

Justine's new sibling

SARAH MUSGRAVE, The Gazette

Published: Monday, January 08 2007

Justine Bistro a Vin

Fair bet

\$\$



A blackboard lists private wine importations to go with such daily specials as braised lamb with couscous.

ALLEN MCINNIS, THE GAZETTE

4517 St. Denis St.

(at Mount Royal Ave.)

Phone: (514) 287-2552

Hours: Mon. 5 p.m. to 11 p.m., Tues. and Wed. 11 a.m. to 11 p.m., Thurs. and Fri. 11 a.m. to midnight, Sat. and Sun. 5 p.m. to midnight

Alcohol: Yes

Credit cards: All major cards

Wheelchair access: Several steps

Vegetarian-friendly: Limited

Price range: Appetizers,

\$4 to \$5; main courses, \$10 to \$15.95; desserts, \$4.95

Budget bistro, Take 2. Outremont's charming and cheap Bistro Justine has set up a second spot on St. Denis St. - although fans of the original won't quite be seeing double in terms of sustenance or setting.

Justine Bistro a Vin occupies a semi-basement in which long, grey banquettes and warm woody tables all somehow accentuate the street-level picture window at one end of the room. At the other end, a long blackboard lists the private importations on offer, and wine suggestions flow freely from the friendly waiter. I immediately liked the decor for having class without being overly conceptual.

The same could be said of the budget-minded menu, designed to please rather than impress. As at the first Justine, Nicoise salad gets a new twist by going sushi, while other offerings are slightly varied standards along the lines of chevre chaud, filet mignon and a little pot of foie gras-flavoured creme caramel. Cute stuff, not particularly challenging, and that's just fine.

The daily special started with a vibrant carrot soup swirled with cumin oil, which allowed the garden veggie taste and the spicing to remain distinct, depending on the path of the spoon. The earthy essence of carrot hadn't been creamed out of it, which we appreciated.

A rich scent wafted from a cassolette of escargots, snails ensconced in creamy sauce with a mild blue-cheese undertaste. Once the squishy shapes were devoured, we were happy to soak up the remainder with fresh bread.

As portions increased, delicatessen seemed to decrease. "Petites ravioles" stuffed with portobello weren't all that little and came off pasta-heavy, the mushroom filling barely discernable. A sauce composed of three oils - infused with green herbs, sun-dried tomatoes and curry - was cheery though not too subtle. What brought this entry to life was a topping of cherry tomatoes and a tangle of finely sliced leeks melted down with butter. Lively and lush, it could be mixed into each bite.

The daily pork and mushroom stew struck me as heavy and unappealing, perhaps because I was so put off by the decidedly grey shade of the sauce. It was accompanied by a frilly mound of mashed potatoes and grilled zucchini layered with spaghetti squash, which provided colour, but tried too hard to be a much-needed contrast.

We finished our wines over dessert, the last sips of Australian Ram's Leap shiraz pairing nicely with a decadent chocolate truffle and an excellent creme brulee.

On both visits to this well-intentioned bistro, including a previous experience with braised lamb with couscous, I came away with the same comment. Despite obvious efforts to conceive dishes with a balance of textures and tones, there was something dull about the principal entry. The meats didn't jump off the plate - not that I want them alive, but at least lively. I hope this is corrected, because other than that, all the effort is there at Justine: its service is absolutely

gracious, its atmosphere instantly relaxing and its prices, like its heart, definitely in the right place.