

Special extras, great value, fine French cuisine have kept Chez Francois a locals' favourite for 14 years

By Peter Blattmann

Sitting at a table at Chez Francois is like finding yourself in a country home somewhere along the gastronomic routes in Burgundy while savouring classic French cuisine. Jean-Francois Gouin, chef/owner, and wife Sylvie introduced Canmore to the art of French cuisine 14 years ago, yet still today the restaurant remains one of Canmore's favourite dining spots. Do not be intimidated by its French name, however, because over the years many dishes from around the world have been added to the menu. But, as you would expect, Chez Francois has hung onto French tradition as much as possible. At dinner, they offer two classic table d'hote menus, a four-course for \$ 32.95, the six-course at \$48. A whopping 50 per cent of diners select one of the T D' menus. The regular dinner menu features French classics such as mussel soup, escargot, crevettes Provencale, langoustines, veal tenderloine and entrecote, among many others.

I highly recommend the "bisque de crevettes" — shrimp bisque. Honestly I enjoyed the incredible intense shrimp flavour in this soup so much that I asked the server to delay the next course in order for me to sip it very slowly. It took a full glass of Sauvignon Blanc to get my taste buds ready for the next course, which was " The Merquaises a la Nicoise". Originating from Tunisia, a former colony of France, this dish consists of three spicy lamb sausages made by Jean-Francois (Valbella deli also has them available) and is served with a very tasty tomato sauce, the best I had in a very long time. (See recipe below).

As for the main course, Jean-Francois recommended that I taste his all-time favourite-and best selling-dish, the Canard a l'orange de Francois — braised duck. This is a masterpiece of a tasty dish and the recipe is being kept top-secret. Usually duck is tough, but believe me, this bird was so tender there was no knife required. Jean-Francois's generosity not only was evident by serving half a duck instead of the usual quarter, but by adding copious amounts of Grand-Marnier to the orange sauce. His signature dish became very potent indeed. I had chosen a glass of a full-bodied Shiraz for this dish to match its intensity. Next time I would opt for a lighter wine with sharp acidity, crisp enough to cut through the very savoury flavours in the sauce.

Each patron who orders both an appetizer and main course is served a complimentary granite in between the two courses (fruit juice flavoured with wine and Triple Sec and crystallized through freezing) as a palate cleanser and which is tart, not to be confused with sorbet/sherbet which is usually very sweet. For dessert, being a chocoholic, I chose the Gateau au Chocolat consisting of three

layers, each made with a different chocolate. It was decadent and perfect for my liking.

Other classic dishes include Crepe Suzette for two, creme caramel and a plate of French brie cheese. The most popular items on the lunch menu include a very large chef's salad, chicken & wild mushroom crepes, Cajun pasta, pan-fried sole with almonds, beef liver and a large selection of sandwiches, the Reuben being the best seller. It is no surprise to me why Canmorite's and tourists alike fill the place — not only because of the superb quality but also this popular restaurant represents terrific value for money as all dishes are very reasonably priced and because the portions are extremely generous.

In addition to the free granite, a complimentary duck terrine is waiting at your table while you look over the menu, a gesture which can't be found anywhere else.

Another bargain is to be had by ordering a bottle of wine. I haven't seen for a long time Australian chardonnays, Chilean merlots and Alsatian gewuerztraminers listed under \$30.

Finally, readers will be very interested to learn that the restaurant is very popular for breakfast. On Saturday and Sunday it is usually packed to capacity by late morning. Therefore come early with your family as bargains are plenty — in particular the family breakfast platter. Other favourites include crepes, French toast and omelettes.

Chez Francois is located at 1604-2nd Ave., just off Bow Valley Trail. They're open daily, for breakfast 7 a.m. to 2 p.m., lunch 11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. and dinner 5 to 9 p.m. For reservations, call 403.678.6111.