



INTERIOR OF BALZAC BRASSERIE

back to (bistro) basics BY LI WEIQIN

SAVOURING HEARTY, RUSTIC HEARTH-SIDE FARE 10,000KM AWAY FROM FRANCE

There comes a time in every serious diner's life, when gelatinous spheres of meat-flavoured liquid and edible interpretations of soil leave the palate wanting. Instead of an interminable 13-course degustation menu, one begins to crave a stomach-warming pot of stew, a dining room alive with chatter, the scrawl of daily specials on a blackboard.

Cue: Singapore's propitious spate of French bistros and brasseries, doling out crock-pots and cocottes of classical fare to a worldly, haute cuisine-weary audience. These eateries are known—and loved—for several things, all good: their inimitable Parisian ambience, genteel service and of course, soul-warming food. Most come here for the plats mijotes, or slow-cooked dishes such as pot au feu, platters of charcuterie, hearty portions of roasted meats, and traditional sides like potato gratin.

In early 19th century Paris, the first bistros popped up to cater to homesick migrants from other parts of the country. Family-run outfits served what the French call *cuisine grandmère*, or grandmother's cooking—food that, funnily enough, finds a ready audience in 21st century Singapore.

The menu at Brasserie Gavroche, for one, comprises recipes that have been handed down to chef patron Frédéric Colin by his own grandpère Henri. A generation-spanning starter of *pâté en croûte et foie gras* (cold baked pork terrine pie with duck liver) is delightfully anachronistic. Not often seen on menus these days, the dish smacks of a happier time when cholesterol concerns were subsumed by pure indulgence in good food. Grandpère's other speciality: his *quenelle de poisson sauce Nantua*. Notoriously difficult to make, these *quenelles*—fluffy baked “dumplings” of hand-grated pike fish fillets and light dough—are accompanied by a crayfish sauce bellowing with umami.

Over at Balzac Brasserie, executive chef Jean-Charles Dubois keeps things in the family too. The signature creamy, frothy lobster bisque, passed down from Dubois' father, is updated with the addition of crunchy sautéed Qwehli prawns on the side. Then there's Grandma Dubois' traditional rice pudding, wherein jasmine rice, milk and cream are infused with Tahitian vanilla and sprinkled judiciously with salted caramel and candied pistachios.

While the original bistros in Paris were distinguished initially by region—a cook from Provence would serve up *daube*; an Alsatian would dole out *choucroute garnie*—most establishments today purvey *cuisine de terroir*, meaning literally “food of the earth”. It's a convenient, all-encompassing notion that refers simply to hearty cooking based on region-specific ingredients. Chef-sommelier Max Fedkiw of Le Bistrot du Sommelier quips: “Basically, it means everything and nothing.”

But who's complaining? *Cuisine de terroir* at Le Bistrot du Sommelier means that chef de cuisine Patrick Heuberger can place *garbure*, a robust vegetable and duck soup from the Gascon region, alongside a traditional Alsatian *Baeckeoffe* on his menu with impunity. In the latter, generous, luscious cuts of pig neck, bacon, tongue, and homemade sausage are simmered in white wine and served with vegetables and potatoes.

Another perk of being everything and nothing: room for improvisation. The restaurant's second floor is home to a *rilette* bar—a buzzy, cosy space adorned with counters and high stools, where patrons can sip on Fedkiw's selection of French wine and nibble on *tapas*-sized portions of charcuterie. The concept's not typically French, but it works—especially in the tsunami wave of small-bite eateries to hit our country. While the unctuous, gloriously rich homemade duck *rillettes* are the main draw,

Singapore's Best Bistros

BALZAC BRASSERIE

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BRASSERIE GAVROCHE

66 Tras Street

Ph: 6225 8266

WWW.BRASSERIEGAVROCHE.COM

TOOTS BRASSERIE

The Sultan Hotel

101 Jalan Sultan

Ph: 6723 7117

WWW.TOOTSBRASSERIE.COM

BISTRO DU VIN (SHAW CENTRE)

#02-12 Shaw Centre

1 Scotts Road

Ph: 6733 7763

WWW.LESAMIS.COM.SG

LE BISTROT DU SOMMELIER

53 Armenian Street

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MILLE FEUILLE FROM BRASSERIE GAVROCHE

58
+
59
GOURMET



BAR DE LIGNE DU CHILI RÔTI FROM TOOTSBRASSERIE



BEEF CHEEKS A LA CUILLERE FROM BALZAC BRASSERIE

other exotically French delicacies abound. There's fromage de tête, tongue terrine, chicken liver pâté and more to sate adventurous local palates and homesick French ones.

From Ernest Hemingway's beloved Café Lipp to Amelie Poulain's Café de Deux Moulins, the timeless charm of the French eatery has lodged itself firmly into our cultural consciousness. The experience of dining amongst wall-mounted mirrors, burnished wood-panelled walls and cast-iron wall sconces is almost inextricable from the cuisine itself. Happily, the local band of French restaurateurs has left no stone unturned in pandering to romantic projections. Ubiquitous Thonet bentwood chairs and monochrome chequered floor tiles evoke 1920s Paris in Les Amis' casual Bistro Du Vin. An antique draft beer dispenser and vintage zinc bar take centre stage at Balzac Brasserie, while Brasserie Gavroche boasts a monumental piece de resistance: an antique bar was sourced from Paris' famed Café de la Paix itself, where the city's literati—Hemingway, Proust, Salvador Dali and Gertrude Stein, for starters—used to converge.

In our cosmopolitan culinary scene, respect for tradition comes hand in hand with its dissemination. It ain't only the French dishing out food from their homeland—a growing bunch of locally trained chefs are holding their own too. Bistro Du Vin's fork-tender red wine-braised beef cheek, which comes nestled atop a luxurious layer of silky mash, could have come straight from a Burgundian kitchen but is the handiwork of Singaporean chef Dalton Fong, formerly of Au Jardin. Malaysian chef Jason Wong, previously from Au Petit Salut, now helms the kitchen at the recently opened Toots Brasserie. His poelles de cuisses de grenouilles (pan-seared frog legs in garlic butter sauce) finds its roots in the sprawling countryside of Lyon.

It never ceases to amaze us that on a tropical island 10,000km away from France, one has such ready access to authentic hearthside fare. Thanks to the tireless work of French and local chefs alike, it seems that ol' Ernie Hemingway was right: Paris (and the rest of France) is indeed a moveable feast. ■