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## Dining Out *By Thom Cardwell*

### Bistro St. Tropez

2400 Market St.

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[www.bistrosttropez.com](http://www.bistrosttropez.com)

Sometimes I think that Philadelphia could be too easily dubbed "the city of hidden treasures."

In the culinary world, Bistro St. Tropez can definitely be placed on such a list. Happily, though, enough faithful diners have unearthed this French gourmet gem to sustain chef/owner Patrice Rames; for 15 years, he has offered some of the most authentic French cuisine that can be found anywhere in the city – and at reasonable prices.

The restaurant's off-the-beaten track location at The Marketplace Design Center, reminiscent for Rames of the many restaurants tucked away in office buildings in Paris, only enhances its attractiveness to foodies who enjoy its European-like views of 30th Street Station overlooking the Schuylkill River.

Since 1987, Rames has been perfecting his craft, with an affectionate nod to his Aunt Liliane, his mother and his culinary roots from his native Provence by relying upon his natural instincts to create simple, satisfying, good food with the right amount of fresh, high-quality ingredients.

Rames, who spent two years working with Georges Perrier at Le Bec-Fin, before opening his own restaurant, also apprenticed under some of France's leading chefs, including Didier Goiffou of Restaurant La Marene in Peronnas and Christian Zeiger of Le Domarais in Paris.

His passion for food is evident everywhere. Over the years, it has been fueled by his loyal following.

"Diners have become more adventurous in Philadelphia – they're now willing to experiment with culinary choices and not worry about not liking something," Rames said.

This has resulted in Rames' offering a daily menu in addition to an early evening (before 6:30 p.m.) prix-fixe three-course dinner for \$18.95.

My companion and I found so many delectable menu choices for hors d'oeu-

vres that we wanted to test several during our visits to Bistro St. Tropez.

Terrine Maison, country duck paté made with foie gras, roasted pepper and French beans, was deliciously peppery with the perfectly balanced taste of both the duck and foie gras. It made us feel like we were celebrating at a French picnic.

The barigoule of artichokes was another wonderful indulgence. Fresh artichokes were sliced and layered with onions, roasted peppers, mushrooms and served in a fennel pernod sauce. Rames said "sauces are the secret to cooking French food," and this was one of the many unforgettable ones we enjoyed.

Fricassee of champignons, a meatless medley of mushrooms, features small, wild mushrooms, a strong, distinctive flavor of oyster mushrooms floating in a rich, dark brown sauce of salsify – an oyster-flavored root vegetable – in a truffle oil.

Rames has added his own creative twist to some traditional French dishes.

Escargots was a seductive concoction of the richest, deepest flavors with diced carrots and garlic and sautéed in a macadamia nut shiitake butter sauce.

St. Jacques scallops were stuffed with foie gras, fingerlings and string beans, and served with red pepper coulis – a perfectly balanced thick sauce.

We could have been completely satisfied just with the first course, but we knew that there were additional dishes to taste.

Agneau pistachio nut rack of lamb was a medium-sized fresh and meaty rack, complemented by Yukon Gold potato soufflé and roasted garlic sauce.

Merou corn and basil grouper was served with eggplant caviar and shrimp purses – small flake-pastry dumplings filled with ground tuna and shrimp in a reduction sauce of roasted shallot jus.

All of Rames' food was well-executed with a subtlety of flavors, perfectly balanced or contrasted appropriately, according to the ingredients, seasonings and spices.

Rames also creates desserts. Le Lavandou, his signature dessert, is an apricot, honey lavender and praline mousse cake. We indulged in the heavenly delight

of frothy and airy richness of the mousse cake, sweetened with the minty aromatic pungency of the lavender. It's definitely a must-have.

My companion, who confesses that he doesn't even like desserts, said the tarte aux poires was the best tart he had ever tasted. The warmth of the pear and almond, with the most distinctive of sweet flavors, was playfully seductive. Rames also features a fruit tart of the day, based upon seasonal offerings.

Appetizers range from \$5.95 for Moules marinieres steamed mussels with fresh parsley, shallots and white wine broth to \$9.95 for St. Jacques scallops, stuffed foie gras, fingerlings, string beans and red pepper coulis.

Soups are priced at \$4.50 for a fresh carrot ginger soup and the chef's "flavor of the day" soup.

Salads range from \$4.75 for mesclun field greens with shallot vinaigrette to \$9.95 for Nicoise seared tuna filet, mesclun, olives, haricots verts with shallot vinaigrette.

Dinner entrees range from \$15.95 for Coq au Vin provencale French-cut chicken breast, served with mushrooms, truffle-mashed potatoes and with a red wine sauce to \$19.95 for Vivaneau pan seared red snapper, with fingerlings and broccoli rabe, braised fennel, white bean and olive vinaigrette and Rascasse potato goat cheese crusted wild striped bass, escarole and carrot flan with tomato caper coulis.

Desserts range in price from \$5.50 for the fruit tart of the day to \$7 for Gateau Chocolat, warm chocolate cake.

The extensive wine list almost exclusively features French vintages with the exception of a handful of American reds and whites. French vintages range in price from \$19 for a Provence White, Coteaux-du-Lanquedoc, Chateau des Hospitaliers 1999 to \$63 for a French red, Bordeaux Paulliac, Chateau St. Mambert 1997.

Lunch is served from 11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday through Friday; dinner is from 5:30 to 9:30 p.m. Wednesdays and Thursdays, and 5:30 to 10:30 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays.