
The Sacramento Bee

TICKET

Sunday, November 26, 2006

Three

Reconsidered

By Mike Dunne - Bee Restaurant Critic

La Provence

Even before La Provence opened in early 2004, proprietor Stephen Des Jardins had a reputation for precision, insisting that not a seam show when the restaurant made its debut.

That attention to detail is even more evident today. Though the night was too chilly for us to eat outside, two fires nonetheless lit up the terrace, with several diners taking advantage of them. The Domaine des Chanssaud 2002 Chateauneuf-du-Pape the restaurant serves as one of its house wines is a marvelously fruity, meaty and spicy take on the style, a high value even at \$11 by the glass, and a much better buy at \$39 the bottle. The daily specials are printed neatly on high-bond paper. A guitarist was playing at the entrance to the central dining room.

La Provence is classy, and can be expensive, but it's neither stuffy nor intimidating. Much of the set menu is given over to modestly priced starters, small plates and side dishes from which diners easily can assemble a diverse and filling dinner without a major investment.

There was no chicken on the daily fresh sheet, but there is on the set menu, which hasn't much changed since the restaurant opened, still offering a vigorous and artful take on the unpretentious seasonal cooking of Provence.

The lone fowl is an "all-natural free-range semi-boneless" half chicken that has been pan-seared, pressed and oven-roasted (\$19). Chef partners Bernard Brun and Joshua Rabbie, who have been with La Provence from the start, don't take the bird lightly. They season it with abundant fresh herbs, serve it with a bright and spirited ratatouille of eggplant and peppers, and punctuate the juicy meat with a rustic coulis of tomato and basil that seizes all the sunshine of the south of France that Vincent van Gogh missed.

The daily fresh sheet provided two of the more stirring dishes of the year. The first was a thick slice of seared Hudson Valley foie gras whose buttery richness was cut by the citric fruitiness of orange

marmalade with wedges of mandarin and the sweetness of a caramelized tarte tatin (\$17). And talk of detailing: Scattered atop the foie gras were tiny greens from "bull's blood" beets, which I later learned from the Web site of Seed Savers Exchange provide the only red food coloring allowed by Swedish law.

The second was a thick cut of pan-seared Gulf of Mexico corvina, a member of the croaker family but with the glistening white flesh and delicately sweet flavor of sea bass (\$28). The corvina rode atop roasted root vegetables -- turnips, carrots, cipollini onions -- and was topped with ribbons of shaved fennel and Fuji apple. The sweetness of the vegetables, of the fennel and the apple, and of a cluster of roasted garlic cloves off to the side all echoed the sweetness of the fish, also punctuated with a cider sauce. Visually, it was a pretty and refined bonnet; on the palate, it was buoyant from first bite to last.

Dessert was the gâteau au chocolat from the regular menu, a fresh and dense wedge of flourless cake topped with a satiny ganache (\$6). A pool of crème anglaise was off to one side, topped with several fresh raspberries. It isn't a complicated or particularly inventive dessert, but once again it demonstrated the precision and pride that goes into every element of La Provence.

Before: 3 1/2 stars

Now: 4 stars

La Provence Restaurant & Terrace, 110 Diamond Creek Place, Roseville, serves lunch 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday, dinner 5-9 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday, 5-10 p.m. Friday and Saturday; brunch 10 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Sundays; (916) 789-2002.