

Best Little Bistro in Town Is Like a Time Capsule: Paris Dining

By A. Craig Copetas

Dec. 5 (Bloomberg) – The best little bistro in Paris is down by the river, tucked beneath the northern trestle of the Garigliano Bridge, the final frontier of the 16th arrondissement and a passageway into the lost world of French cooking.

It's called Mathusalem, a restaurant with a deeply satisfying 22 euro (\$29) fixed-price "cuisine bourgeoise" menu and a stable of wines the waiters refuse to serve up until a few glasses are passed around for tasting purposes.

The tables are warm, the bar is zinc and there's nothing noxious about the occasional aroma of burning black Gauloises tobacco wrapped in maize paper mixing with the garlicky clouds wafting in from the kitchen of chef Regis Weideneder.

Mathusalem is France, and its menu is a robust travelogue into the country's tastes and attitudes toward traditional foods served up in ample portions at a bewildering down-home cost. Located along the Port d'Auteuil bank of the Seine, far from central Paris restaurant prices, Mathusalem has been serving up pretty much the same food since 1987. Word of Mathusalem's succulent Charolais entrecote with a dollop of tarragon butter and its porc fermier Label Rouge d'Auvergne with adolescent artichokes for years has been quietly passed around by food lovers.

And the accounts are all deliciously true, particularly the croustillants de camembert served with a jam of baby cherries and tied into flour packets that resemble sachets of lavender from Provence, followed by Charolais steak tartare that arrives only after a condiment consultation with the chef.

Keeping It Local

Mathusalem is a neighborhood restaurant that intends to stay that way. It nestles in the ground floor of a 19th-century apartment house decorated with art deco floor tiles.

The gracious service and energetic atmosphere allow patrons to experience what Ernest Hemingway portrayed when he told a friend, "If you are lucky enough to have lived in Paris as a young man, then wherever you go for the rest of your life, it stays with you, for Paris is a moveable feast."

James Joyce, Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein and Scott and Zelda would have been at ease feasting on any of the six starters, followed by one of five meat or two fish dishes, including a plate heaped with delicately grilled jumbo Breton sardines.

For French cuisine purists willing to watch conservatives cringe, the tete de veau tiee, a warm calf's head in gribiche sauce, is bound to delight. An equally tasty compromise is the jarret de porc aux lentilles, a meaty knee of pork that falls off the bone into a hillock of lentils at the touch of a fork.

Thirsty before dinner? The wine bottles are scattered around the bar, alongside two taps. The one on the right pumps beer, the one on the left siphons artisanal lemonade and the Bordeaux vintages available are a testament to the notion less is more.

Attractive Wines

The most expensive of the 18 reds and 12 whites is a 35 euro 2004 Chateau Tour de Castre, a splendid example of a young Graves. For a refreshing taste of the surprises being concocted by Burgundy's new crop of Chablis makers, the 37 euro 2005 Chateau de Viviers Lupe-Chalet provides ample evidence that this white is no longer just the favorite tippie of tipsy French grandmothers.

Mathusalem's pumpkin soup is sharp and hearty, spoon spills absorbed by thick paper napkins laid out over red checkerboard linen tablecloths. And don't be put off by the dogs that are often found snoozing under the tables. They've already been fed and, unlike the folks at our table, didn't beg for a taste of the signature foie gras flanked by apple sauce with herbal sea salt.

Those on diets beware. The bowl of communal home-made mashed potatoes in the center of each table brings new meaning to the phrase melt-in-your-mouth and has a nasty habit of becoming an unofficial member of the dessert menu. So just say ``non" to a third helping and, when in season, focus on the mirabelles fraiches roties au miel, freshly picked plums roasted in honey.

Just Say `Oui'

Always say ``oui" to the creme brulee, particularly as Mathusalem's take on this often butchered French staple is tenderly laced with warm pistachio-nut flecks. Don't be shy about asking for a second scoop of ice cream.

All of it comes from the renowned Ile St. Louis ice-cream maker Berthillon, whose grandson just happens to be one of the restaurant's co-owners and custodian of the culinary heritage on offer in this splendid gastronomic time capsule.

Mathusalem, 5 bis Boulevard Exelmans, 75016 Paris. Tel. +33- 1-42-88-10-73 or go to <http://www.mathusalem.fr/> .

The Bloomberg Questions

How much? The fixed-price menu is 22 euros, excluding wine.

Sound levels? Cheerful and geared for amicable conversation with diners at other tables.

Private rooms? No.

Date places? An evening of intrigue can be guaranteed to follow dessert.

Will I go back? Yes, particularly for business meals or with family and friends from abroad.

(A. Craig Copetas is a writer for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are his own.)

To contact the reporter on this story: A. Craig Copetas in Paris at ccopetas@bloomberg.net .

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