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food

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Bistro on the Schuylkill

South-of-France charm with a river view (and great crabcakes).

By Maxine Keyser

A bistro is supposed to be a cozy, unpretentious restaurant that offers a dependable menu with daily specials at painless prices. It should also provide ease of location, a welcoming attitude and a moderate wine list. Bistro St. Tropez offers many of these requisites, and the location — well, it certainly belies the idea that off-street venues are a death knell.

Tucked away in the shadowy upstairs confines of the Marketplace at 2400 Market Street, the Bistro has a steady, appreciative clientele that scurry through the otherwise dark hallways with an almost illicit delight. The huge building is usually closed at night but opens Wednesday to Saturday to those who fancy French food fast. Don't be alarmed — there's plenty of security, and something redolently exotic in these hushed halls.

Once inside the restaurant (four floors up via elevator), you see what the skilled hands of the decorators who inhabit the Marketplace by day have wrought. It's a stunning space, with dark green sponged walls and tapestry banquettes. The lighting is just right — not too dark, not irritatingly bright, and the brushed steel chairs are among the comfiest in town. It feels French and casual-chic, as if it were one step up from the *plage*, as does the menu. The restaurant, which started 15 years ago as strictly a lunchtime spot, quickly gained in popularity, and about five years ago a front room and small bar were added where the view west over the Schuylkill is unobstructed. At sunset, when the lights begin to sparkle on the bridges over the river, you can almost believe you're in Paris.

Patrice Rames, the chef, is not from Paris, however. As you might guess, he is from St. Tropez, and the menu reflects the more casual, sun-drenched approach to food that you find in Provence. There are 12 hors d'oeuvres, two soups, six attractive salads and, under "poissons and viandes," 12 more choices — plus they offer that clever European idea, the early evening prix fixe: three courses for \$18.95 before 6:30. The food is not rich or complicated — just naturally good ingredients, prepared in time-honored ways, with a new little surprise thrown in occasionally — coconut curry sauce on one dish, soy in a beurre blanc, Yukon gold potatoes. A simple fricassee of wild mushrooms such as morels, shiitakes, or portobellos (\$7.95) is tossed with a bordelaise sauce of red wine, butter, garlic and parsley, but given a nouveau touch of salsify and truffle oil. The escargots (\$8.95) are classic, but there are macadamia nuts and shiitakes in the buttery sauce. Pan-seared scallops over wilted frisée and green beans gets not only a sherry reduction but a few fingerling potatoes for good measure. You can get standard mussels or onion tart, and especially an authentic terrine of duck (\$8.95), coarse and gamy, with mustard, olives and cornichons to complete it. And there's always Patrice's galette de crabe

BISTRO ST. TROPEZ

2400 Market St., 4th floor, 215-569-9269

Lunch: Mon.-Fri., 11:30 a.m.-3 p.m. Dinner: Wed.-Thu., 5:30-9:30 p.m.; Fri.-Sat., 5:30-10:30 p.m. Wheelchair access. Reservations suggested. All major credit cards.

nuts and gorgonzola cheese (\$7.50). There's even a kitchen-sink type of duck salad (\$7.50) that contains soba noodles, mangos, spinach smoked duck and a Thai chili vinaigrette!

The wine list is approachable, and we try a Smithbridge Cellars Meritage (\$22)

which is a bit fruity, and a white Graves (\$24) that is bone-dry. Fletan (halibut, \$19.95) is superb, wrapped in phyllo and garnished with a true barigoule of artichokes (sautéed artichoke hearts, with vegetables like mushrooms and flavorings like Pernod). I have my doubts about the coconut curry sauce, but it can't spoil the snow white, delicate halibut. There's salmon with horseradish crust and a

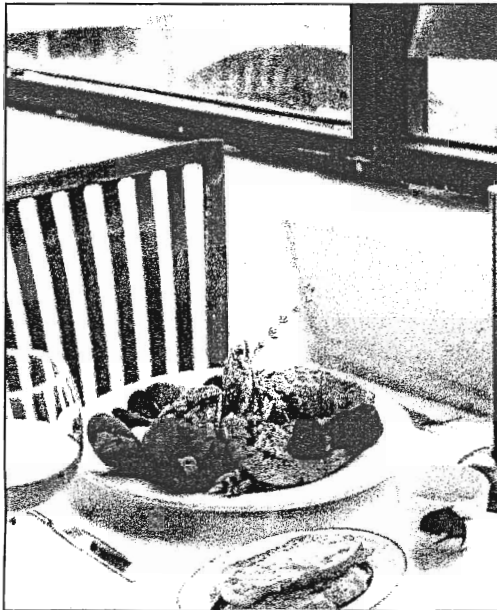
red wine sauce (\$17.95), striped bass crusted with potatoes and olives (\$19.95), tuna with that soy-beurre blanc that works (\$19.95), red snapper with a lemon vinaigrette (\$19.95), corn crusted tilapia (\$15.95) — it's a veritable Mediterranean Sea right before your eyes. I choose a honeyed duck breast, for a change, in an interesting juniper berry sauce set on a potato blini (\$19.95) that gives an aromatic tinge to the sweetness of the duck meat. Some of these preparations may sound a bit haute for a bistro, but the comfortable fare of the bourgeoisie is not overlooked. There's a classic boeuf bourguignon (\$12.95) of long-braised beef with carrots, and onion with fettucine, and of course, a fine steak frites (\$18.95) that's a flavorful NY strip with pommes frites that taste *vrai* French.

In the sunny, southern warmth of the Bistro, you can hear French spoken at practically every table, and it lulls you into a Provençal mode. So you will be happy to find a selection of French cheeses, served with grapes and grilled bread (\$7.95), that you can have for a starter as well. For the irresistible sweet tooth, there's always profiteroles (\$6), chocolate mousse (\$5.25) or a warm apple tart (\$6) that you know will be hearty and delicious. Even the coffee is the La Colombe brand, very good, very French — right up there with the big guys.

I've always enjoyed Bistro St. Tropez, and always receive a warm greeting. But does it fit the original definition of "bistro"? It lacks the dark, nicotine-stained walls or rickety chairs, or even a resident *clochard* on the grate outside.

But it does serve familiar, homey food at decent prices. And if the food does lean a bit more toward elegant than everyday, and the décor is more stylish than shoddy, remember Patrice is from the Côte d'Azur, where you always get glamour with your value.

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ST. TROPEZ TREAT: Bouillabaisse in a saffron broth.

(\$9.95). It's one of the biggest, creamiest, lumpiest crabcakes in town, with no visible filler except a drop of shrimp purée and a drizzle of tomato caper coulis (after all, he did train at Le Bec-Fin). Or you can have a salad — good Caesar (\$4.50), true Nicoise (\$9.95) or that new darling, Bibb lettuce, apples, honey roasted wal-

MICHAEL TORRANO

PHILADELPHIA CITY PAPER MAY 24 - MAY 31, 2001 145