

French Connection

Café Provence inspires affection.

by [Charles Ferruzza](#)



At Cafe Provence, Kansas Citians get to pretend they're in France.

Café Provence

3936 West 69th Terrace, Prairie Village

Lunch served Monday - Friday 11 a.m.-2 p.m.; Dinner served Monday - Saturday 5-10 p.m.

[Cafe Provence](#)

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



There is little evidence of the historic French influence on Kansas City except the northland trafficway and the demolished-but-soon to be-rebuilt bridge named for Francois Chouteau, who established a trading post on the Missouri River bluffs in 1821. Soon after, in "Kawsmouth," where the Kansas and Missouri Rivers come together, French Catholics settled the area we now call the West Bottoms. Not that a single relic remains down there. Instead, one of the few tributes to Kansas City's French founders is on one of the highest points in downtown Kansas City, in the little-appreciated Case Park at 10th and Jefferson. A historic marker installed by the Chouteau Society honors the earliest French settlers, many of whom left the soggy bottomland to build farms on the higher ground near Quality Hill.

Nor has Kansas City's culinary world embraced its French heritage; we prefer a simple grilled steak and fried potatoes to *boeuf bourguignon* and *pommes frites*. French toast, french fries, French vanilla ice cream and French kissing are all well and good, but until recently, Kansas City has had a love-hate relationship with traditional French cuisine.

In the 1970s, you could find crepes, omelets, quiche and French onion soup on dozens of local menus, including those of the least cosmopolitan joints, such as Houlihan's (which even served escargot in those days), the long-vanished Putsch's Sidewalk Café, Papa Nick's and the Arrowhead Inn. When those dishes fell out of fashion, they

were sent to the guillotine, sharing the fates of once-stylish "continental" restaurants located in hotels: Le Jardin (Glenwood Manor Motor Hotel), La Tour En Rond (the downtown Holiday Inn) and Le Carrousel (the Muehlebach Hotel). *Au revoir*, crepes! Hello, salad bars!

But the constantly spinning cycle of culinary trends revives restaurant concepts every few decades. What baby boomer would have guessed that fondue would become hot again? (The Florida-based Melting Pot Restaurant opens on the Plaza later this month.) And Kansas City is undergoing a French-restaurant renaissance, though not one favoring the "fancy" kind (such as the defunct La Mediterranean, with waiters in tuxedo shirts and dishes prepared *flambe* on rolling carts). This new breed of French dining rooms -- Café des Amis, Aixois and the three-month-old **Café Provence** -- features fare inspired by the cuisine of Provence, the Southern province of France where garlic, tomatoes and olive oil are the favored ingredients. It was there, in the coastal city of Marseilles, where the sumptuous fish stew known as bouillabaisse was reportedly invented.

Café Provence serves a robust bouillabaisse, fragrant with garlic and saffron and packed with pieces of monkfish, bass, mussels and potatoes. It's a classic Provencal dish, even if the restaurant's owner, chef Patrick Quillec (who also owns the more eclectic Hannah Bistro), is a native of Brittany, way over on the Atlantic side of the country.

"I try not to let too much Brittany slip into the menu," Quillec confesses. "I'm saving that cooking style for another restaurant, a creperie that I plan to open in the future."

Café Provence resembles its Parisian cousins more closely than Kansas City's other new French bistros. In fact, if Café Provence had ashtrays on its tables and patrons smoking (the restaurant is smoke-free), it could easily pass as a double of Paris' trendy L'Epi Dupin -- one located instead in the not-quite-glamorous parking lot that bisects the Prairie Village Shopping Center. A window table provides no romantic view (unless suburban shoppers wheeling baby carriages turns you on), but the petite dining room, with its white woodwork, linen-draped tables and lace curtains, is exceptionally attractive.

Less attractive was my run-in with a tyrannical French-born hostess, who immediately waged war against me. For my first dinner at the restaurant, I had made an early reservation for *deux*, and the dining room was empty but for one other table. Madame gave me a hostile once-over (was it my denim jacket?) and ushered us straight to the worst spot in the room, a tiny table for two pushed up against the wall in a dark corner near the restrooms. I said, "This table will not do."

Madame gasped, pursed her lips, dashed over to the reservation chart and, with a sigh of resignation, motioned us over to a slightly better two-top in the center of the room. She cast the evil eye in my direction until, halfway through

the meal, she saw that I was jotting notes into a little pad. Suddenly she became, as they say in English, my best friend.

Our waitress was the hostess' exact opposite: chatty and convivial from the minute she set down a basket of crusty, warm bread and a china ramekin of butter. The bread was lovely on its own or spread with a thick chunk of the *pâté maison*, a savory and surprisingly rich terrine of beef, lean pork and chicken liver that's elegant in its simplicity ("and very much in the style of Brittany," Quillec admits).

That was the dinner where I spooned up every last drop from a steaming crock of onion soup, its sweet caramelized onions in a lusty dark broth hidden under a thick blanket of bread and melted Gruyère. My friend Bob was just as enthralled with his salad of spicy arugula, crunchy walnuts, pungent Roquefort and roasted peppers splashed with a citrus vinaigrette. In fact, he loved the creamy blue cheese so passionately that he had it again for dinner, ordering a grilled filet that arrived tender and sizzling under an intoxicating sheath of melted Roquefort and butter.

Those dishes may have been perfect, but Quillec has been tinkering with the roast duck since the restaurant opened. At first he served it with a piquant nicoise olive sauce -- I loved it, but the restaurant's most frequent patrons (over-fifty, well-off, WASPy) found it a shade too salty. Now the crispy slices of duck are draped in a slightly sweet raspberry vinegar sauce; alas, Quillec says that's going away, too.

On another visit, with Bob and Carol along, we got a better table (Madame wasn't working that night), a less chatty but highly attentive server and enough slices of bread for dipping into the garlic butter sauce that had already drowned five meaty snails. Before we could get too full, our server whisked away the tray and replaced it with salads for Bob and Carol and, for me, an intensely flavored lobster bisque splashed with Armagnac and thinned with cream. The soup had been made from the heads and hulls of lobsters, cooked into a lush stock with brandy until it was the color of melted butterscotch, then served with croutons.

For dinner, Bob chose an appetizer: that pile of minced beef tenderloin mixed with shallots, capers and onion known as steak tartare. He hoarded every bit for himself. I was equally greedy with my *coq au vin*, a succulent chicken breast slathered in a russet-colored sauce made from red wine, butter and a smoky stock flavored with bacon. (The dish is native to Burgundy, not Provence.) And the garlic-phobic Carol found refuge in a poached salmon draped in a buttery sorrel sauce.

It was all heavenly, but not as transcendent as the desserts, which came in a vast assortment for such a small restaurant. I saluted the flaky profiteroles, filled with ice cream and slathered in bittersweet chocolate, and the silken dish of *crème brûlée*. But Café Provence's freshly made sorbet is the answer to all the world's problems. One night it

was coconut, brought out in five little scoops surrounded by lots of fresh raspberries and blueberries. It was a sweet way to be patriotic and to celebrate Kansas City's French heritage at the same time.

[December 06, 2001DINING](#) » [RESTAURANT REVIEWS](#)