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Maxine Keyser **Dining**

The bistro moves upscale

And it doesn't do it one bit of harm



Bistro St. Tropez
2400 Market Street
569-9269

Bistro (allegedly from the Russian *beestra*, meaning “quick”) is a small, cozy, unpretentious restaurant that offers a dependable carte, 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, 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's seductive, as if it were one step up from the *plage*, definitely French and chic – as is the menu.

There were so many attractive fish and seafood offerings that we immediately ordered a white Graves (\$22) and tried to make some decisions. The menu usually offers seven starters, four interesting salads (*mesclun* with duck *confit*, *par exemple*), 11 or 12 entrees – five *poissons* and seven *viandes* – as well as that so-sensible European concept which I've mentioned before: a three-course *prix fixe* (\$16.95). Breads are from Le Bus, and the sourdough is fine with the light pesto sauce they serve as a butter alternative. Not so the sweetish whole-wheat buns – a correctable misstep.

I make no secret of my predilection for French cooking. Those who complain, “It's too rich for me,” or “...all those sauces,” really miss the point of the French dictum. Impeccable ingredients, lovingly handled – that's all there is to it.

Take the *friture* (\$4.95) – a golden pile of crisp, lemon-accented smelts – or the grilled squid (\$4.95) – perfectly

tender, with only the markings of the grill, a drizzle of olive oil and lemon, and a tiny salad of lentils, sprouts and carrots on the side. Transparent, silky, pink slices of raw salmon *carpaccio* (\$6.95) are similarly dressed and have a small salad of *mâche*, but the Gallette of Crabe (\$5.95) is, ahem, rich. It's one of the biggest, creamiest, lumpiest crab cakes in town, with no visible filler except a drop of shrimp puree. (The owner/chef, Patrice Rames, used to work at Le Bec Fin – I think I detect the master's hand in this dish.) The lowly smelt and the humble squid are typical “bistro” fare, wherein the challenge lies to turn out the best preparation at the best prices.

The same responsibility applies to the splendid *entrecôte* (\$14.95) with a lesser Bordeaux (\$23), or the veal kidneys in a cognac demi-glace (\$12.95), or the chicken *paillard* with just lemon and herbs. All these are the comforting fare of the bourgeoisie, but you can also have a filet mignon with wild mushrooms (\$14.95) or a lovely veal chop (\$17.95).

Barbue d'Amérique sounds exotic, but it's really only catfish. But *what* catfish – corn-crust, sweet-fleshed and served with a vegetable ragout (\$13.95). However, a meaty slab of Arctic char (\$14.95) may appear with a corn-mushroom ragout, or sea bass with truffled lobster cream (\$14.95) that's not too shabby.

Patrice Rames is a native of St. Tropez, and the entire restaurant exudes a sunny, Provençal warmth. It's evident in the friendly waiters, the casual, odd mix of china and the familiar tried and true desserts. With a sigh, I can order *tarte tatin* (\$4), *profiterolles* (\$4), even chocolate mousse (\$3.25) and know they will be hearty, delicious and bear no traces of mango or raspberry puree. And bliss – they offer a cheese assortment (\$5.95) as a dessert – or a starter if you prefer. (The March issue of *Gourmet* magazine lists seven New York restaurants with the best cheese boards in town. Am I on to something? I hope so.) The very coffee they pour is the La Colombe brand. Oh, the sheer “Frenchness” of it all!

Clearly, I like Bistro St. Tropez. But does it fit the original definition of “bistro”? It lacks dark, smoky walls or rickety chairs or even a resident *clochard* on the grate outside. But, it does serve familiar, homey food and wine at good prices. And if the food does lean a bit more towards elegant than every-day, and the decor is more stylish than shoddy, remember: M. Rames is from the Côte d'Azur, where you always get glamour with your value.