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FOOD

**Above
 The Rest**

*Why it's worth
 taking the time
 to find Bistro
 St. Tropez.*

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Bistro St. Tropez is particularly known as a great restaurant that's difficult to find. Indeed, I had long heard the quiet buzz on Bistro St. Tropez's virtues, but was myself confused about how exactly to get there. Whenever I drove eastward on the Walnut Street Bridge over the Schuylkill, I'd see the gleaming neon lights of the restaurant, shining over the water from the top floor of the MarketPlace at the distant corner. It appeared that one might have to employ a gondola, then throw small stones up at the window until someone sent down a rope. Why, I wondered, was Bistro St. Tropez kept in such purdah?

Purdah, schmurdah. That's what I say now.

In fact, I found it is not at all difficult to breeze right into Bistro St. Tropez, and I provide the following instructions.

Just follow the signage: Bistro St. Tropez wants you to come visit, and do they have the regularly spaced sandwich boards to prove it. Walk into the MarketPlace Design Center, at 2400 Market. At the entrance you will find a large black BST sign which directs you into the building via the revolving doors. Once inside, wave hello to the guard on duty as you pass him on the left, and continue walking through the (at dinner time) closed and darkened showcase rooms of furniture manufacturers. Window shop if you like, or be kind of creeped out by how crushingly devoid of life these fussed-over facsimiles of people's private spaces seem. Whichever.

Anyway, once you have almost reached the end of the hallway, you will see a large red and yellow BST sign directing you to take an elevator to the fourth floor. Inside the elevator, you will see another BST poster, this one with fruits and vegetables, which

will also remind you to ride to the fourth floor, just in case you have forgotten. Once at the fourth floor, the elevator doors will open to reveal a large white BST dry-erase board directing you to exit left. Do so, and walk in a curved path to the right, past more darkened showcase rooms. When you come to the bright yellow door, and encounter the final sign, which asks you to please wait to be seated, hey, you're there.

I offer these directions because I, too, want you to visit Bistro St. Tropez. There the food was so fabulous, I couldn't believe I was just supposed to eat it. Not smear it all over my body and wriggle around in pleasure? Not shellac it, wrap it up in a pretty box with a perfect-width ribbon and send it to myself as a birthday present? To take out and gaze upon as an antidote to particularly melancholy days?

Chef and owner is Patrice Rames, who really does hail from St. Tropez. His food is of the remarkable French sort where individual flavors are wonderfully balanced, creating rich, memorable dishes with absolutely no strong-arming of the palate. Starve yourself the day of your pilgrimage to Bistro St. Tropez, because you will fill

rus-marinated fresh tuna, with avocado, smoked salmon, mâche and ginger vinaigrette (\$8.95).

Bread-dipping became chronic during the entree course. The bouillabaisse, the classic French fisherman's stew, was a power-packed medley of roasted monkfish, squid, mussels, shrimp and potatoes in a tomato saffron broth (\$16.95). Beautiful to look at, and so good I wept for those allergic to shellfish. The grilled filet mignon with gorgonzola bordelaise sauce was terrific, and the sides of mashed potatoes, carrot mousse, Provençal stuffed plum tomatoes and sautéed snow peas did not miss a beat (\$16.95).

And the shad roe — fish eggs served "in-vitro" style. That is, the membrane sacs in which they all were originally housed are removed from the shad and then cooked very slowly, over low heat so the eggs don't break. The result is longish, golden brown lobes with gray insides composed of thousands of tiny eggs. A strange consistency, to be sure, but then, you're no food wimp, are you? At Bistro St. Tropez, the shad roe are mushroom dusted and served with a prosciutto caper sauce; they were wonderfully tender, not a bit dry (\$14.95).

The desserts were all stunners. The crème brûlée was properly served in a shallow dish (read: greater brûlée to crème content), and the first break into the thin layer of caramelized sugar was one of the more satisfying I've ever had (\$5). The unusual nougat glace, a burnt almond frozen mousse, was light and very tasty (\$4.50), and the gâteau de banane, with layers of banana, caramel, chocolate and walnut mousses, was another triumph of rich flavors coming

together in a subtle and sophisticated manner (\$5).

Final praises belong to the decor of the restaurant: One dining room is canary yellow with silver accents, the second dining room/bar area is a sort of chromatic negative, mostly silver and white, with accents of bright, primary colors. Both were stylish, and convivially loud, and both had wonderfully apt views of Philadelphia's finest: the post office, 30th Street Station and the Schuylkill. Bon appetit!

Bistro St. Tropez, 2400 Market St., 569-9269. Open for lunch Monday-Friday, 11:30-3 p.m. Open for dinner Wednesday & Thursday, 5:30-9:30; Friday & Saturday, 5:30-10:30. Three-course, prix-fixe dinner offered for \$18.95 nightly before 6:30 p.m. Credit cards accepted; reservations accepted. Handicapped accessible.



Diners on a trip to St. Tropez.

up on bread in spite of yourself: Rich, yummy sauces run like rivers here. They scream to be soaked up in some fashion, and you will have no choice but to greedily dip your bread, over and over and over again.

My own compulsive bread-dipping began with the hors d'oeuvres. The classic motles marinière (mussels steamed open in white wine, garlic and shallots and topped with parsley) were fresh, tender and bathing in the delicious broth — the garlic was present, to be sure, but in an empowering, not overpowering, way (\$5.95). The sautéed escargots, served out of the shell in a small crock, were soaking in a sauce of macadamia nuts, shiitake mushrooms, garlic and butter (\$7.95). Here again, the sauce was mild, but very rich. The tuna tartare was a wonderful appetizer, the kind that embellishes your hunger rather than quelling it. It contained cit-