butter was as subtly crafted as any of the restaurant's entrées. We went light on the bread in order to save room for our

entrées, but the basket was an excellent addition to the meal and a detail that added greatly to the restaurant's overall impression.

For a main course, I chose a braised New Zealand lamb shank with rosemary and red wine jus (\$17.95). Though the meat was so tender it fell right off the bone, I found this to be the most disappointing dish on the menu. The sauce had a bitter flavor tinged with the taste of over-boiled meat, which turned me off the entire entrée. Even scraping aside the sauce, I found I couldn't appreciate the tender braised lamb meat underneath it.

My dining companions had much better luck. Both ordered from the nightly special menu. A grouper fillet with a sauce of tomato, onion and olives (\$18.50) turned out to be another knockout dish. I preferred it to the other special — a pressed duck breast sprinkled with a fair amount of garlic chunks (\$18.50), though the individual who ordered it liked the poultry better than the fish. However, both specials stood head and shoulders over the dish we ordered from the main menu, which bears out the theory that when a restaurant has such a large, tempting list of nightly specials, it's in a diner's best interest to take advantage of it.

For dessert, we sampled a minuscule cup of ultrarich dark chocolate mousse (\$3.50), which held to the tradition of bitter European chocolate, as well as a selection of Le Bouchon's fine pastries (\$4.50 each). I highly recommend the pastries baked here, they are excellent, and chock-full of such marvelous evils as carbohydrates and buttery fats. Viva la flavor!

All in all, I had a very satisfying experience at Le Bouchon. The outstanding wine list, delicious pastries, yummy pizzas and ever-changing specialty menu provide a dinner to laud, despite the few setbacks that caused it to fall short of spectacular.

*Freelance writer Diana Peterfreund dines anonymously and the Planet pays for her meals. She may be contacted at [diana.peterfreund@weeklyplanet.com](mailto:diana.peterfreund@weeklyplanet.com). Restaurants are chosen for review at the discretion of the writer, and are not related to advertising.*



LISA MAURELLO

**WE RECOMMEND:** Co-owner and chef Peter Leonavicius at work. Most of Le Bouchon's menu is exceptional, but don't overlook the nightly specials.