



"The dining space resembles nothing if not the informal elegance of a Georgian living room"



NEW STEINE BISTRO
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QUELLE SURPRISE

Ever on the look-out for authentic French cooking in Brighton & Hove, Daniel Frickelton, samples the francophile delights of the latest offering from hotelier and restaurateur Hervé Guyat

Considering the physical proximity of France to southern England, with Normandy merely a long spit into a prevailing sou'wester from Brighton Pier, you would think diners in our City would be spoilt for choice when looking for a bit of French grub. I can nevertheless count on two fingers the number of restaurants offering genuine French cooking in this area during the 20 years I have lived here. I'm sure there must be some I have missed out, but it is a remarkable fact that you have to actually do an internet search to find a French eatery. You want Indian or Italian? Just mogle yourself into town and have a stroll in any direction but south (for France). You will have the same problem I have when entering a car park with loads of empty spaces: which

one to choose? Tough decision, especially when they are all so similar.

"I can't think of a better place to take your hunger and thirst"

Regular readers of food reviews in the British press will have noticed the decline in critical interest in French cuisine in recent years. Some insist that standards have slipped in French kitchens, that they don't seem to care any longer. Others blame the ascendancy of fast food and the eat-on-the-go culture. Personally, I think critics just got bored with writing about the glories of French food for so many decades.

The demand for things French nevertheless appears unabated. After all, millions of us still make our very necessary regular pilgrimages across or beneath la Manche to get our fix of food, drink, golf and culture at French destinations.

I was therefore delighted to be offered the opportunity to review Hervé Guyat's recently renovated (2007) bar and bistro in the New Steine. Hervé rolled up in Brighton in 2000, following successful careers in fashion and then in the hotel business. The experience gained from working with the likes of fashion houses Valentino and Cacharel in Sloane St and Bond St would inform his passion for quality and getting the right mix of colour and décor, skills that served him well when he moved over to the

hotel trade. Hervé's first hotel was the Abbey Court Hotel in Pembridge Gardens, part of the trendy Notting Hill Gate. "The hotel was mainly used by fashionistas and designers such as John Galliano," he says, "who felt at home with our English charm and modern décor. This was my first inspiration. Looking around me at what the owner had done by mixing Laura Ashley and new England with original oil paintings, Villeroy & Boch china, antique furniture and bibelots displayed in different areas, including bedrooms, *creating an exclusive home from home* (my emphasis)."

Which accurately describes my first impression of Hervé's bistro in the New Steine. The dining space resembles nothing if not the informal elegance of a Georgian living room, decorated by someone who has mastered the difficult art of blending the old with the new – polished Georgian marble fireplace-cum-surround with quirky, modern crystal chandeliers – and graced the whole with modern furniture, colourful table linen and zany, "fringie" original artwork, presumably from Hervé's private collection. The net effect is one of cultivated, classy intimacy and relaxation, a room in which guests converse in a normal tone of voice, as they do in French restaurants. Betty met us at the door, was clearly expecting us, and made us feel that our arrival had made her day. As she led us to our table by the windows, I felt like the prodigal son returning to the

warm embrace of an adoring family. Hervé's experience in London hotels was clearly not going to waste.

A quick glance at the menu resolved the white-or-red issue faster than a French chef can crack an egg. My eyes went no further down the wine list than to the Bourgogne, Pinot Noir 2013 from Maison Louis Latour. Very French in style, its dry astringency laced with strawberries, cherries and a whiff of smoke, this Bourgogne was the perfect partner to our classic bistro meals, and at £24.95 was a real steal.

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The menu card with its plastic cover and rustic, slightly tatty, appearance transported me straight to the family restaurant in the Dordogne, where, years ago, I ordered trois fois canard for lunch. Having found, identified and annihilated the three kinds of duck in the enormous warm salad placed before me, I was shocked when the second substantial course of ducky delights arrived, and quacking by the time

the third, a plateful of confit, was presented. Trois fois canard, after all. But that's just one of the things I have always loved about dining in other countries – the chance of a Forrest Gump moment.

But you're not looking for surprises when you head off to M&S to buy underpants, nor are you seeking quelle surprise moments when you take your hunger to a bistro. You are looking for robust, well-turned classics of French cooking, and the modest menu at the New Steine is bursting with them. Our starters, duck rillettes and salmon tartare with avocado (£6.50 each) were faultlessly prepared in the traditional way. Crucially, the salmon was very fresh. Our mains, duck confit with lentils and lardons (£13.95) and Sussex braised pork cheeks with mash (£13.75), were but two among many bistro classics available at New Steine. My dining companion left nothing but duck bones on her plate. I swapped the mash for some potato dauphinoise and tucked into the cheeks. They came with a generous amount of red wine and shallot gravy, which I would have greedily mopped up with a piece of bread, had there been any. The pork cheeks were cut-with-a-fork tender and chock-full of meaty, piggy flavour. They truly have a cheek at the New Steine, and I can't think of a better place to take your hunger and thirst. And, did you notice the prices above? Authentic French bistro food at authentic French prices. Doesn't get much better than that.