

Tableau serves comfort food with a side of Paris

What a luxury it is to linger over dinner for three hours, sipping wine and munching on plump olives and crusty French bread along the way. So it was for a birthday celebration at the new Tableau Bar Bistro in the Loden Hotel, a space that has the same kind of unpretentious style and easy comfort you'd find in a City of Light brasserie.

Part of the fun of dining in Paris is people-watching—ever noticed how sidewalk-café seats there are arranged in theatre-like rows facing the street, not bunched around tables?—and our evening at Tableau made for intrigue. Was that an escort with the homely guy next to us, way overdressed in her black-and-red strapless minidress and indulging solo in the Tableau Plateau (\$45), a giant plate of shellfish and seafood designed for sharing? The couple in the corner were cozy, sharing a bottle of wine and a cheese and charcuterie plate (\$18), while the table of six late-20s male professionals—maybe articling students?—drank draught beer along with their moules frites (\$18), looking a little uncomfortable but maybe just lost because there was no hockey game on. If there had been, they wouldn't have missed any action with the bar's three flatscreen TVs, one of them funkily set in a golden frame that would suit art from the Louvre.

It's possible we weren't in the least bit rushed by our attentive server because the place had only opened the night before. We started with cocktails, three of us picking The Drawing Board, a cocktail that changes and evolves weekly. We liked that night's offering, the Aviation (\$11),

which had macerated rhubarb and strawberry spiked with gin and a little agave syrup and soda, complete with an alcohol-soaked black cherry to suck on afterward.

Our server told us about the purified water Tableau carries: Vivreau is filtered on-site and served in designer bottles that get used over and over again, thereby reducing the bistro's carbon footprint. No shipping, no packaging, no overloaded blue boxes. It's smart and costs \$3 per person. Still, I'm happy with tap water.

We never did hear about the soup of the day or any specials, but no matter. Even though the menu is extremely lean on selections for vegetarians, with just one main (broccoli and brown rice casserole with mushrooms and a Cheddar gratin, \$16), there was lots of flexetarians and carnivores to choose from.

Executive chef Marc-André Choquette headed the hotel's former restaurant, Voya, and before that worked for years under the tutelage of Rob Feenie at Lumière. Tableau is a refreshing departure with his uncomplicated but well-executed offerings.

The mushrooms on toast (\$10) were a lovely start. That toast is actually housemade brioche, rich, soft, and heavenly. The mushrooms were perfectly cooked, a little creamy, and come with a smattering of flat-leaf parsley: straightforward and satisfying. The birthday boy enjoyed a selection of oysters, including three from Vancouver Island's Chef Creek (\$3 each).

The moules frites, unfortunately, bombed. Served in a traditional pot, the portion looked ridiculously small, and a heavy dose of turmeric

Best Eats Gail Johnson



There's good people-watching at chef Marc-André Choquette's Tableau Bar Bistro in the Loden Hotel, and the uncomplicated menu, including Ocean Wise halibut, is a winner. Tracey Kusiewicz photo.

obliterated the character of the fleshy shellfish. On our way out we mentioned to our server that everything was great but the mussels, and she said we were the third group to say so. The four mains, including three seafood choices—all Ocean Wise—scored thumbs up. The salmon-coloured steelhead trout (\$18) was especially pleasing, sitting snugly on a mound of almond quinoa. Its subtle flavour is gently enhanced by a lemon and brown butter sauce. Halibut lovers have two versions to pick from: a filet with parsley sauce atop a comforting white-bean ragout (\$24) or warm in a hearty Cobb salad complete with blue cheese, avocado, egg, and bacon (\$20). (The latter is served only on Fridays.)

Comfort food is a recurring theme here, with the half roasted chicken (\$20), its skin ever-so-slightly crispy, being tender and flavourful. It came with green beans and broccolini. And the accompanying “champ” potatoes? The traditional Irish side dish, a mashup of new potatoes, cream, butter, and loads of spring onions, was a star unto itself.

For dessert, we wanted the mille feuille, but it had already sold out. Instead we went with the rhubarb cake (\$7), made from Choquette's

mom's recipe, we were told. With vanilla gelato and a smidge of caramel sauce, it was perfect.

I like the fact that the bistro has an innovative selection of nonalcoholic drinks (like the Ceylon Orange Fizz [\$6], made with tea, orange juice, agave nectar, and soda). The Americanos, too, were well-made.

At lunch, Tableau is a lively spot; it was bustling on a recent weekday. There's little variation between the lunch and dinner menus and pricing, making dinner seem like an especially good deal: the most expensive main dish is braised veal shank for \$25. For very good food, that's very reasonable.

A meal for four with cocktails, appetizers, a bottle of Tinhorn Creek Pinot Gris plus another glass or two, and dessert, came to \$250 before tax and tip.

Now if only we could do three-hour dinners more often. ♦

TABLEAU BAR BISTRO 1181 Melville Street, 604-639-8692. Open for lunch Monday to Friday 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.; dinner Monday to Thursday 5 p.m. to 11 p.m. and Saturday and Sunday 5 p.m. to 12 a.m.; and Sunday brunch 10:30 a.m. to 3 p.m.

FOOD OF THE WEEK

> BY CAROLYN ALI

While the name “burnt ends” doesn't sound very appealing, those who have eaten the dish will salivate at the memory. Steveston's Hogshack Cookhouse (160-3900 Bayview Street, Richmond) takes fatty brisket tips, smokes them twice, and smothers them in a freshly made Kansas City-style barbecue sauce. The result is meltingly soft chunks of sticky, smoky beef. The dish is labour intensive, so it's not on the regular menu, but the restaurant's Twitter feed (@hogshackca) broadcasts when it's available. For \$15.95, it comes with two yummy sides, such as baked beans and corn bread.