

Globe British Columbia

BC EDITOR: PATRICK BRETHOUR



The mushrooms on toast at the Tableau Bar & Bistro in Vancouver are a luscious mix of wild and cultivated mushrooms on buttery brioche. RAFAL GERSZAK FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

THE DISH

A charming Tableau of French comfort food

Tableau Bar & Bistro's rich food shows off the skills of chef Marc-André Choquette

ALEXANDRA GILL

Tableau Bar & Bistro

1181 Melville St.
604-639-8692
www.tableaubarbistro.com
\$170 for dinner for two with wine, tax and tip
Cuisine: French bistro

At Tableau Bar & Bistro, the spotlight is finally shining on executive chef Marc-André Choquette and his slinky French cuisine. To set the stage, the Loden Hotel's newly remodelled dining room even boasts a catwalk of sorts, leading to the open kitchen.

If only his presence had been felt this clearly 2½ years ago, when Voya Restaurant made its debut in the Coal Harbour boutique hotel. For eight years prior, Mr. Choquette had been chef de cuisine at Lumière Restaurant and the launch of his first restaurant was one of the most highly anticipated openings of 2008.

Alas, Mr. Choquette's voice got lost in the Voya of confusion: a bar that eclipsed the restaurant; a globe-trotting menu with little rhyme or reason; outrageously high prices; casual service in a glamorous room; and the demands of a multipurpose hotel. The restaurant never made much of an impact. And late last year, the beautiful art-deco dining room was hacked in half to make way for private meeting rooms.

But that was then, this is Tab-

leau. And those private meeting rooms have worked to the interior design's sensational advantage. Rather than just being awkward blocks on either side of the recessed kitchen, they now look like parted stage curtains covered in rich wood panelling. The dark "runway" is a service corridor, which doubles as a passage to the washroom. And the theatrically lit kitchen at the back, with Mr. Choquette working away feverishly under shiny silver heat lamps that dangle above the pass, is a living peek-hole picture – a true tableau.

There are several playful meanings embedded in the name. This is an everyday, table d'eau type of restaurant, not the kind that serves fancy sparkling water. (Though it does offer house-carbonated, Vivreau-filtered, eco-friendly water for a few dollars a bottle.)

The water theme ripples through the décor, which is highlighted by two large, limited-edition prints of a nymph-like Marilyn Monroe bathing in a pool on the set of *Something's Got to Give*.

Although the ceilings are very high, the restaurant is made up of many cozy nooks with excellent acoustics. People who hate noisy restaurants will love this place. At dinner one night, my friend and I sat in a front window table surrounded by glass and several boisterous parties, yet never once strained to hear each other. My only complaint is

that the leather banquette tables on the raised level are squeezed uncomfortably close – or at least it feels that way when you're seated next to the owner during lunch and trying to remain anonymous.

You'll go for the ambience and stay for the cocktails (which are excellent). But you're bound to return, again and again, for the food. Even though the menu is a fairly ordinary bistro selection, the tender 8-oz centre cut sirloin steak frites, the glossy chicken Riesling sauce, the densely fishy seafood soup and other classic dishes have all been caressed by Mr. Choquette's silken touch.

This is rich, charming, sophisticated French comfort food that tastes a lot like the small plates he created for Lumière Tasting Bar – especially the mushrooms on toast. Wow. This is a luscious mix of wild and cultivated mushrooms sautéed in a marsala cream sauce, ladled in a fragrantly herbed mudslide over a thick, buttery slice of toasted brioche.

Veal shank is one of the best renditions in the city. The fork-tender meat is braised for up to eight hours. It sits on a soft pillow of polenta that's been creamed with heaps of grated padano, and is pooled around the edges by a darkly deep wine, port and Madeira demi-glace. (A tiny spoon to dig out the bone marrow would have been nice.)

Even the salads are great, and that's not a common feat. The

B.C. WINE



Jackson-Triggs Proprietors' Grand Reserve White Meritage 2008

BC VQA Okanagan Valley, \$20

A memorable Meritage with grapes from the Whitetail vineyards in Oliver. It's sophisticated and complex: a combination of ripe fruit, rich fullness and food-friendly balance. It's a good match for oysters, vegetarian pastas, soft ripe cheeses and Southeast Asian-inspired dishes.

Kasey Wilson is food editor of Wine Access magazine and editor of Best Places Vancouver.

endive salad, with its caramelized pear, fresh hazelnuts (they're so often rancid), interesting mix of watercress and greens, well-balanced cream dressing and big bursts of Roquefort – is a stand-out.

Only a couple of dishes failed to shine as bright as the rest. The halibut, although perfectly cooked with a light golden crisp, was missing a beat in its bland side dish of white beans, kale and cherry tomatoes. And one night, the choux pastry in the éclair was stale. The whole dish was a bit of a disaster, plated as it was, with overly sweet whipped cream flecked with dangerously sharp-edged pistachios. (It was taken off our bill.)

I wanted to try another dessert at lunch, but was turned off by the owner – of all people. The tables are tight, as I mentioned. So I couldn't help but overhear Lilliana Di Franco and her guest complain nervously. They consulted the kitchen. They tried to explain that this is the way the dish is meant to taste.

"That was just me being me," Ms. Di Franco said later. Still, it was quite a dramatic production. And I don't think this is the type of picture that Tableau is meant to present. Behind the scenes, sure. But not in the middle of an otherwise brilliant performance.