

Taste



Café Provence

THERE'S A COZY LITTLE BISTRO IN PRAIRIE VILLAGE THAT'S QUIETLY BEEN SERVING UP SOME OF THE MOST AUTHENTIC (AND DELICIOUS!) FRENCH FARE THIS SIDE OF AIX-EN-PROVENCE FOR MORE THAN TEN YEARS

BY CONTRIBUTING WRITER
DARREN MARK

Years ago, I was living in that capital of culture, Bismarck, North Dakota. Shortly after I arrived, I discovered a curious phenomenon: This city of fewer than 60,000 people was supporting five different Chinese restaurants. This is a city that, still to this day, doesn't have a Gap. But five Chinese restaurants? It wasn't the region's booming Asian population that was keeping all five joints alive. The only Asians who lived there were the owners of the five restaurants, and they couldn't have possibly eaten their own food—it was that bad.

It was then that I realized something interesting about the cities of this country: each of them has a food DNA—sometimes one that makes sense, and other times one that's inexplicable, as was the case with Bismarck's preoccupation with Chinese restaurants.

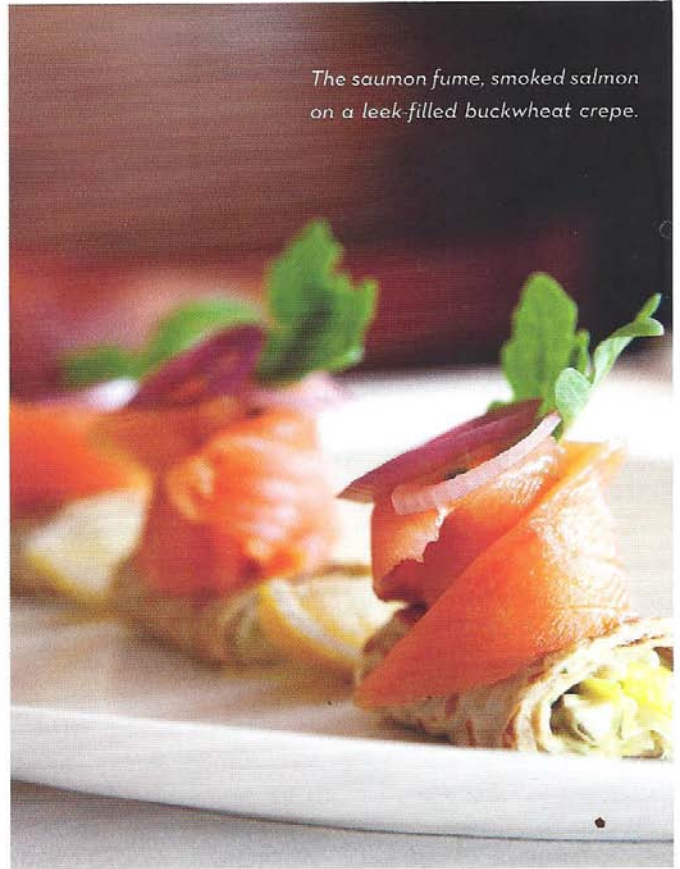
White linen tablecloths and napkins on the table and paintings of France lining the walls transport diners from Prairie Village to Provence.

Say bonjour to Kansas City, and yet another case of a city whose food DNA might prompt a Stephen Colbert-like raising of the eyebrow. Kansas City loves its French restaurants, a curious asterisk I would argue, for a city of this size, and for a city that's seriously in love with all foods American. However, a glance at the city's restaurant radar reveals Café Provence, Le Fou Frog and Aixois. And Café Des Amis, Tatsu's, Westport Café and the creperie Chez Elle. Look in the rearview mirror, and you may also see the shadows of Cassis, Café Paris, Hannah Bistro and a second location for Tatsu's. But let's not act so surprised to find an explosion of French restaurants in this city of la vache. After all, Kansas City is the Paris of the plains, right? So there. It all makes sense. (No it doesn't.)

I was pondering this, and other matters of food, when I sat down for le dîner at one of Kansas City's French anchors, Café Provence, which is celebrating its ten-year anniversary in the Prairie Village shops.

The menu here reads like a greatest hits list of French cuisine, featuring those perennial chart toppers like Coquille Saint-Jacques, French onion soup and escargots. It's upscale French comfort food, aimed at an audience that's not interested in rolling the dice with experimental concepts and New Age ideas. What that audience may

The saumon fume, smoked salmon on a leek-filled buckwheat crepe.



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not realize, however, is that chef de cuisine Philip Quillec, son of the travelling executive chef and co-owner Patrick Quillec, is hiding innovation inside a menu that appears to bleed red, white and blue in the most French of ways.

"We keep true to a lot of classic French dishes, but like a lot of chefs in my generation, we're taking the classics and putting modern twists on them," Philip Quillec says. "And that's what happens a lot in France, and in New York, and in all those big gourmet cities. So that's what I kind of do: take classic dishes and put little modern twists on them."

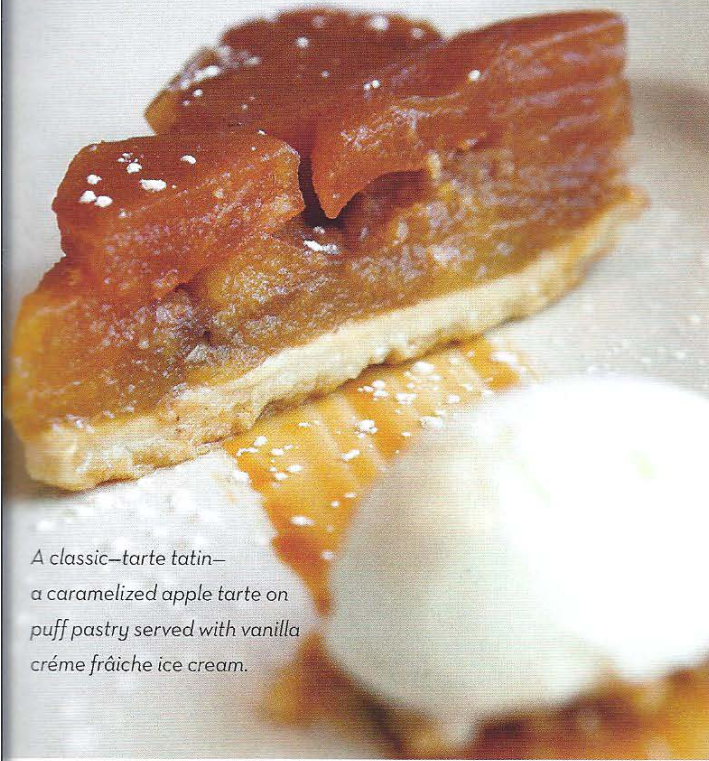
One of the best examples is the saumon fume, a smoked salmon appetizer that spins a classic pairing into an interesting creation, and one that was an indisputable crowd-pleaser for my table of three.

The core of this dish is the gribiche sauce, a traditional French number made from eggs, mustard, oil, capers, cornichons and other variations on goodness. It often finds its mate in fish, which is filleted or poached, for instance, and the sauce becomes its blanket. But here, canting the obvious angle, Quillec draws from his family's Brittany background in using a crepe to tell the story—a crepe wrapped around smoked salmon, gribiche and poached leeks. Rounding out the appetizer are lemon and pickled shallots.



Chef de cuisine Philip Quillec sauces a dish.

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*A classic—tarte tatin—
a caramelized apple tart on
puff pastry served with vanilla
crème fraîche ice cream.*

It's a dish that speaks to Quillec's unique take on French food by way of the one thing that inspires him most: his dad.

"He's been a chef for 25 years," Philip says. "He's my number one inspiration. I learned a lot from my dad. I'm very lucky to have grown up with chefs. I learned a lot from my uncle too. But there's a lot of other chefs that I look up to. If you go to New York, I like Eric Ripert, Jean Georges, Alain Ducasse. But the guy I really like is Daniel Boulud. I like what he does and he inspires me."

A common thread among those chefs is their focus on quality ingredients. That mindset drives the success behind Café Provence's poulet aux morilles, a traditional French dish that, in other settings, relies on a mushroom cream sauce to mask a sometimes inferior-grade bird. But on the Café Provence menu, the poultry is an Amish chicken, which is organic and hormone free. And wonderful.

The highlight of this dish isn't the velvety morel mushroom cream sauce, but the way the kitchen cooked the chicken. It neither leaned towards pink, nor towards dry. It was beautifully crisp on the outside and wonderfully juicy within, allowing those flavors—ones for which Amish birds are celebrated—to live without compromise.

The overarching theme here is, of course, French cuisine. But underneath that lie themes in miniature. There's the theme of Provence. There's the theme of Brittany.

Canard au bigarade, pan-seared duck breast with French red camargue rice.



"Provençal cuisine," Quillec says, "was one of my father's concepts, and he thought it would fit here in Kansas City. It uses a lot of fresh vegetables and is a lighter cuisine. My father is actually from Brittany, though, so we do mix in a lot of cream and butter dishes—and crepes—into the Provençal cuisine. But it started with people demanding a lot of fresh olive oil-based sauces."

So Café Provence is as much a reflection of America as it is of France. The menu is a melting pot of ideas, traditions and regions. Which is why the Coquille Saint-Jacques can live here proudly, and without reservation. This simple preparation of pan-seared diver scallops, combined with a mushroom mustard cream sauce, shallots and breadcrumbs features a flavor profile that is assertive and bold, but not heavy nor overpowering.

Same for the foie gras terrine, which reflects the season with a peach and ginger chutney, a winning complement to the foie, which prepares for prime time by first marinating in sauternes and cognac. Cubes of Riesling gelee clean the palette, readying the diner for whatever's next.

In my case, it was the filet mignon au Roquefort, a classic French preparation that

ages as gracefully as a Beetle. Quillec's version features pan-seared Black Angus beef tenderloin, topped with Roquefort cheese, and served with Bordelaise sauce, green beans and potato gratin.

It's all part of a menu that celebrates not just French food but Kansas City's insatiable appetite for it.

"Kansas City has people that know their food as well," Quillec says. "We've been blessed with people here that appreciate French cuisine. We have a lot of people that travel to France, actually, and to Europe a lot, and know their food. I don't know why in Kansas City there are so many French restaurants, but people are well traveled and they love their French cuisines."

That's one explanation. The other? It's just part of this city's DNA. ♦

Café Provence

Address: 3936 W. 69th St.

Hours: Lunch: Mon.-Sat. 11 a.m.-2:30 p.m.

Dinner: Mon.-Thurs. 5 -9 p.m.,

Fri.-Sat. 5-10 p.m.

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