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Candlelight supper in Kensington

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By Frank Sabatini Jr.

Even though it's the most clichéd dish in North American French restaurants, I've had a long, unbreakable love affair with onion soup au gratin.

From my initial infatuation when first encountering it as a teenager in Montreal to embracing its flaws whenever they arise in the present-day, the "Soupe à l'Oignon Grantinée" at Bleu Bohème is my new benchmark from which I'll judge all others.

Assuming the soup at Bleu is consistently constructed with such finesse, consumers will meet a broth that is sweet and herby rather than salty and oily. And in getting to it, they'll poke through a bubbling mass of toasted Gruyere cheese that puts the often-seen caps of insipid Swiss cheese to shame.



Soupe à l'Oignon Grantinée; beef Bourguignon; crab croquettes with saffron aioli; mussels with garlic cream, shallots and pomme frites; and flourless chocolate cake (Photos by Frank Sabatini Jr.)

But if you come to this lovely Paris-meets-rural-France restaurant with something other than onion soup in mind — for let's say foie gras au torchon, steak frites or a bucket of mussels bathed in a choice of sauces — you'll likely still break into a few pirouettes before exiting.

Since visiting a couple years ago for a pleasant Sunday brunch, I most recently came for dinner with my sister visiting from the Chicago burbs, where French restaurants are in short supply. The nighttime vibe felt radically different as hot wax dribbled down the sides of twinkling stick candles placed on every table and a Champagne cart adorned with fresh flowers zigzagged quietly throughout the dining room.

The restaurant has become a reliable mainstay in the last decade among well-heeled Kensington residents and anyone who knows that luscious French suppers aren't cheap. Most small plates are priced above \$16, and entrees generally exceed \$25, although they include various veggies and other sidekicks, not to mention in many cases ponds of classic French sauces.

From the small plates list, crispy bacon and very sweet caramelized onions smothered a flaky pastry tart, thus overwhelming any hint of prized Reblochon-style cheese mentioned in the description. Sis loved it anyhow as I diverted my attention to a trio of crab croquettes crowned with daubs of saffron aioli.

The fresh and fluffy crab meat exuded delicious measures of tarragon and thyme. Jicama slaw bedding each orb added graceful texture. Imagine the best crab cakes you've ever eaten tasting twice as good. These are what you'd end up with.

Proceeding further down the eye-straining small-font menu in this elegantly dim candle lighting, we augmented the French onion soup and our other starters with "Salade Maison" — the house salad.

It was a familiar but satisfying assembly of butter lettuce, apples, almonds, market beets and Roquefort crumbles dressed ever so lightly in basil-shallot vinaigrette. Crostini with olive tapenade on the plate provided the essential French kiss.

Expect sizable portions if opting for moules frites (mussels with skinny french fries) or any of the full-size "grands plats."

Sis ordered beef bourguignon, which yielded hearty filets of fork-tender meat cooked slowly in red wine. Potatoes and carrots are added in the later stages, and were obviously timed just right given their non-mushy texture.

Chef-owner Ken Irvine does wonders with black mussels. A graduate of the Culinary Institute of America and former head chef at Hyde Park Hotel in London, he offers seven sauces for the bivalves.

Among them is a blend of Dijon mustard wine sauce, crème fraîche and parsley. Another combines tomatoes, olives, white wine, garlic and herbs — a tempting prospect if you're hankering for a light Mediterranean approach.

We went all-out French with a sauce made of garlic cream and white wine. Sprinkled throughout were sliced shallots in great amounts. But a good bucket of mussels they were. And so many of them — at least two dozen we estimated.

The wine list is lengthy and offers solid choices from France's leading wine regions. But we decided to sail through dinner on cocktails instead. Sis' berry martini needed a jolt of extra sweetness, which our waiter remedied with a top-off of pineapple juice. My "French 75" made with distinctive French brandy (Armagnac) and Champagne was uniquely earthy and easy to drink, even though I'm not a huge fan of the bubbly.

We concluded our French repast with chocolate flourless cake that was superbly gooey in the center, and chocolate mousse that resembled a slab of cake. Both desserts melted in our mouths like butter, yet we left without feeling overly weighed down by cream and fat, which Irvine proves isn't always the outcome when indulging on fine French cuisine.

— *Frank Sabatini Jr. is the author of "Secret San Diego" (ECW Press), and began his local writing career more than two decades ago as a staffer for the former San Diego Tribune. Reach him at fsabatini@san.rr.com.*