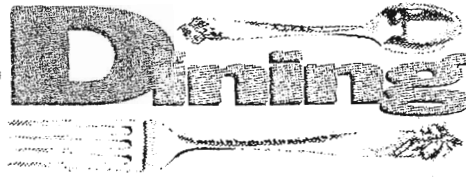


PHILADELPHIA DAILY
NEWS
THE PEOPLE PAPER

March 1, 1995



France on the fourth floor

by Maria Gallagher

Daily News Food Editor

Big portions. Low prices. Wines that perfectly match the menu for \$3 a glass.

What have we here, another Italian restaurant with piles of pasta? *Au contraire* — it is Bistro St. Tropez, a wonderfully affordable destination for French soul food, hidden on the fourth floor of the Marketplace Design Center at 2400 Market St.

Until recently, Bistro St. Tropez was a lunch-only destination patronized primarily by designers doing business at the Marketplace and savvy PECO employees who work across the street. Dinner is now served Wednesdays through Fridays, and will expand to Saturdays if business builds sufficiently.

It was at dinner that Bistro St. Tropez reminded me most of France. France was in the menu — cassoulet; strip steak with bordelaise sauce; grilled chicken with fresh thyme and lemon; not one but two types of apple tart on the dessert list; sensibly priced wines.

It was in the decor — framed posters, candlelight, fresh flowers in the dead of winter, white paper stretched over the white-clothed tables. And it was in the clientele, which included some French-speaking customers the night we visited.

Dinner is a fabulous value, particularly the three-course \$15.95 *prix fixe*. The courses vary with the market; I was wowed by a superbly fresh arugula salad with pine nuts and roasted red peppers,

followed by braised duck covered with sweet carrot chunks and long-cooked onions. Alongside were parsley-flecked pureed potatoes, a baked vegetable side dish that layered caramelized onions, tomatoes and green and yellow squash and a branch of fragrant fresh rosemary. The sweet finish? A classic apple tart on the thinnest of pastry crusts, served with vanilla ice cream.

(A minor complaint: The main course was described as duck with olives. There wasn't an olive in sight, and we were not informed about a substitution.)

There may not be a more satisfying entree in town at the moment than the cassoulet (\$10.95) crammed with white beans, duck, sausage, lamb and bacon. Those in search of a less hearty entree would do well to try the herbed salmon baked in parchment (\$10.95), served with the same side vegetables as the duck.

Although I'm a pushover for the French dishes here, the menu isn't strictly French. The soup du jour (\$2.75) may be black bean topped with sour cream or Mexican vegetable. There's a Caesar (\$3) among the salads. Calamari (\$4.95), grilled until just tender, surprised us with the bite of fresh

ginger in its veil of extra-virgin olive oil.

Cappellini Maison (\$9.95), a pasta dish served at lunch, came in a light-bodied white wine broth laced with lump crabmeat, sundried tomatoes, capers, roasted red peppers and arugula. A small tossed salad was included.

The meal-size Nicoise Salad (\$8.95) didn't measure up in quality to the best ones I've had in the south of France, but it deserves a nod for incorporating a still-warm grilled tuna steak, crisp-cooked green beans, lusty black olives and butter lettuce leaves. Unfortunately, its potato slices were undercooked, its tomato slices were pale and wan and the oversized plate that held it all had an oversized chip in its rim.

Save room for the excellent desserts, all made in-house. The frozen Grand Marnier souffle (\$3.50) is a dead ringer for the one served at Le Bec-Fin. Profiteroles, small puff pastries filled with vanilla ice cream and drizzled with chocolate sauce (\$3), are a bistro standard. The chocolate mousse cake (\$3.50) is too rich to finish, while the chunky Tart Tatin on a puffy crust with vanilla ice cream (\$3.25) is good to the last crumb. ■

REVIEW
Bistro St. Tropez ★★
2400 Market St., 215-569-9269.
Lunch: 11:30 a.m.-3 p.m. Monday-Friday.
Dinner: 5:30-9:30 p.m. Wednesday through Friday.
Liquor: Full bar, wine list, premium wines by the glass.
Accessibility: Barrier-free.
Credit: Major cards.
Atmosphere: Fashionably French.

★=Good ★★=Very Good ★★★=Great
No Stars = Needs Work
\$=Average entree under \$10
\$\$=Average entree under \$15
\$\$\$=Average entree over \$1