

Outremont's little bargain

Bistro Justine Offers a limited menu of good food in a simple but chic setting at prices insanely reasonable

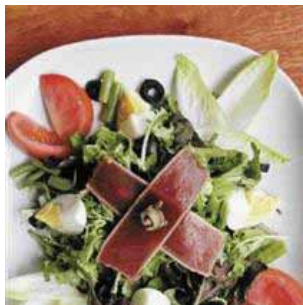
SARAH MUSGRAVE , The Gazette

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Bistro Justine

Good bet

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Bistro Justine's new-wave Nicoise salad, served with seared tuna and an anchovy rosette.

PHIL CARPENTER, GAZETTE

1268 Van Horne Ave. (near Champagneur Ave.)

Phone: (514) 277-2728

Open: Mon. to Fri. 8:30 a.m. to 10 p.m.; Sat. 4 to 10 p.m.; closed Sun.

Licensed: Yes

Credit cards: Visa, MC

Wheelchair access: One step

Vegetarian-friendly: Limited

Smoking: Yes

Price range: Appetizers \$3 to \$5; main courses \$8 to \$14

"What's the catch?" my cynical companion asked, scanning Bistro Justine's chalkboard menu with one eyebrow raised. He was looking at a short selection of French dishes that listed chevre- chaud salad at a mere \$5 and filet mignon at \$14.

The setting of this two-month-old bargain bistro is none too shabby, either. Located in ooh-la-la Outremont, the decor is simple but chic, with candlelight playing off white walls, a few strategically placed mirrors and music kept far, far in the background rather than the tinselly radio sounds you might expect at these prices.

When I asked about Justine, I was told the restaurant was baptized much as you'd name a child. And it certainly seems set on being the next small thing rather than the next big thing in the neighbourhood. There are just a few options each night, depending on the whim of the host and his young chef.

The seasonal soup of melon and basil was refreshing and full-flavoured, fruity almost to the point of a tropical candy. (The host rather strangely mentioned that the melon-scented bathroom hand soap was also seasonally appropriate).

Next up, a choice of salads. We tried a new-wave Nicoise, with a strip of pan-seared tuna "sushi" and an anchovy rosette atop baby greens, hard-boiled egg, olives and tomatoes. Our other appetizer, slices of duck breast fanned out under a drizzle of sauce made with Quebec blueberries, was equally light and fresh.

Pastas were an insanely reasonable \$8, but we opted for meat main courses. Accompanied by not-too-creamy Dauphinoise potatoes and spaghetti squash, the filet mignon was basic and beefy. The unadulterated piece of meat was cooked to medium, squeaking with juices under the knife, and still a bit bloody under a thin brown sauce.

There was no veal left, so a breast of grain-fed chicken stuffed with ham and cheese was mine. Cordon Bleu has always reminded me of hotel food, more cliched than classic, and this slightly dry version didn't convince me otherwise. But I did like the bed of shredded zucchini and puree of caramelized onions.

Desserts (\$4) of maple creme brulee and apple pie were also good value. In fact, throughout supper, we found ourselves marvelling more at the savings than the flavourings. We agreed Bistro Justine's fare isn't the finest but it's just fine, and it's easy to appreciate its wines at \$4.50 a glass and inexpensive meals to match. We left satisfied, yet without a real challenge to our palates or our pocketbooks.

Sarah Musgrave is the author of Resto a Go-Go: 180 Cheap and Fun Places to Eat and Drink in Montreal (ECW Press, \$16.95).

