

Casual French Dining in Lincoln's Shadow

Bistro d'Oc

Charms
Locals
and
Tourists
Alike



BY CELESTE MCCALL

We discovered Bistro D'Oc, an unpretentious French bistro, a few years ago while searching for sustenance after a performance at Ford's Theatre.

The historic playhouse – where John Wilkes Booth assassinated President Lincoln, April 14, 1865 – is situated right across the street. Next door to Bistro d'Oc, more history lurks at the “House Where Lincoln Died” (officially called the Petersen House), the boarding house where our 16th president died early the next morning after the shooting.

In fact, the building housing Bistro d'Oc dates from 1835. The structure has seen a number of restaurants and bars through the years including the Star Saloon. At the original Star Saloon, located nearby, we're told that Booth downed a few drinks to work up the courage to commit his dastardly deed.

There's nothing fancy at the 120-seat Bistro d'Oc; wherein lies its charm. Service is straightforward, not snooty. Floors are made of plain, saloon-style wood. Colorful photos, some depicting the French countryside, grace the sponge-painted reddish-orange walls.

Lunch

For a Friday lunch, after watching buses disgorge hordes of tourists who then filed into Ford's Theatre, we settled into a table in the back. Our server promptly brought over a lengthy, handwritten board of daily specials. After ordering a glass of sauvignon blanc from France's Gascony region, we began with seasonal butternut squash soup aux fines herbes. In spite of the moniker, the potage needed a little more zest, which we managed with a judicious sprinkling of salt and pepper.

On a previous visit, we were delighted to find ris de veau (veal sweetbreads), which are finally making a culinary comeback on local menus. However, this recent luncheon provided another French-style variety meat: lamb's brains sautéed in lemon/caper butter. Priced at \$10, the rich yet delicate dish provided a generous luncheon entree. Cervelle d'agneau – lamb brains – is a specialty of chef/owner Bernard Grenier's native Languedoc region in Southwestern France.

Grenier, who operated La Miche in Bethesda for more than 20 years, opened Bistro d'Oc about seven years ago. If you notice Asian accents on the menu, it's because Grenier's wife and business

Bistro d'Oc

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Hours: lunch is served Monday through Saturday from 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.; Sunday from 11:30 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Dinner: Monday through Thursday from 5:30 to 9:45 p.m.; Friday and Saturday from 5:30 p.m. to 10:45 p.m.

ABOVE: Mesclun greens are topped with rich foie gras for a tempting salad course. photo: Andrew Lightman



A marvelous finale at Bistro d'Oc is lavender-scented creme brulee, with its sweet, crunchy crust. photo: Andrew Lightman



Owner/chef Bernard Grenier and his son, Benoit, enjoy a respite from a busy day at Bistro d'Oc. photo: Andrew Lightman

BELOW: A plate of garlicky snails (a half or whole dozen) makes an enticing appetizer. photo: Andrew Lightman



partner, Thasanee, comes from Bangkok, Thailand. Sons Benoit and Henri are also heavily involved in the family culinary enterprise.

As I savored my cervelle, Peter tucked into a bountiful bowl of Prince Edward Island (Canadian) mussels steamed in a rich broth of creme fraiche perfumed with fresh tarragon. Escorting the bivalves was a nest of crisply addictive pommes frites. We could have been virtuous and gone for the tossed house salad instead, but this was no time to monitor our cholesterol. Speaking of indulgence, Bistro d'Oc's deliciously crusty French bread is baked by a commercial company, Baguette Republic, which also supplies the nearby Cowgirl Creamery.

Dinner

Braving even nastier weather than before, we returned for dinner on a Thursday. Despite the cold drizzle, the restaurant was almost full, and the lively upstairs bar scene indicated a party was in full swing.

This time we started with a crock of classic onion soup, replete with rich broth and crowned with wonderfully gooey cheese. An equally rich appetizer was the half-dozen escargots (you may also order 12), nestled in their shells awash in garlicky parsley butter enlivened with a hint of pastis (an anise-flavored aperitif). Perfect for sopping up with that crusty French bread.

In spite of the indicated 30-minute preparation time, we opted for the house special, cassoulet. Grenier's traditional Languedoc rendition was well worth the wait. Generous enough to feed two, the earthenware serving dish was chock full of beautifully-seasoned white haricot (navy) beans, studded with huge chunks of pork, lamb, a white pork sausage and an enormous slab of duck confit. The crowning glory was the delicate crust.

We had to pass over other tempting

options like salmon swathed in basil-scented smoked salmon and enveloped in a whole wheat crepe, braised veal, grilled Colorado lamb sirloin, and roasted free-range chicken.

Peter thoughtfully selected a light entree, one of the evening specials: a seafood salad of salmon, calamari, shrimp and scallops, heaped on a bed of mesclun greens and oddly interspersed with pink grapefruit sections. Unfortunately, the concoction tasted rather tired; it was less than successful.

Advice? Stick to the Gallic classics, which Chef Grenier and his kitchen staff execute with aplomb.

Dessert? Why not? The grand finale was a beautiful lavender-kissed creme brulee, garnished with a sprig of rosemary. The two of us polished it off tout de suite.

Bistro d'Oc's comprehensive and moderately priced wine list concentrates on France's Languedoc region, with a sprinkling of other French vintages and a smattering of bottles from California. We also noticed a few wines offered by the half-bottle, always a good idea. However, we were pleased with our French sauvignon blanc and pinot noir.

There's also a listing of cocktails, beers and aperitifs – including two kinds of pastis, kir (creme de cassis combined with white wine), kir royale (creme de cassis with Champagne), and Pernod. Bistro d'Oc also offers such postprandial libations as Cognac, Armagnac, Grand Marnier, Calvedos, port and Muscat du Languedoc.

Dinner for two with two glasses of house wine apiece came to \$108 before tip. Our dining experience was well worth the Euros – er – dollars.

An excellent value is the pre-theater supper, served from 5:30 to 7 p.m. daily. Priced at \$23.95, the early-bird repast includes an appetizer, entree, dessert and a glass of wine. The deal also applies to post-theater dining; hours depend on the duration of Ford's Theatre performances.

As downtown street parking is extremely limited, we strongly recommend taking Metro. The Metro Center stop (Blue/Orange and Red Lines) is located just around the corner. ★