

May 15, 2018

BISTRO CAMPAGNE

4518 N. Lincoln Ave.
773-271-6100

4 diners @5:30 pm

Cuisine: French

Opened: June 2002

Original owner and executive chef; Michael Altenberg, passed away March 2012.

Current owner: Altenberg's brother, Jon, is maintaining the restaurant for Michael Altenberg's three sons.

Current executive chef: Luke Creagan (Pops for Champagne, Bonsoirée)

THE PLACE

I am happy to report that Bistro Campagne is trapped in time. It looks as French and bistro-ish and dated as ever. Beautifully weathered. A wonderful welcoming neighborhood feel and a dynamite patio setting. Now that the Gold Coast is losing Bistrôt Zinc (walking distance from my house), I am likely to visit Campagne (Lincoln Square) more often. This is exactly the cozy and authentic style of French restaurant that is slowly disappearing in Chicago.

THE SERVICE

I was a guest and so service was a non-issue.

Looking around the room, however, it appeared that there is a well-trained, congenial staff.

THE MEAL

Les Hors d'oeuvres

Soupe à l'oignon gratinée \$9

Haven't had a wonderful French onion soup in a long time. My personal drought is over. Deeply moody broth loaded with onions and a fantastic burnt cheese crust blankets the crock. It's the kind of dish that tastes so good that you repeatedly burn your lips because you can't wait for the next mouthful, even if it's still too hot eat. You could almost use a knife and fork on this hearty preparation.

Escargots au beurre d'ail \$13

Snails in garlic-Pernod butter

Another dish I haven't had in ages. Mostly because I rarely see it on menus any more. This comes in an escargot serving plate with the five indented circles surrounding a sixth in the middle. Everything is buttery and garlicky and bubbling away. This is about texture, butter, and garlic, along with parsley pesto galore. Delightfully chewy snails and, believe it or not, the garlic and butter are both done with a light hand. Must use the baguette to sop up the riches.

Fondue d'artichaut \$11

Baked artichoke, fennel, crabmeat and cheese fondue with coriander and fleur de sel toasted brioche

Our host wanted me to try this, and I didn't want to be rude, so I said, "Bring it on." Very rich and totally irresistible. The fresh earthiness of the artichokes somehow manage to keep this fondue from sinking under its own indulgence. And there is no skimping on the fleshy crabmeat. Of course, this comes with impossibly delicious crusty bread to make open-face sandwiches.

Mussels \$?? (a special this night)

Orange juice, arugula pesto, cream, butter, and paprika.

There were two preps being offered. The other one involved ale. Give me OJ and arugula every time. And more bread for dunking. All bobbing around in a broth I'd like to bottle. All the shells had opened and there wasn't a bum mussel in the sea. I practiced my newly learned technique of scooping broth into one side of the full shell, using an empty shell like a pincer, and then pouring the juice into my mouth simultaneously with the mussel. It doesn't sound pretty, but I understand this is the norm in France. It was probably gauche of me to spoon up the broth at the end.

Les Salades

Salade Lyonnaise \$13

Baby spinach and frisée, Bryant Family Farms poached egg, haricots verts, crostini, bacon, lardons, warm bacon Dijonaise

Yet another favorite of mine, but here with spinach added to the classic combination. This was a fairly composed plate with a luscious poached egg sprawling across the top of the greens. Pop the egg and the salad is perfectly dressed. A long slice of toasted baguette flanked the greens.

Les Plats

Poulet rôti forestière \$26

Naturally raised Amish chicken, wild mushroom ragoût, onion frites

The perfectly cooked, juicy bird was completely buried under a haystack of onions frites. Best onion frites since Bistro 110! Crisp, no grease, not too much breading. Wow! The chicken was amazing, too. I keep saying that chicken should be cooked whole to retain all the juices. Cozying up to wild mushroom ragoût didn't hurt either. Thank you, Chef Creagan. Since it was a whole bird, there was plenty left over and I can vouch for the fine chicken salad it made the next day. And it was still plenty moist.

Côte de porc \$29

Heritage Farms Berkshire pork chop, whipped Yukon gold—crème fraîche mashed potatoes, cabbage wilted in smoked ham hocks, smoked maple syrup

This was a monster chop. And I mean “monster” in the best possible way. You know like the Beast in *Beauty and the Beast*. Thick and tender with gorgeous grillmarks. A slight misstep here: The potatoes were not warm enough.

Boeuf bourguignon \$28

Braised beef cheeks, baby carrots, pearl onions, Yukon gold potatoes confit, pork lardons, tarragon, mushroom veal reduction

Uh, oh. A disappointment. This dish was crazy salty. Tender and well-intentioned but so salty, I could not manage more than one bite. Too bad, so many carrots and onions went to waste.

Crème brûlée \$??

Another classic done well.

THOUGHTS

Starting with warm crusty baguette wrapped in a single square of waxed paper and ending with crème brûlée, “Bravo,” for a dinner of French clichés, proving there is a very good reason that some dishes never go out of style.

Michael Altenberg's homage to French bistro cooking is playing out in grand style everyday in Lincoln Square.

