

The Sacramento Bee

TICKET

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A visit to Provence

Roseville restaurant sends diners on a virtual tour

By Mike Dunne -- Bee Restaurant Critic

La Provence Restaurant in Roseville presents bouillabaisse in the style of Marseilles with a tomato saffron broth. The dish is available on Fridays and Saturdays only.
Sacramento Bee/Erhardt Krause

The gnocchi are bigger and sturdier than usual, the dense but light dough rolled out to the thickness of a fat cigar, then cut into one-inch lengths. They are accompanied with bright English peas; big, dark and earthy morel mushrooms; and a light cream sauce aromatic with truffle oil.

On the side is a separate order of estouffade printanière, a medley of baby artichokes, pearl onions, fava beans, asparagus and more peas sautéed with bacon and shiny with basil oil. No fence hung with jasmine could say spring with more focus and lift.

I could have stopped eating right there. That was dinner - delighting the tastebuds, stimulating the heart, invigorating the muscles, transporting the spirit to Provence, or at least to an art gallery with an exhibit of Vincent van Gogh's paintings from the south of France.

We were at La Provence Restaurant and Terrace in the far reaches of north Roseville. By its monumental size, its detailed if understated design and its commitment to an industrious take on seasonal Provençal cooking, La Provence could be seen by the uninitiated as intimidatingly expensive and stuffy.

It's anything but. The gnocchi is available as a "small plate" (\$12) as well as a larger entree (\$16). The estouffade printanière is one of several optional side dishes (\$6). And so it goes; you can spend a little or a lot at La Provence.

Developer Stephen Des Jardin, partner chefs Bernard Brun (he's from France) and Joshua Rabbie (he's from California) and manager Mark McClure (long ago of Wulff's French Restaurant in Sacramento) all seem to have matriculated at the joie-de-vivre school of hospitality, and insist that hostesses and servers at least take a correspondence course in the same proprietary attitude.

Built to resemble a French farmhouse that has been periodically expanded and updated over a century and that still might house three or four generations of the same family, La Provence stands at the edge of 51 acres of grassy, brushy and oak-studded open space. Diners on the terrace might wonder how long this rare and comforting view will last, but Des Jardins and the City of Roseville have vowed to not develop most of the area, a refuge for all sorts of wildlife.

Inside, La Provence is homey and comfortable, the soaring ceiling supported by thick trusses of Douglas fir reclaimed from a 1930s warehouse in Chicago. The floors are slate, the windows paned, the furnishings cherrywood. Appointments are austere and practical, a large fireplace at one end of the central dining room, a wall of plank shelves topped with potted plants at the other, shielding the small lounge and its zinc-top bar. A subdued leaf motif is carried through wall sketches and upholstery. It's grand but welcoming.

And it's a perfect backdrop for Brun's and Rabbie's cooking, rooted in Provence's appreciation for brightness, wholesomeness and seasonality, with occasional nods to Californian ingredients and tastes.

The menu is extensive and varied, but manageable. La Provence is the sort of modern restaurant where it is easy to build an entire meal off the starters, small plates and optional side dishes.

The several salads include one of lightly roasted heirloom beets whose sweet earthiness was complemented marvelously with creamy Roquefort cheese and a nest of mache sprinkled with a Champagne vinaigrette (\$9).

My favorite starter was grilled asparagus drizzled with balsamico, though the asparagus wasn't the big surprise of the plate (\$8). That was the accompanying bunch of hot grilled red grapes, which had been brushed with olive oil and put over the coals just long enough to give them heat and smoke. They were a treat by themselves, but their juice also added a welcome sweet tang to the oil-dressed mesclun greens also on the plate.

That sort of complexity and completeness characterized several other dishes. Fried slices of Meyer lemon brought sweet tartness to a plate of perfectly fried calamari (\$7.50), while grace notes of anise-scented pastis and garlic gave flambéed prawns a refreshing edginess (\$10 as a small plate, \$14 as an entree).

The menu's robust meat entrees were consistently fully realized and satisfying. The Australian rack of lamb was richly succulent, and the accompanying potatoes au gratin were also rich and creamy (\$32). Brun and Rabbie had the good sense to just lightly season a thick and moist chop of Kurebuta pork, letting the sublime flavor of the meat stand on its own, without a lot of competition from its accompanying sweet-potato purée and sautéed broccoli rabe (\$21). A grilled Black Angus New York steak was fittingly juicy, tender and rich, and its accompanying tomato Provencal was so refreshingly bright I'm surprised it isn't listed as an optional side dish (\$28).

Brun and Rabbie seem to especially enjoy working with seafood. Their bouillabaisse, available Fridays and Saturdays only, changes nightly depending on the availability of certain Mediterranean seafood. For the bouillabaisse, they prefer the traditional seafood and broth of Marseille, which on the night we had it included substantial portions of such lean, firm and delicately tasty fish as John Dory, red mullet and monkfish in an aromatic tomato saffron broth shot through with suggestions of shellfish (\$30).

Monkfish appears in another entree, in which the moist and finely flavored fish was braised and served with a liltily sweet lobster sauce (\$23). (Monkfish, writes seafood authority James Peterson, is a remarkably ugly fish, its broad head and toothy mouth seeming to smile maliciously. At one time, French authorities forbade fishermen from bringing monkfish into port with their heads still attached for fear of frightening passers-by, notes Peterson. Nevertheless, the fish's flesh makes for terrific eating in the hands of Brun and Rabbie.)

Desserts are not yet at the same pitch as the rest of the menu, though some do hit high notes, especially the buttery apple and pear upside-down caramelized tarts, the vivid pomegranate sorbet and the aromatic rose ice cream. Profiteroles filled with vanilla gelato were a bit tough, while a mascarpone and chocolate mousse cake didn't have enough of the cheese to bother mentioning. All desserts are \$6.

La Provence is off to a strong start, with food that is unpretentious and stimulating, amiable and brisk servers and handsome and inviting setting. Its personality is increasingly animated, with jazz combos and a guitarist a few nights a week and twice-monthly pairings of French films with a prix-fixe menu. Maybe around Halloween they'll bring in the head of a monkfish to stir things up. But even without all that, La Provence is fun, provocative and a welcome addition to the Roseville dining scene.

La Provence Restaurant and Terrace

110 Diamond Creek Place, Roseville; (916) 789-2002
3 1/2 stars/\$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

FOOD: The airy culinary traditions of Provence blend harmoniously with the bright inventiveness of California Cuisine as chefs Bernard Brun and Joshua Rabbie turn out refreshing dishes that emphasize seasonal appropriateness.

AMBIENCE: While new and monumental, La Provence naturally and subtly embodies the warm hominess of a French farmhouse that has been frequently enlarged and refined through several generations of the same family.

HITS: Wine program, which includes a modest \$13 corkage fee - encouraging diners to take advantage of the adjoining Capitol Cellars wine shop - and a list that while brief is manageable, attractively priced, fitting for the style of food, and bold in both its imported French house wines and its choice of California producers. Breads by Bella Bru.

MISSES: Though the menu keeps abreast of the seasons, the somber ties of most of the servers are still stuck in winter.

HOURS: Lunch 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday; dinner 5:30-9 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday, 5:30-10 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays; brunch 10 a.m.-2 p.m. Sundays. No dinner Sundays and closed on Mondays.

About the Writer-----

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