



Stephen Downes

DINING OUT > And now, a French restaurant that's better than good

C'EST BON

396 Bay St, Port Melbourne
Ph: 9646 2296

Checklist

Chef: Michel Bonnet, Thomas Routhieau

Open: Noon-2pm Tues-Fri;
6-10pm Tues-Sat

Parking: In street

Cards: AE, BC, DC, MC, Visa

Seats: 55

Liquor status: Licensed

Cost: About \$55 for three courses;
three-course menu \$40

AS I have eaten a lot in France, I approach new Gallic bistros with trepidation. It's especially the case when the place I'm about to review is called — fairly twee, I reckon — C'est Bon.

Well, put down your glasses. Or rather, raise them to some slightly modernised but deft and refined traditional Gallic cooking. C'est Bon is not only "good" — as its name indicates — but delightful.

Moreover, the value for money of its fixed-price menu is exceptional. The 12 dishes from which you choose an entree, main and dessert for \$40 are supplemented by many more on the full list.

There are snails and chicken liver mousse, duck in an orange and Grand Marnier sauce, and coq au vin. But there are also less conventional items such as pumpkin gnocchi with mushrooms, calf's liver with a raspberry-vinegar sauce, and fried lamb's kidneys with a beaujolais juice.

First-night nerves? Not a bit of it. I dined at C'est Bon on its debut day and everything about it was professional. Though amiable, the service provided by two young waitresses was expert and respectful.

The place itself is modest but gets important aspects of the restaurant business right. The napkins are white, heavy, fabric and starched. The wine glasses are tall-stemmed and fine-rimmed, cutlery heavy, alloy and also classically shaped.

Tables, mostly well-separated, are covered with cloths then white paper, and you sit on upholstered benches or timber bistro chairs.

The floor is of stripped hardwood, and taupe-coloured walls are hung with landscape-format mirrors in gilt frames and a wide canvas of a French bistro's frontage. Decor clichés — pastis posters and gingham cloths — are absent.

A confit duck salad (\$13.90, but also on the fixed-price list) was arguably the most modest of dishes. It was nonetheless artlessly executed. Cos lettuce leaves, some



Pictures: DARRYL GREGORY

Food

Seafood quenelle

Drink

Redbank pinot gris, \$33

The feel

French bistro-brasserie

whole, some shredded, mixed with fine duck bits and small tomato cubes. A sliced and splayed half of avocado and an excellent dressing with restrained hints of mango and ginger finished the picture.

A fist-sized, single seafood quenelle (from the fixed-price list) was a light and lovely dumpling. Tasty, too, and blanketed with a terrific fawn "lobster cognac" sauce. It sat on a raft of very thin potato discs.

French restaurants never pay much attention to plating, and our mains followed the great plonk tradition. But an eye fillet (\$29.90) was as good as beef gets — you could just about cut it with your tongue. Its cognac-peppercorn sauce was another deft

and refined juice of great flavour. Moreover, it was without the usual excess of cream. A contemporary sauce, in other words. Good herby mash supported it, and a life buoy of caramelised apple topped it.

A lamb shank (below, from the fixed-price list) sat in another refined and tasty cooking juice, footies of alternating carrot and zucchini ringing it.

Desserts stick to the great tradition. Creme caramel, chocolate mousse, lemon tart and creme brulee all feature. But an extra of crepes suzette (\$10.90) amounted to two crisp, thin and folded pancakes that were a little overdone in a classic suzette sauce of characteristic flavour.

IN SUMMARY

If you're seeking authentic and refined French flavours and textures C'est Bon will delight you. Its dishes, I should add, are scarcely photogenic, but the service here is fine and the place itself lightly stylish. The wine list is limited but represents common grape varieties, most bottles priced in the 30s and 40s of dollars. Four table whites and three reds are available by glass.



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