

Printed from the Monterey County Weekly website: <http://www.montereycountyweekly.com/archives/2007/2007-Aug-16/Article.feast>

Deft Chef

The cozy Bistro Moulin is a perfect stage for Didier Dutertre's delicious skill.

Posted August 16, 2007 12:00 AM

By Jeanne Howard



Less is More: Chef Didier Dutertre (preparing platters of his best-selling mussels entree traded the massive Casanova in Carmel for a place with around 10 tables.

Colleen Manni and French-born Didier Dutertre, the chef at Casanova in Carmel for 25 years, recently opened Bistro Moulin just up the hill from the Aquarium on Wave Street. It's a nice place with only 20 or so seats, and is sending a ripple through the restaurant community, with chefs

among the diners on any given night.

By the time our entrees arrived during a mid-week dinner, the man and I were in a three-table conversation with our two nearest neighbors. Comments bounced around like billiard balls, interrupted only by the "oohs," "aahs" and "mmms" of food and wine delight. Forks crisscrossed as we sampled one another's dishes and desserts.

The experience reminds me of dinners I've had in Italy and France, and maybe it is a European tradition, but my theory is that it's an outcome of the design. The tables are close together and the room is small. You are literally dining with others and whether or not our hosts planned this, it's terrific—as long as one is in the mood, has been with one's partner long enough to appreciate outside stimulation, or is willing to test a new romantic partner's ability to spontaneously include strangers at dinner.

When it comes to the menu, Bistro Moulin proves that simplicity rivals complexity. Further, Moulin has the confidence not to soothe diners with a sense of abundance through elaborate descriptions of a dish. Finally, Moulin assures me that a selection of good wines, not superfluous yet diverse enough to complement the food, will do.

The menu is not tiny. There are six entrees, six hors d'oeuvres, several sides, and four desserts. There are a few daily specials and an antipasti list of 11 items; \$3.25 each or any four for \$11. We ordered five of these: roasted peppers, roasted eggplant, stuffed tomatoes, beets and feta cheese. None of this sounded particularly compelling, but I always order vegetables for my health if not my pleasure. Well, every bite was a reminder that in the hands of a capable chef, it makes little difference what is ordered. The delicate herbs, the flavor yielded by the roasting technique, the drizzling of a good olive oil—all were in fine balance.

The eggplant was a case in point. This pesky vegetable tests many kitchens — it can be somewhat dry or tough. People often say they don't care for eggplant, and I say to them, try it at Moulin.

Fortified by faith in our hosts, we ordered wines by the glass. I had the Hallcrest 2003 "Powerhouse" Pinot Noir from Santa Cruz (\$10). The Burgundian-styled Hallcrest Pinots have been gaining recognition and this is a good place to taste one with food. For a wine of similar weight, the Umberto Cesari MOMA 2004 Sangiovese (\$8.50) is an unusual

velvety version of this blend due to a small percentage of Cabernet and Merlot.

The special, roasted duck with chunks of fresh peaches, perfectly textured polenta (not too dry or too moist), and crisp sugar snap peas won my affection. I asked Dutertre how it was that the peaches were well cooked and yet not a pile of mush. The slightly crisp outer surface indicated they might be roasted, but he said they were sautéed.

At the next dinner, the Osso Buco Milanese with mushrooms and polenta (\$18.75) was, like the duck, supported by another of Dutertre's intensely flavored sauces. He has always built dishes like these, and fans will recognize his style. Each plate sings at higher notes than ever, and Dutertre knows it.

"Without the volume," he said, gesturing toward the small, open kitchen, "I can pay attention to every dish now." It's honorable that three of the six entrees cost less than \$15.

A complimentary paté of roasted eggplant, garlic, carrot and yogurt was a generous treat. It accompanied the one blemish on the first visit, a stale baguette. This problem was solved by the second dinner.

While contemplating the nature of my mousse au chocolat, sized for sharing at \$5.50, I gazed through an arched opening into the shop next door. Lovely imported ceramics, olive oil, vinegar, wine, and seductive foodie items are for sale, thanks to a partnership with the retailer Mediterraneo Imports.

The mousse was further tasty evidence that Bistro Moulin performs with strength, confidence, and even wisdom. This bold new restaurant has struck out and bucked the trend toward modern design, modern food and excess. This is the best new restaurant to come along in quite some time.

BISTRO MOULIN: 867 Wave St., Monterey • 11:30am to 2:30pm Mon-Sat; 5-8:30pm daily. • 333-1200.

2008 © Monterey County Weekly