



French twist

By **Kate Washington**

La Provence Restaurant and Terrace ***½

110 Diamond Creek Place in Roseville, (916) 789-2002

Dinner for One: \$10 - \$20

It can be easy to dismiss the massive growth of Sacramento's suburbs as largely chain-driven. From the freeway, the outlying areas to the east can tend to look like a vast sea of fast-food outlets, box stores and Applebee's restaurants. But don't be fooled. Excellent local places are springing up along with the chains, combining stylish settings with ambitious menus.

La Provence, located well out of visual range of the freeway in a remote-seeming part of Roseville, is one. The menu is strongly French bistro in tone, but with the added twist of some trendy small plates as well as plenty of hearty classics. The setting is warm and appealing, with high beamed ceilings and an open fireplace. On a chilly late-fall night, the terrace wasn't in use, but the pleasant interior did offer a bit of the sunny feel of the South of France.

For the most part, the culinary style here is a pleasantly Americanized version of French bistro cooking rather than strongly regional. However, herbes de Provence make an appearance, and on Fridays and Saturdays there is a bouillabaisse on offer—which, according to the menu, includes traditional but hard-to-find Mediterranean fish such as rouget.

Other choices, such as gnocchi with wild mushrooms (available as a small plate or an entree, like several dishes) and the carpaccio of house-cured wild salmon, demonstrate a less specifically French inspiration.

The salads, however, combine the best of both worlds. The salade chèvre chaud sports a bite of Laura Chenel goat cheese wrapped in pastry. The salade maison, topped with a tiny slice of toast thickly smeared with the same excellent goat cheese on one half and savory olive tapenade on the other, is as visually striking as it is classically delicious. The black-and-white toast is complemented by vibrant pink slices of slightly pungent watermelon radish as well as juicy little cherry tomatoes. The balsamic vinaigrette coated the salad's organic leaves with just enough sweetly acidic flavor.

The drink menu, too, combines French classicism with American innovation. There's a short but interesting wine list with a mini-section of well-priced Provençal wines by the glass. However, the cocktail specialty of the house seems to be the lemon drop,

served in a sugar-rimmed martini glass. The bartenders apparently aren't above cajoling those who order lesser drinks into making the switch to the lemon drop. My friend, who had one, seemed not to regret her choice, pronouncing it very tasty.

I was the only one at our table of five to order one of the large entrees, and I had a hard time choosing among them. From braised lamb shank to coq au vin, they all sounded appealing. In the end, I was drawn to the onglet--tender hanger steak--with a red-wine-and-shallot sauce, pommes frites, and a tomato Provençale. The steak was cooked just right, and the savory wine sauce was a delicious complement. It was pretty good with the fries, too, which soaked up some of the sauce. This unfortunately underscored the fact that some of them weren't as crisp as they should have been. The baked tomato, topped with a thick layer of garlic-parsley breadcrumbs, was well-intentioned, but it was marred by an overpowering amount of raw-tasting garlic in the topping.

My dining companions instead tried some of the less-meaty options. The house-made gnocchi, topped with a creamy and savory mushroom sauce, were a bit doughy, but not unpleasantly so. There was also a gratin de fruits de mer, which in the entree size was a shallow dish of scallops, shrimp and calamari over al dente egg noodles, topped with crunchy breadcrumbs. Oddly, the julienned vegetables inside were notably crunchy, as well. I also tried the soup of the day--a creamy, sunny-flavored carrot-and-tomato puree.

Desserts stuck firmly to the classics, like profiteroles, tarte Tatin and crème brûlée. The latter was vanilla-flecked and smooth, with a shatteringly caramelized top. It was a bit more pudding-like in texture than richly eggy and custardy.

There were actually two options for tarte Tatin: the old-school apple and a pear-cinnamon version. I was intrigued, because I never like the classic apple tarte Tatin as much as I think I will. (I must be too American, secretly hoping for a hint of apple-pie spice and underwhelmed by the plain combination of dark caramel and apple.) The pear version had a cinnamon, sticky caramel I loved, as well as hints of lemon peel. However, it also reminded me of the other problem with tarte Tatin: execution. It's just plain hard to make. This one missed greatness, with a firm pear and a doughy-soft crust both undercooked.

Still, we picked away at it over after-dinner coffee, which comes with not just the usual cream and sugar, but also chocolate chips, cinnamon sticks and raw sugar, so you can doctor your own. (Truth be told, the chocolate chips were nibbled plain.) This touch was nice but really very un-French. Then again, so were the solicitously friendly service and the location in the outer suburbs. But don't let that stop you. If you live in the area, you probably already know about La Provence. Even if you don't, it's worth a trip.

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