

citystyle

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Melbourne embraces a bistro boom **MIDDLE PAGES**



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BISTRO BOOM

Glorious chips: Pommes frites are among the everyday fare at Bistro Vue.

Simple, fast and affordable, French bistros are the flavour du jour in Melbourne, writes BOB HART

FRENCH bistros have been an active and influential part of Melbourne's culinary life for almost 50 years. But it has taken that long for many Melburnians to grasp their special qualities, and to fire up Melbourne's new bistro boom.

Words you will hear applied to bistros when you speak to those, generally French, who have grown up with them are "fast", "simple", "comfortable" and, inevitably, "cheap".

Another recurring element is "local" — the place in which you eat when you don't feel like going out to eat. A true bistro, a Frenchman will assure you, is almost an extension of the home.

Take Bistro Thierry, a snazzy establishment that occupies a plum position in Toorak's Hawksburn Village.

Owner Thierry Conevin sounds like an Aussie, but is as French as frogs' legs. He spent his childhood near Nice and came to Australia, with his parents, when he was 12 — living a French lifestyle in a South Australian winery.

"We have been here for seven years, so we are hardly part of the new bistro boom," he says.

"But I believe it is the casual nature of bistros that appeals to Australians. You don't visit with especially high expectations, but you expect consistency.

"Bistro food is French comfort food. We cook for our customers and not for the restaurant critics, which is why we are still in business.

"Curiously, I am not a fan of either onion soup or bouillabaisse, but those are two of our biggest sellers. Along with crême brûlée."

Jean-Paul Prunetti operates one of Melbourne's best-loved French restaurants, France-Soir.

He came to Melbourne in the late 1970s and took a job as a waiter in one of the half-dozen French bistros that began to change the way Melburnians lived their lives — Les Halles in Swan St, Richmond.

"It was one of the first, and more authentic than most. Balzac in East Melbourne had opened before Les Halles, but it was more of a restaurant. Les Halles kicked off the first bistro boom for two reasons: it was open late, and served alcohol. We were there most nights until about 3am."

Les Halles was flouting the laws of the day on both counts, but nobody seemed to mind — least of all the police officers who could, regularly, be found drinking there.

"There were other important places," Jean-Paul says. "Iclarno French Bistro, of course, but also Le Fiacre near Queen Vic Market and the Bullfrog in Carlton, in premises now occupied by another French bistro, Paris Go.

"In Paris, people can't afford to eat in restaurants very often, but they can afford to eat in bistros."

France-Soir, however, is no longer a true bistro.

"I started it in 1986 as a bistro. But then the café culture started to claim the bottom of the



market while a few serious restaurants took the higher ground. There was nobody between those two markets, so that's where I chose to position France-Soir."

Prunetti has his own theory as to why bistros, suddenly and literally, are flavour of the month.

"In Australia, we are short of highly skilled people, and you need quite a few of those to run a top restaurant," he says.

"But for a bistro, the demands are not as high, either for kitchen or front-of-house staff. To cook simply, obviously, is easier than to create complex food. But one major difference is that as a rule of thumb, the price of a meal in a serious restaurant will be three times the price of a meal in a bistro."

A full generation away from France-Soir is Port Melbourne's C'est Bon, a bright and charming new bistro run by Amelie Bonnet with guidance from her father, Queensland chef/restaurantier Michel Bonnet, who has owned and operated something like 18 bistros since he came to Australia, from France, in 1968.

C'est Bon won instant acclaim from even the hard markers around town, partly because Amelie found her way around the skills issue by importing from Burgundy a fine, young chef,

Thomas Routheau — and partly because she is as entrancing as any young woman of French extraction called Amelie should be.

"Bistros should be relaxed and fun to visit, and we try to be both of those things," she says.

Shannon Bennett, the brilliant chef/owner of Melbourne's world-rated and seriously expensive Vue de Monde, now has a foot in each camp, so to speak.

To eat at Vue de Monde — especially if you select wines to match the extraordinary food — is unlikely to leave change from \$250-\$300 a head, more if you try hard.

But lunch at Bistro Vue — the cosy French bistro Bennett has opened within his sleek CBD restaurant complex — need cost you no more than \$32 a head for the dish of the day, a salad, glorious chips and a glass of decent wine.

"Bistros are places in which you can eat every day, and treat as your local," Bennett says.

"Here, a lot of our bistro patrons visit three or four times a week, which is not something you encounter in Vue de Monde."

Many top chefs, especially those who specialise in complex, expensive dishes made from exotic ingredients, eventually open a bistro as a second outlet, just as Bennett has done. Why?

"People probably think I go home and eat caviar on toast and foie gras sandwiches, but nothing could be further from the truth," Bennett says.

"To me, my bistro is the place that cooks the food I like to eat every day, while Vue de Monde is a place in which I create the sort of experience I would like to have in a restaurant, say, once a month."

- **Bistro Thierry**
511 Malvern Rd, Toorak. Ph: 9824 0836
- **France-Soir**
11 Toorak Rd, South Yarra. Ph: 9866 8505
- **C'est Bon**
395 Bay St, Port Melbourne. Ph: 9546 2796
- **Bistro Vue**
430 Little Collins St, city. Ph: 9691 3838
- **Aux Batifolles**
258 Swan St, Richmond. Ph: 9428 9544
400 Nicholson St, Fitzroy, North. Ph: 9481 5015
- **Frency's Bistro**
52 O'Sullivan Rd, Glen Waverley. Ph: 9887 9399
- **Koots**
479 Glenferrie Rd, Kooyong. Ph: 9822 3805
- **Le Petit Bourgeois**
330 Waverley Rd, Malvern East. Ph: 9571 0909



Pretty and cosy: Bistro Vue.