

Versailles Redux...Fit For A King

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It seems that new restaurants open in Fairfield County almost every week; trendy noodle bars, serious seafood spots, and locovore luncheries abound. But there's something dependable about a classic French bistro that's withstood the test of time. **Bistro Versailles & Patisserie in Greenwich is one such restaurant.**

Bistro Versailles & Patisserie opened in 1980 and survived the celebrity-chef driven restaurant dynasties of the 1990's and into the millennium where their elegant pastries reigned throughout the cupcake craze. But in 2013, the restaurant quietly shuttered its doors, shocking hoards of long-time patrons. This spring, Marc and Evelyne Penvenne, owners of Greenwich's Meli-Melo cafe, acquired the establishment and opened to excellent reviews. But recently, there's been another change at Bistro Versailles – the Penvennes tapped executive chef Erik Erlichson, formerly of Chez Jean-Pierre in Stamford and Fairfield's Saint-Tropez Bistro Francais, to oversee the kitchen. A traditionalist, Erlichson's new menu pays homage to classic French cuisine with a nod to today's modern gastronomic sensibilities.



Erlichson is on the right

On a cold Saturday night in mid-November, the tables at Versailles are filled with whippet-slim Greenwich ladies-who-lunch (and apparently supper – quelle surprise!), bankers in navy blazers, and young romantics experiencing a stateside taste of Paris. The restaurant's sound system plays a contemporary mix as we sip Champagne and settle into the scene. Instead of ordering off the menu, we opted for the chef's selections – and could not have been more pleased.



Our first course, a delicately seasoned, pureed cauliflower soup, was rich without being filling, a sprinkling of garlicky croutons added depth of flavor, while a dusting of flat-leaf parsley added a bright note and pop of color to a new favorite comfort food.



Next, one of my all-time French favorites – a thick slice of earthy foie gras on crunchy grilled bread was accompanied with quince confit and candied shallot (the shallot, prepared in a bath of Chablis, was arguably one of the stars of the evening – its refined sweetness delightfully surprising). Chef Erlichson explained that he prepares the foie gras in the torchone manner – rolling the ingredients in a towel to compress them into a log shape, immersing it into a pot of steaming cognac scented broth for 90 seconds to “melt” the ingredients together, then plunging it in an ice bath to cool. The process is more difficult than the traditional terrine method, but it's worth it – yielding a decadent rich and velvety texture. Divine!



It simply wouldn't be a French restaurant experience without escargot. Served in a cast-iron skillet and swimming in garlic butter, they're the right kind of chewy, with a hint of brininess, a respectful riff on an indulgent classic. Tip: ask for extra bread to sop up the remaining garlic butter!



C-shaped pink rock shrimp are the star of the next course. Fresh shrimp in a French tomato confit are glazed in Pastis and served on a bed of (gluten-free – if that matters to you) al dente rice pasta. Light and flavorful – this dish proves that you can simultaneously watch your waistline and indulge in fine cuisine.



The event of the night was duck prepared two ways – first, pan roasted Hudson valley duck breast surrounded by wedges of crispy potatoes and chunks of cardamom glazed apples. Second, a flavorful and tender confit de canard served on a bed of savory braised cabbage. The melange of flavors – from bold to delicate – and exquisite presentation manifest the passion and talent of Erlichson.

Don't skip dessert! This is, after all, a patisserie as well as a restaurant. At the chef's suggestion we sampled the chocolate crunch – layers of crunchy French wafers set in hazelnut fondant and topped with milk chocolate mousse and dusted with cocoa powder, and a blueberry tart piled high with whole fresh berries in a buttery shell.

While the dinner menu at Versailles is not inexpensive (most entrees are in the \$24-30 range), they are open for an affordable breakfast and lunch daily, and brunch on Saturday and Sunday.

If you're looking for a Parisian-inspired dining experience in Fairfield County, you simply cannot go wrong at Bistro Versailles – impeccably prepared French food served in a delightful atmosphere...the new and improved Bistro Versailles & Patisserie rises to the pantheon of classic Fairfield County restaurants. This one is here to stay.