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NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTION CONTRACT

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2013

TREND WATCH: CASUAL FRENCH DINING

By Leanne Mirandilla



Bistro du Vin



Brasserie de L'Île



La Cantoche



F.A.B.

When most of us imagine French cuisine, we might picture dainty dishes with fancy plating and fussy waiters in tuxedos. But a bevy of new restaurants are encouraging diners to bid this stereotypical image goodbye. Within the last of couple of years or so, newcomers to Hong Kong's dining scene have delivered fun, casual spaces and menus to match, including everything from chicken cordon bleu to moules frites (mussels with fries) and lamb shank. The dishes may be different, but they're all French, all simple and all refreshingly unpretentious.

The trend was arguably kicked off by Parisian-style brasserie **Saint-Germain** (1A Wong Nai Chung Rd., Happy Valley; 2838-6131), which opened in quiet, chilled-out Happy Valley in 2011. With a cozy yet subtly classy interior featuring a cream and green checked floor and vintage Art Nouveau posters, its menu features salads, pastas, chicken stew and cuts of beef and lamb. Opened more recently—last year, to be precise—on the western end of Hong Kong Island are **La Cantoche** (5/F, 5 Wa Lane, 227 Hollywood Rd., Sheung Wan, 2426-0880) and **Bistro du Vin** (5/F, 10, 1 Davis St., Kennedy Town, 2824-3010). Chalkboards and bentwood chairs give Bistro du Vin its character, with no-nonsense dishes such as bouillabaisse, scrambled eggs and madeleines on offer.

A two-story space with colorful seating, graffiti on the white brick walls and a football table next to the entrance, La Cantoche was opened by French-born David Sung, who moved to the city eight years ago. Having helped out in the kitchen of his family's

restaurant since he was 12, he says he first started to cook for himself in Hong Kong because he couldn't find beloved food from home in the city. Soon enough, this led to his idea to open a space of his own. "The concept was to offer really basic comfort food—nothing fancy—but well-executed. It's fancy in the execution, not the presentation," he explains. "I included some of my mom's recipes on the menu."

Other eateries beyond the classic bistro have popped up around town as well, such as French takeaway **La Rotisserie** (5/F, Manhattan Avenue, 255 Queen's Rd. Central, Sheung Wan, 2324-1898), which specializes in roasted chicken with various sides, soups and desserts. **Brasserie de L'Île** (4 Arbutnot Rd., Central, 2147-2389) is another example, with the main highlight of its menu being straightforward moules frites and a seating setup that includes alfresco dining on the terrace.

Last but not least is **F.A.B.**, which stands for French American Bistro (5/F, 30 Hollywood Rd., Central, 2810-1600) and—as its moniker suggests—takes inspiration from French, American and other European cuisines to produce a menu of tasty offerings such as sandwiches, tartines, roasted chicken and seabass tartare, all with a Gallic twist. Weekends also often see revelers spilling onto the sidewalk.

"You don't just go to a restaurant to eat, to feed yourself," Sung of La Cantoche says. "It's about how people make you feel in the restaurant. Here, we try to make people feel comfortable." And with a glass of wine and a plate of simple, delicious French fare, how could we feel anything but?



La Rotisserie



Saint-Germain

ON THE SCENE
Pierre Gagnaire

Veteran star chef **Pierre Gagnaire** is known for putting his name on French fine-dines all over the world, our very own Pierre outlet at the Mandarin Oriental is just one arm of his multi-armed culinary empire. Having started out as a chef who pushed the boundaries of traditional French cuisine and a pioneer of modern French fare, Gagnaire now has Michelin stars and global recognition all under his belt. He

tells Adele Wong how his Hong Kong restaurant is different from his Tokyo one, and why food isn't the most important element to a successful venture.

On Beginnings

I opened my first restaurant in France in 1977. Opening it wasn't difficult. What was difficult was that it was in a small city in the middle of France. There weren't many guests or tourists. It was a very small business so we didn't always have a lot of people to entertain.

On Hong Kong

At the beginning it was difficult. When we arrived, Hongkongers were not very nice to us. Now we have our identity, our clientele, and when they come, they know us. The only problem is the wine. The customers want to bring their own bottle of wine in Hong Kong, and that is a big problem. In France, people would never do that; they always buy in the restaurant. Same in Tokyo and London. Only in Hong Kong, because the people love their wine.

On Status

The public first learned about me from the Gault Millau guide. Michelin was more conservative, so they discovered me a little bit later. Now Michelin is a big group—it's not just a guide; it's a big company. Sometimes it's not fair, but it's part of the game. They judge you, and it's their own opinion, not yours. The Michelin guide is one thing, but then there are the guests, and if you make your guests happy, they'll come back.

On Paul Bocuse

Legendary chef Bocuse is an incredible guy. The year when I worked for him (1965), he obtained three Michelin stars. He was the first chef who played with the journalists, who understood

the power of the media. He was the first chef who felt it was important to manage the image of the kitchen. He was incredible.

On the Job

Our lives are fantastic, but it's like a jail. It's absolutely tough. Especially for the family. You have to remain your own person. You might see something bigger, brighter, shinier, but you must remember to remain who you are and stay humble. It's also a matter of luck and the people you meet in your life. We all evolve through the people we meet. But don't try to steal ideas from others—just do what you like to do. Each of my restaurants has its own personality. It's always my sensibility, but the restaurant in Hong Kong is not the same as the one in Tokyo. It's not the same product, the same people, or the same staff. For example in Tokyo for lunch, we have only women. It's funny. Here it's all business people. It doesn't have the same energy.

On Partners

I work to maintain the quality of my restaurants all over the world. The most important thing for me is to be confident with my partner. If you're not confident and you don't have a good connection, it's impossible. It's not just the food, it's the way you treat the people, create the atmosphere. Here [at Pierre], it's working because we're a very good team. The king of the restaurant is not me, it's the guest. It takes time to build a relationship with the chef. I design all the menus, I send the recipes to them. The technique is one thing, but the soul of the dish is something else. I want to make sure that when the guests eat the dish, the soul is there.