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MARCHÉ BACCHUS: FRENCH BISTRO FULFILLMENT

Marché Bacchus has been a haunt for professional chefs and discerning diners for years. With its traditional French bistro fare, a charmingly bucolic setting, and a delightfully affordable wine shop, **Marché Bacchus** has always delivered consistently good food and service. So imagine my surprise when I went to dine recently and found that the bistro was under new ownership. Despite the transition being but weeks old, there was evidence of the new regimen. The reception area was a bit Spartan and the food case bereft of its usual assortment of buy-by-the-pound salads. My angst was softened when I saw that the rustic wine bins remained untouched.

Patio dining is a luxury in Las Vegas particularly when a patio provides diners with vine covered trellises, gazebos, and turtles sauntering by a cascading waterfall. **Marché Bacchus**, with its 155 seats, provides both indoor and patio seating; given the 80° day, we chose the latter. It's hard to believe in a little strip mall in a residential community, there is this gem of a bistro with such a marvelous dining environment!

We were greeted promptly and politely and seated right next to the small bridge alongside a family of mallards as our water glasses were filled and a crusty French loaf with whipped butter presented. It was then we were joined by one of the new proprietors, Jeff Wyatt, who with his wife Rhonda and long-time friends Christophe and Noanie Ithurritze purchased **Marché Bacchus** from the founders and previous owners. Christophe serves not only as an owner but as the new Executive Chef.

Jeff was a charming if loquacious chap who shared his priorities for the bistro including expanding the menu and the wine offerings. It was of the new owners' opinion that the restaurant needed to deconstruct the menu (read: cull about 40% of menu offerings) in order to reconstruct it using specialty purveyor ingredients. Beef is from the same purveyor as Delmonico's and artisan breads still hot when delivered from the local specialty baker.

Wyatt indicated the atmosphere and food quality would not diminish and, if anything, improve. Learning that Chef Christophe is pedigreed from France's Les Rocailles provided assurances.

We started with Escargots Persillade, which were served classically in a cast iron vessel and bubbling hot. The Burgundy snails were plump and cooked to just the right bite which is to say a little tensile strength in front and a juicy chew in back. We eagerly sopped up the clarified butter and parsley puddle at the bottom with the accompanying crusty bread.

Wyatt told us the Saumon A La Poêle was divine, so we ordered it only to have the waiter return and tell us they were fresh out of Atlantic salmon. In fact, the chef had been dispatched to pick up the filleted fish at the airport. Instead we chose Poulet Frites, a pan seared chicken breast with French fries and natural

“au jus,” and Petit Steak and Frites. In other words: meat and potatoes.

Why you ask? Well if one is to appreciate the caliber of a chef, such simple dishes as chicken and beef are terrific gauges. Simple ingredients require flawless execution to make a dish outstanding. Not to mention true French country food is like getting a cuddle from your grandma: warm, comforting, with an unmistakable perfume of herbs and spices.

The presentation of the free-range Petaluma Valley hen was simple: a cast iron skillet and home-style potatoes. The skin of the chicken was a lovely bronzed color with a nicely crisp and slightly salted skin. It was juicy and very flavorful. The potatoes, however, were garden variety and reminded me of the 24-hour-diner type one gets at 3 AM after a night of carousing. The steak was presented with the same unadorned abandon. A miscommunication resulted in the steak being prepared medium and I much prefer rare, but the shallot glaze was amazing provided the concession. The butter base danced daintily atop the beef infused with the perfect blend of shallots that more than compensated for the well-done meat. A truly peppery emulsion of peppercorn sauce with nuances of Dijon mustard accompanied the entrée. And the French fries? Well, let's just say these golden sticks of starch topped with sea salt complimented the entrée, and, in my opinion nearly overshadowed it. I could have made a meal from them alone.

Between courses a couple from Florida chimed in from the adjacent table that they always come to **Marché Bacchus** when in town and enthusiastically noted “now there's one of Wolf's chefs in the kitchen!” Indeed, Chef Christophe Ithurritze was one of Wolfgang Puck's key players, but he's his own man with his own style and an impressive background.

Christophe attended Les Rocailles in Bayonne, France and earned his culinary degree at age 17. He interned with Certified Master Pastry Chef Andre Mandion and then moved to America a year later. Since then, he has worked under Joachin Splichal at Patina, Wolfgang Puck in L.A. and Chicago, followed by Chef Alessandro Stratta of Renoir. In nearly all of these coveted positions, Christophe fortified his pastry expertise and was named a “Great Chef of America” by the Discovery Channel series “Great Chefs.”

Obviously Christophe is foremost a pastry chef and so I expected an amazing dessert selection. I was not disappointed. We had the Gateau Basque, a cake with raspberry sorbet and red raspberry coulis. The short crust was buttery and cooked to a golden brown. The almond center was luxuriously smooth and dense providing a slight sweetness to the savory crust. The sorbet was refreshing and the plump raspberries a terrific finale. Even now I long for its buttery extravagance.

Jeff Wyatt popped in throughout courses to ensure our satisfaction as he did with other patrons. He also shared one of the higher end wines he was planning to stock: a 2006 Livio Felluga Tocai Friulano, a crisp white with grassy oak, pepper, apples and pears followed by a clean, crisp finish. It pairs well with most foods and was delightful with our two entrées and dessert.

With a huge variety of wines in the adjacent wine shop, diners can purchase the modestly priced wines and then pay a \$10 corkage fee and enjoy a bottle with their meal. Wyatt and crew are also investing in the Oz System, an argon gas pouring system that allows serving wines by the glass without eroding the quality. It's a state-of-the-art system and will allow **Marché Bacchus** to pour finer wines by the glass. Guests can enjoy an \$8 to \$16 glass of wine, sampling some of the newly stocked sweeter Alsace vintages.

Despite a few hiccoughs during this transitional experience and the deletion of much of the old menu, **Marché Bacchus** is poised to continue a tradition of providing comforting and true French bistro cuisine in one of the most serene settings in Las Vegas.