

Catherine Neville (clockwise from left) and Allyson Mace of the Shaw neighborhood and Karen Jones and Jenn Schoemehl of Lasalle Park enjoy the food and atmosphere of Pomme Cafe and Wine Bar in Clayton, under the guidance of server Mike Whitehead. Photos by Katherine Bish

Pomme Cafe and Wine Bar

rates 3 apples (out of a possible 4)

By Stefanie Ellis
SPECIAL TO THE POST-DISPATCH

Dinner at Pomme Cafe and Wine Bar was like a French film. There were clever characters (a quietly confident waiter who made us laugh), plenty of unexpected plot twists (how much does the hummus actually cost and why is it served with apples?) and aesthetically pleasing scenery (cozy bistro tables with candles all aglow).

I've always loved French films, which is why it felt natural to want to adore Pomme Cafe. For a restaurant to be Cannes-worthy, though, all the characters, plot twists and scenery in the world don't make a bit of difference unless the story line (food) is strong.

That being said, the newest ad-

dition to the Clayton food scene has three of the four most important elements mastered. About a month into its debut, there are still some kinks to work out in the kitchen, but that doesn't mean it lacks the potential to become a classic.

Though its name alludes to more than just food, it would be difficult to ignore that which doesn't come from a bottle, given the deft hand of owner Bryan Carr, whose flagship Pomme is just two doors down. With a menu much more casual than its fine-dining sibling, the Cafe offers a variety of small plates such as pâté, smoked fish and cheeses, sandwiches and salads, and breakfast selections such as scones, croissants and quiche.

The wine list, which is predominantly French and Californian,

is nothing to sneer at, though. There are more than 80 selections available by the bottle and 16 by the glass. We started with a glass of the Belle Provencal Rose '04 and the steak salad, an artful compilation of blue cheese, tomatoes, red leaf lettuce, caramelized onions and hanger steak tossed in a light vinaigrette.

The salad was a showstopper. Every ingredient was thoughtfully paired, and worked in tandem with the senses rather than competing for attention. The steak was cooked medium well and was a lovely counterpart for the earthy cheese, sweet onions and mildly acidic dressing. Parts of the meat were tough, but we got over that because of the great sex appeal of the dish.

However, the tomato, basil and mozzarella tartine elicited



Pomme Cafe and Wine Bar's Shrimp Louis salad consists of shrimp, a cocktail sauce mixed with mayo and herbs, and tomatoes on a bed of mixed greens.

slightly different reactions. The open-face sandwich, though simple on its own, came out tasting much plainer than we'd expected. There was no memory

of summer in the tomatoes despite their still being in season the time of our meal, and wasn't much basil to draw the muted flavors. The break-

nice and crunchy, though, never once succumbing to the juices from the tomatoes.

On our second visit, the bread on our sandwiches had no evidence of the aforementioned crunchiness. It was, instead, embarrassingly dry, if not on its way to being stale. Such a shame, given the choices: turkey and avocado with a superbly rich and eggy house-made aioli, and beef brisket topped with caramelized onions and Dijon mustard.

The house-made chips that accompanied our sandwiches were crispy and achieved a just-right level of saltiness. The potato salad was simple and nice, tossed with chives in a light Dijon-based vinaigrette.

The ribs we ordered came sprinkled with a beguiling mix of spices verified as top secret by our waiter. There were definite hints of sugar and paprika, though, giving the unseasoned meat a delightful kick. The status was raised even higher when dipping the meat in the house-made barbecue sauce, which was lightly vinegar-based, slightly fiery and a bit fruity, perhaps from apricots or plums.

The plot twist involved, interestingly enough, hummus, which was lusciously creamy and offered the smallest kiss of garlic. The plate was dotted with caramelized onions, dill yogurt, Dijon mustard, roasted red peppers and roasted apples (which seemed a bit unnecessary, and was perhaps a nod to the Cafe's name, which means apple in French). Though the Mediterraneans frequently mix tart, creamy, acidic and sweet, I felt that here the presence of yogurt, whose natural tartness and pervasive dill flavors wrestle the taste buds for dominance over

mustard's coarsely acidic bite, seemed a bit inappropriate.

There also seemed to be a discrepancy in price. On the chalkboard in the back of the restaurant, the hummus plate was \$5. On the menu it was \$8, and on our bill it was \$6.

The service, however, was relatively flawless, and we enjoyed engaging in witty yet intellectual banter with our waiter. His unobtrusive yet intuitive attention to our needs won us over almost immediately.

Likewise, our wine steward for the evening came over several times to see how we were enjoying our wine. He possessed a clear understanding of his craft and discussed the individual characteristics of our choices with a modesty that put the less educated wine aficionados among us at ease.

Pretension wasn't on the menu at Pomme Cafe, and for that we were grateful.

We also were delighted by the blueberry pie, which couldn't have been a more elegant denouement. It was French in every way, boasting a crust that was rich and buttery and remained crisp despite being immersed in a pool of house-made vanilla ice cream. The ice cream was among the best I've ever tried, wonderfully creamy with prominent vanilla bean flavor, accented by the tiniest hint of cinnamon. The silty blueberries were seasonally sweet and offered the perfect contrast to the smooth cream. This was indeed the ending for which I had hoped.

While it's true that there were several anticlimactic moments in this French romance, many of the most important elements were there. Indulge in a bit of editing, and you've got yourself a hit.



Pomme Cafe and Wine Bar

44 North Central Avenue, Clayton
314-721-8801

Menu: About 29 salads, sandwiches and small plates, and breakfast items such as scones, croissants and quiche, all priced \$11 and under; \$6 for apple and brie tartine; \$11 for a brisket sandwich.

Wine list: More than 82 bottles, with prices averaging about \$30. \$15 for a Charmes de Rieussec, and splurges like the Clos Des Lambrays Grand Cru '03 for \$117; 16 by-the-glass selections, many of which are available in half-glass portions, from \$5 to \$15; also a full bar.

Smoking: No

Wheelchair access: Yes

Hours: 7 a.m. to 1 a.m. daily

Food: B

Atmosphere: A



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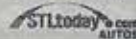
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NEWS A LA CARTE

Stout-hearted men (and women)

Friday is the final "pre-opening" event at the Dubliner (1025 Washington Avenue, 314-421-4300), a new downtown venture from Eddie Neill of Cafe Provençal fame. The Dubliner mixes the inspirations of Irish pub and restaurant food with Neill's passion for local ingredients, all served in a classic Irish pub atmosphere. The restaurant will be open seven days a week for lunch, dinner and late-night food (until 1 a.m. weeknights and 1:30 a.m. Friday and Saturday), with brunch also available Saturdays and Sundays starting at 9 a.m.

Road trip

Open since late March in Salem, Ill., is the Depot Supper Club, featuring the food of chef Doug Fontana, formerly of La Bohème in West Hollywood. He and his wife, Pam, discovered the vintage-1909 train depot in Salem while visiting her family, bought it and rehabbed it. The menu mixes heartland food such as pot roast and beef stroganoff, with more elaborate Fontana creations such as seared sea scallops in saffron garlic sauce. The Depot Supper Club is at 1001 East Main Street (Highway 50); Salem is at Highway 50 and Interstate 57, about 75 miles west of St. Louis via Highway 50 and about 25 miles past Carlyle Lake.

BY JOE BONWICH