

Northern France
in the Middle of Houston

Bistro Calais

by HENRI MERCERON

Bistro Calais operates out of a cottage that was once part of the estate of Michael De Chaumes who hailed from Paris and ultimately made Houston his home in 1837. He became one of the city's first prominent architects. Originally built on land close to downtown, the cottage was relocated intact to its current location in 1984. Today, Bistro Calais prepares French and Continental fare that would have made Monsieur Chaumes feel right at home. Of course, there are some Southern favorites on the menu, as well.

There are a number of characteristics that define Bistro Calais's unique appeal. First, the relatively unaltered century old architecture definitely places you in another era. The earth tone paint complements the dark pine wood floors and many tall window encasements. The back room faces a courtyard that is bordered by other restored cottages that house quaint boutiques. A line of tall windows provide an unfettered view of the area. In the center of the courtyard is a large English conservatory which is available for receptions and parties. Victorian lamps, a fountain and wrought iron fences complete the ambiance.

I heard about Bistro Calais from a friend of a friend. I had been searching for some diversity in my Sunday brunch options, as I tended to go to the same three establishments over and over again. I am here to share with you that the Sunday brunch at Bistro Calais is my new favorite. As the menu items change from week to week (except for certain permanent items), it is a moving target of culinary pleasure. How do you get bored with a menu that changes on a regular basis? I don't think you can. Perhaps that is why it was voted best "Morning-After Brunch" in 2008 by Citysearch.

Three of the items that are permanently offered at brunch are a rare beef tenderloin, house cured salmon and the made-to-order omelets and crepes. There are many people who prefer their beef tenderloin very rare. They will be very happy, indeed. While that is not my preference, house cured salmon definitely is. The texture of the salmon could not be more delicate nor its flavor more satisfying. It is not quite sashimi and it is not quite cooked either. I was almost embarrassed by how much I piled on my plate after my first serving when I was testing it out. But I got over it as I was overcome with sheer delight.

Although it is not uncommon to find omelets made-to-order at restaurants that serve brunch, it is somewhat special to be able to have freshly prepared crepes filled with your choice of blueberries, strawberries and bananas. I am not certain if this was all that was available as I simply asked for "everything". Although the chef (generally, one of the owners) will gladly have your crepe taken to your table so that you do not have to wait, the process is mesmerizing. The crepe is placed in the hot skillet and folded into quarters as it begins to brown; the berries are thrown in, doused with banana or berry liquor and ignited to achieve that irresistible caramelized flavor that results from the flambé. I never tire of watching the drama of the flames, although I



shamefully admit that I ordered two servings at the same time to avoid having to wait in line twice. I hope the owners don't read this – they may change the rules to my detriment.

I noticed that the buffet options may change during the course of brunch. Had I known that, I would have tamed my gluttony and stayed longer. For instance, the large sautéed sea scallops that I generously served myself were later replaced with plump steamed mussels in that wonderful sauce that the French have mastered. I did try a mussel even though I was full to the point of discomfort. I wish I had waited. Then, I noticed the jumbo shrimp...but I had to draw the line somewhere. I paid the bill quickly and left before I would see something else I would not be able to enjoy! At \$21, Bistro Calais's brunch provides a variety of exceptionally delicious foods and does so at an exceptional value.

While this would normally be the end of my food review, before I left, one of the owners, Phil, told me that I HAD to come try his gumbo. It was the BEST, he said, or so he was told by customers who ordered it. You could tell he was kind of proud of his gumbo. I told him that I would be back after a few weeks once I recovered from brunch. I did not tell him that I do not care for gumbo. I find the flavor of the rue unappetizing, in general, often salty and a little thick for my taste. Nonetheless, I kept my word and returned on a Wednesday night.

For the moment, you're in France. You're on vacation. You're not ready to go home.

This second trip to Bistro Calais was like going to an entirely different restaurant. Brunch was bright and cheery; dinner was darker, of course, and decidedly cozy and comfortable. I sat in the front room this time. Unbeknownst to me, on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday nights a keyboardist and singer provide live cabaret performances. Throughout dinner, guests are entertained with show tunes, country western and other music worthy of the "cabaret" moniker. Aside from her wonderful delivery, the singer established a refreshing and friendly rapport with the audience, many of whom apparently were "regulars" and some of whom spontaneously grabbed their dates and danced in spaces between tables. The cabaret began at 7:00pm and within an hour most of the tables were occupied.

Although I had come to review the gumbo, I started with an order of Lump Crab Cakes (\$22) which interestingly is listed as an entrée on the menu. This item consisted of two crab cakes approximately 2 inches in diameter and an inch thick, resting in a shallow pool of homemade remoulade. It seemed to me that the only breading was a fine dusting of flour on the outside of each cake; the inside appeared to be entirely lump crab meat. The process by which they were pan fried left very little oil residue and, consequently, they had a lightness to them. I am a purist; hence, I enjoyed the flavor of the crab as prepared and only sparingly dipped into the remoulade. They did not disappoint!

The gumbo may be ordered in two sizes, small and large (\$10/\$12). For two bucks, I took a chance that I would like Phil's recipe. It was a calculated risk but it paid off. If you like your gumbo with a thick rue and brimming with all kinds of seafood, this may not be for you. But for me, it was perfect. The rue was light and there was no fishy flavor as the only seafood in the gumbo was jumbo shrimp and crawfish. Completing the flavor profile was okra, tomato, green and red bell peppers, celery, rice (not too much), andouille sausage and what I am sure is the chef's "secret recipe" of spices. After three decades living in Houston, I can declare that I love gumbo...or at least the gumbo served at Bistro Calais.

The owners of Bistro Calais are hands on; they wait on tables, prepare crepes as they interact with their guests, and are constantly surveying the flow of service throughout the restaurant. Together with the other characteristics described above, you will find your dining experience to be incredibly comfortable and satisfying. You won't feel like leaving after you have finished eating. For the moment, you're in France. You're on vacation. You're not ready to go home.

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Photos by Chad Landry