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Sublime Bistro

Section: Restaurant Reviews

Most men profess their love with flowers, or diamonds, or sappy Hallmark sentiments. Chef Didier Dutertre told his love: "I'm going to buy you a restaurant and make you the boss."

Cue the violins. The woman says yes. She cries. They embrace. And the result is Bistro Moulin, the Peninsula's newest — and perhaps hottest — restaurant.

The French-born Dutertre, for 25 years the chef at renowned Casanova in Carmel, always shared the dream of every chef — to one day own his own place. But he had it really good at Casanova — what with its world-class reputation and Grand Award wine list — and he settled comfortably into a routine.

Then, five years ago, his wife died suddenly, an unspeakable tragedy punctuated by his daughter's departure for college. Restlessness set in, followed, strangely enough, by ambition. So, when he eventually met and fell in love with Colleen Manni, he knew the time had come.

The couple took a long lease in a former sushi house, gutted the interior, rented half the space to a gourmet store and started to work on a menu. The result is a European bistro, small and quaint, serving French and Belgian classic dishes to a small audience (about 25 seats).

A selection of first-course items includes such items as chicken liver pate, heirloom tomato carpaccio, mixed green salad and an assortment of French cheeses. Additionally, Moulin offers about a dozen tapas-style bites — beans, cheese, olives, smoked salmon, tuna, etc. — housed in a cold case in front of the house.

Six entrées scream "French bistro" with prices from \$13.75 to \$23.50.

Manni, a former beauty shop owner with restaurant experience at places such as Joe Rombi's and Chianti, works the front of the house. Dutertre plants himself in the tiny kitchen performing his one-man show.

The wine list is small yet engaging, with select bottles from California, Italy and France. HE SAID

Manni welcomes us into the room as if special guests had arrived at her home for dinner. It's sincere, not overdone.

There is an air of simplicity here, from the soft-hued, nearly bare walls to the one-sheet menu, but good taste reigns. The four of us are in a festive mood, and before we know it we are clinking Champagne glasses filled with Comete Audoin de Dampierre.

We are excited about the prospect of having a chef of Dutertre's caliber cooking in a scaled-down environment; you don't become anonymous at Bistro Moulin. It's cozy, almost cramped, and at times you're rubbing elbows, literally, with fellow diners. Yet the convivial vibe shines.

The menu, like the room, is small, simple and quaint. I find myself racing through the tasty but largely unremarkable tapas (I would recommend skipping this step).

The ubiquitous Manni and another waiter work the room expertly, anticipating every want. People spill in off the sidewalk and she graciously welcomes guests, politely turning away those without reservations.

Our vegetarian has a field day, chowing down on the tapas and the gnocchi appetizer before ordering all three side dishes — frites (\$3.75), sautéed spinach (\$4.50) and ratatouille (\$4.50), the last item a nod to Dutertre's daughter's new favorite movie, Manni said.

Our carnivore chooses the classic steak bordelaise (\$23.50), a grilled Prime hanger steak bathed in a shallot-cabernet sauce. It's perfectly cooked, although slightly undersalted, and the sauce cries out for fry-dipping.

My entrée, moules frites (mussels and fries; \$15.50), is an example of how simplicity can lead to the sublime. This is often called a working-class dish, but this should be the dish of kings. The farm-raised mussels, absent of sand and grit, are plump and tender, never musty, and they erase all preconceived notions.

After eating 20 or so of these beauties, my work is not finished; the simple sauce is built upon shallots and leeks and uses white wine and the juices from the opened mussels to create a souplike sensation.

My meal ends before I realize they had forgotten the delicious crispy-limp frites I had been stealing from my tablemate. No matter. Dessert is on the way.

SHE SAID

It's almost Pavlovian, really — that knee-jerk aversion to anything in the neighborhood of a Fodor's travel guide entry. Fondness for Steinbeck aside, can anything near Cannery Row really find a way into a local's heart? But just up from the aquarium lives the positively darling little restaurant named Bistro Moulin. It's teeny, so make a reservation; otherwise, you run the risk of being turned away. And that would be an absolute shame. With a passion that comes with utter confidence in one's product, Colleen effuses about the night's specials. I'm seduced by the description of tonight's special, Pacific sea bass — it's marinated in passion fruit balsamic vinegar (from Mediterraneo Imports next door). But first, we scoop up the dreamy and delicate roasted carrot, garlic and yogurt spread with toasted bagette "chips."

I only pick at our appetizer selection (a fresh slab of salty feta and a scoop of cubed red beets from the cold case) because I'm so enthralled with the heirloom tomato "carpaccio" (\$7.75). A fan of paper-thin slices of dead-ripe yellow and red tomatoes is topped with olive oil, fleur de sel and fresh basil, and resembles a painter's palette. When no one's looking, I swipe the plate with my finger to get the last of the sweet balsamic reduction, drizzled like syrup over top.

Since we have to share, I am allotted only two of the gnocchi con spinaci (\$7.50), rich and perfect little toothsome pillows baked gratin-style with cheese and butter. Our appetites are saved by the small portion (no more than eight), but I'm filing that dish away as part of a nice little entrée sometime in the near future.

Now for the sea bass (a sustainable choice): It's a large fillet, lightly caramelized and finished in a light bierre blanc. Underneath, a nest of fresh spinach and onions are simple accompaniments that take a happy back seat to the creamy fish that practically melts on my tongue.

By popular vote, little chocolate-covered "cream puffs" called profiteroles, stuffed with vanilla ice cream, appear and rapidly disappear — sweet afterthoughts to our memorable meal.

Mike Hale and Melissa Snyder approach their reviews from a couple's perspective. All visits are made anonymously. Comment at tablefortwo@sbcglobal.net. GO!

BISTRO MOULIN

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867 Wave St., Monterey, 333-1200

* Hours: lunch, 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Mon-Sat; dinner, 5-8:30 p.m. daily

* Cards: all major

* Wheelchair access: yes

* Bar: wine

* Price range: \$13.75-\$23.50

* Must-orders: Moules frites; tomates au basilic; gnocchi con spinaci

* Web site: www.bistromoulin.com

* Pluses: Quaint, romantic ambience; local appeal; elegant wine list; good value; sustainable seafood

* Minuses: Curbside parking; tiny interior can feel a bit cramped

* The bottom line: Traditional French bistro fare prepared by a master — at a fair price.
