

French Tickler

We'll happily spend all of our euros on rich food at Café Provence.

by [Charles Ferruzza](#)

Filet de saumon en robe des champs sounds better than "salmon in a potato robe."

Café Provence

3936 West 69th Terrace, Prairie Village.

913-384-5998. Hours: 11 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Monday-Saturday; 5-10 p.m. Monday-Saturday. Closed Sunday.

- 3936 W. 69th Terr. [PRAIRIE VILLAGE/MISSION HILLS](#)
- ☎ 913-384-5998
- www.cafeprovence.net
- ★★★★★

It's a good sign that Patrick Quillec likes **Café Provence** so much that he'd eat there often, he says, "even if I didn't own it." That sounds like self-promotional *merde*, but it's a boast I can agree with. Café Provence has always been my favorite of Quillec's restaurants — which once included the original Hannah Bistro on 39th Street, a short-lived Hannah Bistro in Lee's Summit and Café Paris (which became the *third* Hannah Bistro) in Overland Park. As it turns out, Café Provence is the only survivor of Quillec's ambitious Gallic invasion of the local restaurant scene.

He always seems to have some new idea up his toque. At the moment, Quillec is preparing to open a new venue, called Cassis, in the old La Dolce Vita space in Leawood's Town Center Plaza. Unlike Café Provence, he says, Cassis will be a modern French-American bistro. Meanwhile, Café Provence remains a traditional *boîte* serving cuisine from Southern France, where garlic, tomatoes and olive oil are the favored ingredients.

While waiting for Cassis to open, I decided to take a fresh look at Café Provence, last reviewed here more than four years ago. It's one of the most authentic French cafés in town but also one of the most overlooked.

Diners, Quillec says, "forget about Café Provence for some reason." Could it be the location? The 55-seat restaurant occupies a storefront in the contentedly bourgeois Prairie Village Shopping Center, which has never been known as a destination point for gourmands. (Its veteran restaurant is a Waid's.) That remains true despite Café Provence and the addition of Frederic Phillipe's excellent bakery and lunch spot, Boulangerie Phillipe.

Another reason that people may have occasional amnesia about the place is its expense; the prices aren't in euros but might as well be. Dinners range from \$20 for a chicken breast sautéed with shrimp in fresh thyme sauce to \$30 for steak au poivre. I'm embarrassed to admit that one day I blew \$75 on a lunch — *pour deux!* — without even drinking any wine.

But it was a beautiful, memorable lunch, so I can't complain. The service was exquisite (our young server looked like the figure in Manet's "Woman Pouring Water"), and the food was, too. For the past two years, Quillec's older brother, Daniel, has overseen the tiny kitchen here; Daniel's wife, Danielle, is the manager and waits tables. The menu is a collaboration of both chefs. "We plan it together," Patrick Quillec says.

I was, as usual, late for lunch, and my friend Carol Ann sat at a corner table. The wait had given her a chance to take in the surrounding details. "It's a very French room," she noted, "from the lace curtains to the heavy linens and the fresh flowers on every table. If you didn't know you were in Prairie Village, you might think you were in —

"Chartres," I said. But only because I once had lunch at a tiny café in the little French city that's home to the famous cathedral. Like Café Provence, that petite dining room had buttercup walls, toile upholstery and dark woodwork — and it served the best *tarte tatin* I've ever tasted. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

I insisted that Carol Ann start with the signature salad, a jumble of crispy, pale curls of endive, bits of tart Roquefort, crunchy walnuts and slivers of sweet apple to balance out the endive's slight bitterness. That day was a shade warm for *soupe a l'oignon*, but I had tasted so many second-rate versions of "French" onion soup over the winter (including one trashy local restaurant's version with melted mozzarella cheese) that I was overdue for something good. Café Provence serves the real thing, a robustly beefy broth with thick ribbons of soft onion and bits of bacon ladled into a fat little crock, topped with *croutes* and blanketed with bubbly browned gruyere. It's absolutely luscious.

I've encountered plenty of other faux French dishes over the years. In the 1970s, I worked for a chain *creperie* that served variations of famous French crepe recipes, including a creamy concoction called "Chicken Divan" that seemed terribly sophisticated to me. But Daniel Quillec's *crepe de poulet* is a culinary epiphany: a truly divine chicken, cloaked in a velvety mushroom-curry cream sauce and folded inside a tissue-thin crepe. For her part, Carol Ann went wild over a steaming gruyere tart rich with blue crab, chopped spinach and garlic.

Dessert would have been an anticlimax, but Carol Ann wanted something sweet with her freshly pressed coffee, so we shared a delectable apple tart — the *real* tarte tatin, according to Quillec — with thick quarters of juicy apples sautéed with butter and sugar, then baked with barely a hint of pastry.

A few night later, I returned for dinner with Bob and Marilyn. We settled into a comfortable banquette and were fussed over by a saucy British waitress named Carol, who assured Marilyn that it was no sin to love rich food. "We actually encourage it here," she said. And richness was the theme of that meal, though the cream of potato soup that I lovingly lapped up tasted more decadent than it was. "It's made with roasted potatoes and gruyere," Carol informed us, "but we use milk instead of cream, so it's not as heavy."

Marilyn confessed that she was "in special heaven" eating that night's special, a fluffy piece of halibut slathered with vivid yellow curry cream sauce on tomato risotto. After wavering between the rabbit cooked in red wine and the Dover sole, I chose — and loved — the juicy duck breast slices glazed with blackberry-cognac sauce and fanned around a crisp polenta cake. Bob was so crazy about Daniel Quillec's celebrated *escalope de veau* — pan-seared veal scallopini in lemon-butter sauce — that after devouring one plate of the dish, he seriously considered ordering another.

We lured him out of this madness with the idea of dessert — a second plate of veal or a chocolate mousse? He wisely settled on the latter, served in an old-fashioned ice-cream-sundae glass. It was so splendid that he refused to share it. So Marilyn and I split a cold, silken crème caramel that dripped with topaz-colored burnt-sugar sauce.

I cringed when the bill arrived but felt better after Bob and Marilyn raved that the dinner was one of the best they had eaten in weeks. "It really was almost like eating in Paris," Marilyn said. "I forgot I was in Prairie Village."

Dinner at Café Provence is cheaper than flying to France, after all, and a lot more convenient.