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Justine goes al fresco

The latest addition to the Justine 'family' focuses on terrasse-friendly foods grilled with a Provençale influence: lots of olive oil, lively herbs and tomatoes

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LA TERRASSE JUSTINE

Good to great bet

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1231 Lajoie Ave.

(near Champagneur Ave.)

Phone: 514-759-8009

Hours: Lunch Tues. to Fri. 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., supper to Sun. 5:30 p.m. to closing; weekend brunch 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., closed Mon.

Licensed: Yes

Credit cards: MC, Visa

Wheelchair access: One step up, tight bathrooms

Vegetarian friendly: Limited

Price range: Appetizers \$4.50 to \$6, main courses \$12 to \$18.95; desserts \$5 to \$6

If you've been looking for a portal to the heart of Outremont, I think I've found it on this block. All the essential elements of the neighbourhood are visible from the patio of Terrasse Justine, a tiny oasis of commercial zoning in the midst of an otherwise leafy, residential sector. Across the street, Lubavitch families negotiated strollers on the stoops of three-storey walkups. On our side of the street, small groups of diners perused a blackboard of privately imported wines. An all-women jogging club clad flapped by in the

latest breathable fabrics, while the smokers at the table next to ours huddled closer together on a breezy evening.

I'm not sure how many addresses it takes to constitute a chain, but Justine's three are getting up there. First was a small and affordable resto on Van Horne that put a lot of brightness on the plate; next was a less lustrous basement bistro à vin on St. Denis; now comes this pastel-and-polka dot place that's decidedly patio-centric. Like the seating, the menu maximizes al fresco dining opportunities. The spotlight is on foods "à la plancha," (a more romantic way of saying "on the grill"), with Provençale twist - lots of olive oil, lively green herbs and tomatoes. Basically, we're in the south of France here - via Outremont, of course.

The offerings display a cheerful confidence; it feels like chef Sébastien Héloin likes what he chose and chose what he likes. I couldn't help cooing at a plate of three adorably plump grilled tomatoes on the vine, like candy in contrast to soft folds of mozzarella doused in herbs and oil. When tomato and bocconcini works, it really works. This being a Montreal bistro, there was also foie gras to start, a smooth slice of liver served with a side of fig preserve for smearing on toasted baguette. Pared down and pleasing.

Mains were also nicely proportioned; no hint here of times when restaurants lost their minds and started overdoing or reducing portions. The kitchen had gone all Jackson Pollack on the plates, however, with so many layers, pools and stripes of reductions, pestos and oils that my companion had to do an allergy check. The upside of a nut allergy, I learnt, is that it's a good way to meet the chef, who came out all smiles to reassure him about ingredients.

I thought a plate of calamari and chorizo would bring us stuffed squid, but it was rolled in on itself, buttery if not quite melt-in-your-mouth. The smoky, sweet sausage with crackling edges tasted of the outdoors, "like a country fair," my date added.

Chicken breast in its jus could so easy have been blah that I chose it half as a test. The skin was crisped, the meat juicy, there were veggies galore, and a cocotte filled with pillows of gnocchi and mushrooms in a rich wine-based sauce.

Desserts at bargain bistros see no shame in spinning the greatest hits, even if lavender-infused crème brûlée seems like, so, five years ago. Downed with the dregs of red wine, vanilla pannacotta and tart lemon tart, tasted all the better for those outdoor Outremont seats.