

Epicurean Mavericks

With fresh fare and bold culinary choices, adventurous chefs and wine-makers are putting the Los Angeles restaurant scene on the foodie map.

French Felicity

Bastide's unexpected creations offer sublime savoring for open-minded epicureans.

When it opened a couple years ago, Bastide was surely the most eagerly anticipated restaurant in recent Los Angeles history. Opening chef Alain Giraud had earned a devoted local following for his cooking, first at Citrus, where he took over from Michel Richard, and later as Executive Chef at Lavande, the Provençal spot at Loews Santa Monica. After months of test dinners and other behind-the-scenes machinations, Bastide (the word for a country home in Provence) finally opened its doors, serving — naturally — Provençal cuisine.

The stylish and very expensive place soon earned rave reviews all over town — and beyond. One would have expected that owner Joe Pytko, a wine collector and commercial director, might have been pleased. But he stunned the local food community when he recently pushed Giraud out the door and brought in Ludovic Lefebvre as Chef de Cuisine. Lefebvre, who had cooked to great acclaim at L'Orangerie, had been working on opening a new restaurant at the W Hotel in Westwood, but jumped at the chance to come to Bastide.

French designer Andree Putnam created a lovely look for the small space, which was previously home to Manhattan Wonton Company and was once a private home. There's a large front patio planted with olive trees, and three small rooms, including my favorite, the "garden" room, an al fresco setting with pavers on the ground and lush greenery completely covering one wall. (A retractable awning covers the space on cold or wet nights.)

What was once a safe haven of traditional Provençal cooking is now fiercely forward-looking. Lefebvre clearly does not aim to simply reproduce the classics, and he makes it clear very quickly. The bread basket features not the usual suspects, but rather some unexpected flavors, including apple bacon and blue cheese, both fresh and delicious.

And the amuse bouche from the kitchen is not a tasty bit of ahi or foie gras, but instead a deconstructed cocktail, with a globe of celery mousse, another of spicy tomato sorbet and bits of vodka gelee all presented in a large silver spoon. Take it all into your mouth at once: instant Bloody Mary!

Sashimi of toro puts a strip of the fresh, silky raw fish next to a dollop of sushi rice ice cream, and kicks up the flavor with the addition of ginger oil and lime essence, along with assorted Japanese spices,

which add some crunchy contrast.

Lefebvre reaches back to his bag of tricks at L'Orangerie for one dish: Nantucket Bay scallops served with cinnamon butter and fried vermicelli with clams. I remember this combination from another great meal, just around the corner on La Cienega, though Lefebvre may have used some other seafood at the time. Regardless, it's delicious, if unexpectedly sweet, with flavors more commonly associated with dessert than dinner.

Lefebvre continues his unorthodox use of seasonings in Maine Lobster with Vadouvan (an exotic blend spices typically including cumin, fenugreek, garlic, turmeric and caraway), in which a tender lobster tail floats in lemongrass and tomato broth laced with kimchi, the potent Korean favorite. Both the liquid and the lobster explode with flavor, and

By Chris Rubin

the sommelier finds a fantastic match with a grenache-mourvedre blend from the Rhone that seems to cool the heat of the dish while almost matching its intensity.

All chefs must tire of serving the same thing over and over. How much can you do to foie gras? While it's common to pair this ingredient with sweetness, either from fruits or a dessert wine, Lefebvre takes it to an extreme — and one that's completely successful. His rendition is "hot foie gras pina-colada." He starts with a piece of duck liver cooked to rosy perfection, and surrounds it with rum aspic, pineapple foam, coconut sorbet, sherry wine and even a splash of maple syrup.

And chicken. What can even the best chef do with this blandest of foods? Try Poularde "Pepsi," in which Lefebvre marinates a free-range young hen overnight in the "other" cola and then slow roasts it. On the plate, the incredibly tender and juicy chicken shares space with caramelized onions and medjool dates (hand-carried by one of the restaurant's staff from a recent trip to Algeria), along with popcorn, corn and turnips. There's a side plate holding a glass with another deconstructed drink — this time, it's Jack & Coke, with onion compote, a dark cube of cola gelee, and Jack Daniels foam. This one may be an acquired taste.

Perhaps the only simple item here is cheese: the waiter wheels up a cart of a

dozen fromages, covering goat, sheep and cow's milk varieties. Choices include Roquefort, Pont L'Eveque and a decadent Epoisse, and they're dished up with prunes, apricots and toasted walnuts as well as bread studded with hazelnuts, walnuts and raisins. The sommelier pours a Sancerre, which pairs well, particularly with the creamy cheese.

Dessert? What's the rush? Start with the pre-dessert, a bit of key lime ice cream over blood orange granita. Like everything else here, it's bursting with flavor, and an exciting mix of creamy and icy textures for added contrast. The dessert menu is a work in progress as a new chef has just joined the staff with those duties. Quince tart with buttermilk panna cotta arrives on a plate dusted with crushed black pepper, indicating the new chef may well be taking his cues from Lefebvre, going for unexpected combinations of flavors. So far, so good.

Regardless of the chef, Bastide is not just another French restaurant. The wine list is 100 percent French, with no outside bottles allowed, and prices run very high: one entree breaks the \$50 mark, two are \$49, and the chef's tasting menu will set you back \$135. And you can spend up to \$65,000 on a bottle of wine (for an Imperial of 1947 Cheval Blanc).

While the wine list peaks in the high five figures, it also offers bottles as low as \$30, and new sommelier Gregory Castells, recently arrived from Le Bec-Fin in Philadelphia, happily guides customers through its many pages, even as he is in the process of revamping its contents. The list features more than a dozen whites and almost an equal number of reds by the glass, and they've been chosen for their compatibility with Lefebvre's food.

While the technique in the kitchen may be classical, the food is assertively contemporary, with unexpected flavors at every turn. Forget almost everything you think you know about food and wine pairing, and put your faith in Castells' knowledge of both the menu and the wine list. Otherwise, you may end up like one cranky local critic, who practically sobbed that a spicy dish overwhelmed her precious white Burgundy. Castells will pull from obscure regions — Juraçon Sec, anyone? — looking for "winemakers on the edge" and wines with good acidity to match the foods. And he'll do a great job.

Sure, dinner at Bastide is expensive — a couple could easily spend \$500 here — but the valet parking is free!

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