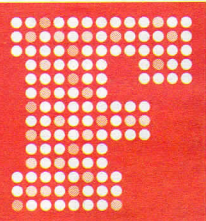


A change does Marche Bacchus good

The French restaurant
only improves under
new ownership

By Max Jacobson



For wine lovers in Las Vegas, Marche Bacchus, a small, comely wine store and bistro located in the bucolic Desert Shores community, has been a touchstone since the first day it opened. Run by a

French couple named Gregoire and Agathe Verge as a meeting place for visiting French chefs and thirsty locals, it has gradually turned into a civic treasure.

But last October, the couple turned their baby over to Jeff and Rhonda Wyatt, two wine nerds with a passion for the Gallic lifestyle and good French cooking. Initially, there were many tongues clucking and worries that these American parvenus would not maintain a top-notch wine selection, or a first-rate French provincial kitchen.

Surprise. Those fears turned out to be unjustified, and today, with newly acquired chef Jean-David Groff-Daudet behind the stoves, Marche Bacchus is turning out the best food it has served in its brief history. What's more, the affable Wyatts have proven to be hosts par excellence, pouring samples and greeting all their guests like old friends.

If you've never had the pleasure, Marche Bacchus fronts a small, artificial lake, though the ducks gliding around in it seem real enough. Pass through the shop area, where many wines are displayed in their original wooden crates.

This is an impressive selection from France, Spain, Italy and other places producing top-flight wines, at fair prices. The markup is only \$10 above retail, furthermore, if you order a wine from the house wine list. That means you can have a top-quality wine at a price often one-third what you'd pay for it in an upscale Strip French restaurant.

Lunch is wonderful here, even on the outdoor patio, where the Wyatts have installed an up-to-date misting system. When the Verges had the restaurant, the menu was abbreviated to include pates, cheeses, a few salads and the occasional soup. Today, the menu is large and diverse, with many French lunch classics to choose from.

I always like to have a *croque Monsieur*, which makes me nostalgic for the '60s when I spent a summer in the student area of Paris. Think of it as a European grilled cheese, but put a slice of ham in the center and coat the bread



Tarte Tatin

with sauce Bechamel, a silken sauce of milk, eggs and flour.

The very un-French Reuben is delicious here, even if the sauerkraut in the middle is not the ideal condiment for wine matching. Marche Bacchus serves one of the best burgers in the city, a half-pound whopper (sorry, Burger King) of Black Angus beef and onions on a sesame seed bun that puts the one served at McDo (as the French call it) to shame. All the *sandos* get fries.

You also have holdovers like French onion soup, *assiette de charcuterie* (which is a platter of pates), salami, prosciutto, *connichons* (tiny French pickles) and onion jam, or the noble *salade Grecque*, a fairly classic Greek salad. But if you order the escargots, you are in new territory. Chef Groff-Daudet is from Burgundy, where this dish originated, and he does a definitive version, with a garlic parsley butter as green as an Oregon pine forest.

While you've been enjoying these dishes, you have doubtlessly been imbibing on wines from the house by-the-glass list, one of the best in Vegas. How about an '04 Clos Apalta, from Chile, or an '05 white Burgundy, in fact, the noble Chassagne Montrachet, from the celebrated producer Michel Niellon. What's more, you can have a three- or six-ounce pour.

Groff-Daudet's dinner menu is a tad more formal and serious, although the atmosphere remains casual at all times here. If you're not an escargot person, there are delicious crab cakes done with a lemon remoulade, and a proper beef tartare, with the clever innovation of pine nuts.

Entrees (which in French means starters, but are main courses here) include gnocchi Provençal, pan-seared with summer squash in brown butter, and a lovely halibut seared in a pan with wilted spinach. The chef is doing *paella*, too, an indulgent version done with shellfish and lots of saffron, big enough to be shared.

Meat lovers can rely on Kurobuta pork chops with Yukon gold mashed potatoes, or *carre d'agneau*, New Zealand lamb chops with couscous. Beef tenderloin is grilled and served with a potato gratin and baby vegetables, and there is even a bone-in New York strip, a 20-ounce beauty. Just be prepared for sticker shock. It's a sobering \$52 on Marche Bacchus' freshly minted dinner menu.

Many classic French bistro faves are available for dessert: chocolate mousse, *crème brûlée*, lemon parfait. Personally, I'd choose *tarte aux pommes*, an ever-so-light version done on top of a crisp *pate feuilletée*, a buttery, oven-baked puff pas-

Marche Bacchus

2620 Regatta Drive,
804-8008. Lunch
daily 11 a.m.-4:30
p.m.; dinner 4:30-11
p.m. Monday-Sat-
urday. Suggested
dishes: *croque Mon-*
sieur, \$11; *l'assiette*
de charcuterie, \$13;
escargots, \$10; *carre*
d'agneau, \$34.

try. And there is the option to have a dessert wine, too, a late harvest something or other, in the half-bottle, a summery idea that will leave you feeling light-headed and lighter in weight than pastry.

Those of you who feared Marche Bacchus would lose some luster in the changeover, fear no more.