

C'est Bon

John Lethlean, Reviewer
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A small restaurant run with rigour and enthusiasm.

C'est Bon: a small restaurant run with rigour and enthusiasm.

Photo: *Rebecca Hallas*

Address

396 Bay St, Port Melbourne

Phone

(03) 9646 2296

Style

Restaurants

Cuisine

French

Hours

Tues-Fri 12pm-2pm; Tues-Sat 6pm-9.30pm

Details

Licensed, BYO

Payment

Visa, EFTPOS, AMEX, Mastercard, Diners Club

Price Guide

Typical small dish \$14, typical main \$29. Corkage: \$10 per bottle

Score: 13/20

THERE was a time, long ago, when many a restaurant review began something like . . .

"When I lived above a small boulangerie in some scruffy but on-the-rise arrondissement of Paris, I would wake to the smell of fresh baguettes, Gauloises and cafe au lait." Or something like that.

Alas, my French credentials bear less scrutiny.

I could say something like . . .

"When I lived above a small bar and undistinguished cafe on the east coast of Corsica," which I did, and ham up the experience for far more than it was worth. But when I did live above the bar for five months in a small village on the Gulf of Ajaccio, it was with a bunch of other young Britons, Aussies and South Africans, and we were all working at a watersports holiday set-up.

We lived on the smell of an oily rag, got paid peanuts and took just about every meal in the hotel because food and lodging was part of the deal, in exchange for pretending to teach British holiday-makers to sail, windsurf and water-ski.

I confess to being far, far better at that part of the job, which might loosely have been termed "guest liaison", than the sailing instruction.

Our meals were prepared by the lovely British lassies in the kitchen. It was glamorous stodge produced on a tiny budget. On the odd occasion we actually made it outside for a meal, it was an eye-opening experience. I recall the horror on a colleague's face when she discovered steak tartare was not in fact a steak with tartare sauce (as if you'd have a steak with tartare sauce).

And it was probably horse meat - or donkey (there are a lot of donkeys in Corsica) - anyway.

The enduring memory of eating in Corsica, however, is not pate de merle (blackbird pate) or Fleur de Maquis (a quite famous sheep's milk cheese), but kilometres of baguette, kilograms of butter and thousands of eggs. Semi-hard-boiled eggs were something the British lassies didn't turn into fancy gruel.

I consider myself a reasonable judge of baguette.

When the bread comes to the table at C'est Bon, a pleasant and strangely quaint little French restaurant in Port Melbourne that avoids the cutting edge like the guillotine, it is proper French baguette. With rapier-like detective skills, I assume a liaison beneficial with Noisette, the French baker down the road.

In my best Peter Sellers accent, I ask: "Is your bread from Noisette?"

"Oui," says the non-nonsense, super-efficient waiter (who is the owner, too). "They make the bread and par-bake it, we finish it off here."

Which explains why it is warm, has a thin, pliable yet crisp golden and blistered shell and the lightest, fluffiest interior that simply screams "slather me in butter or dunk me in a sauce. Now."

Good baguette, as you'd hope for in a place that wears the tricoloreur so conspicuously.

C'est Bon is a simple place that smells of an extractor fan losing the battle as we arrive for lunch. The walls are painted brick, the floors polished new hardwood, the colour scheme faintly Provencal, with plenty of terracotta and ochre. Tables are set just-so with paper over linen, proper linen napery and glassware, nice bistro chairs and just enough Francophilia on the walls to be charming without being clichéd.

It is jolly and jolie. While the menu features many dishes you'd find at, say, France Soir (a traditional collection) done as well if not better, it does not have that edgy Parisian city look to it.

But the food, service, amenities and prices make the place undeniably attractive to diners who enjoy bistro classics without having to intellectualise over their dinner or get lost looking for the loo.

A pleasant, individual "quiche de cigale de mer et camembert" is what it promises to be, more or less: a warm light, thin-crust pastry quiche topped with camembert and then bug meat (\$14.90). It's not nearly as horrible as it sounds. It's served with a salad of mixed greens with a Tasmanian honey dressing.

The owner's family has a restaurant in Cairns and several ingredients (such as mango) used by the kitchen reinforce the tropical connection.

"Quenelle de fruits de mer" is a kind of free-form, rough-hewn seafood souffle floating in a powerful and appealing brick-brown lobster-and-Cognac sauce peppered with diced and seeded tomato. It sits on wafer-thin slices of "confit" potato. That's very pleasant, too. Particularly with that baguette to finish the job.

We sip Perrier and a garden-variety petit chablis and pretend we're en France. Thank God they don't play Piaf.

The "cote de boeuf" (\$32.90) is an excellent steak, what would commonly be called a rib eye but should apparently be referred to as a "rib cutlet." It's a fine piece of meat on the bone - good texture and flavour - cooked in a pan but nevertheless presenting with a decent crust and a medium-rare interior as ordered. It comes with frites and a little salad.

Saucing options include poivre (pepper), roquefort or beurre maitre d'hotel: lemon, parsley and garlic butter. The latter suited me, although I tried the poivre and found it sophisticated. The two together worked well too, which probably shows me to be a little unsophisticated. I bet they sell a lot at lunch.

A "bouillabaisse" works pretty well, although the heady, olfactory hit of saffron and anise is missing: what you get is a generous plate of three different fish (salmon, snapper and one other white-fleshed fillet), scallops, a bit of my seafood quenelle, fennel and potato in a dark, reduced and reasonably thick/intense soup (\$32.90), the potato starch no doubt coming to play there. Croutons with rouille sit on top.

I couldn't fault the generosity but had hoped for more vibrant flavours and smells.

More baguette.

Desserts, unsurprisingly, look a little old-fashioned.

A superb whole pear poached in cassis comes - unnecessarily - in a pastry shell; a sweet/tart caramel is drizzled everywhere, including over the fine vanilla ice-cream/piped cream sidekick with a sprig of mint garnishing (\$12.90).

The "vacherin glace" (\$14.90) combines meringue, vanilla ice-cream, Grand Marnier sponge, strawberry sorbet and piped cream into a tower challenging La Tour d'Eiffel for altitude.

The crowning glory, however, is a golden cylinder of spun sugar surrounding the vacherin like a go-go dancer's cage. I have a deep suspicion of sugar work for the sake of sugar work, but it looked very impressive and added a crunchy - and beneficial - textural dimension to the dessert. C'est bon indeed.

Wine prices are good and the owner clearly cares a great deal for the task at hand. The place deserves custom and loyalty.

Score: 1-9: Unacceptable. **10-11:** Just OK, some shortcomings. **12:** Fair. **13:** Getting there. **14:** Recommended. **15:** Good. **16:** Really good. **17:** Truly excellent. **18:** Outstanding. **19-20:** Approaching perfection, Victoria's best.