

Globe Life

Sophistication in the guise of simplicity

In place of Feenie's, Daniel Boulud's new resto swaps pretension for a laid-back room and food that raises the bar

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Lumière may be my new fine-dining passion, but one cannot live by truffles, foie gras and caviar-crowned hamachi alone. At least not in this economy.

Thank goodness for DB Bistro Moderne, Daniel Boulud's other new Vancouver restaurant, which is much more affordable yet just as impressive in its own way.

If this casual sister restaurant with its luxe burger and rarefied comfort food feels familiar, it should. Feenie's, the restaurant it replaces, was closely modelled on the original DB Bistro in New York.

But whereas Feenie's often strutted a slightly condescending, hipper-than-thou attitude, DB Bistro seems much more humble, almost bashful.

I roll up for my first visit on a snowy Sunday night and the place is packed. Everyone on the floor - from the timid hostess who isn't quite sure what to do with our coats to the restless manager who circles the room anxiously rubbing his hands - looks jumpy and nervous.

And they haven't even recognized me yet.

If they had, I sincerely doubt that the woman seated beside me would still be waving a bill holder in the air as she tries to catch her waiter's attention. Or that we would have to wait this long to order drinks.

We're still waiting, quite thirstily, when executive chef Stephane Istel pops out of the kitchen and looks over. He probably spied me on the video monitor. (*Mais oui*, there are hidden cameras in the dining room with a view of every table so the cooks know when to start prepping the next course.)

Et voilà, the whole atmosphere changes. The reinforcements swoop in. The cocktails (spicy Bloody "Bulls" stirred with veal stock) arrive promptly. And the woman beside us has her credit card processed, *tout de suite*.

C'est la vie. Even with all this fluttering around the table, the service is still warm and unpretentious, much like the dining room, which has undergone a complete transformation.

The restaurant is larger, having absorbed the old Lumière Tasting Bar, yet pleasantly understated. The fire-engine reds have been replaced with a more neutral palette of beige, taupe and burgundy. And the bare wood tables, set with butcher paper placemats and plaid linen napkins, lend the space a chic farmhouse feel.

It's all very comfortable, especially on the eyes and ears. Listen. The music gently hums along in the

background thanks to speakers that have been meticulously placed just so. And look at those lights, softly lit yet amply hung (so you can read the menu without straining, and still look fabulous).

Dinner reveals a similar sophistication cloaked under the veneer of simplicity. Take the legendary db Burger, for instance. This is no mere hamburger. It's a multilayered extravaganza that consists of a creamy foie gras centre surrounded by a truffle-marinated *boudin* of wine-braised short rib, wrapped in an outer layer of ground prime sirloin.

The softball-sized patty is served split in half on a parmesan bun with a daub of tomato compote, frilled frisée ruffle and a silver cup of golden fries on the side.

The meat is ground in-house so it can be served on the juicy red side of medium-rare. Don't bother trying to order it well done. A friend of mine did. "Sorry," he was told. "This is one of our signature items." I admire the integrity.

Be warned: There's no dignified way to eat this burger. And at \$28, it probably won't inspire many Sunday-afternoon cravings. (The \$150 db Burger Double Royale, layered with 20 grams of shaved black truffle, hasn't made it to Vancouver yet.)

It's one of those finger-lickin' delicacies that has to be tasted at least once. But there are other signature dishes worth trying.

The venison ragout with handmade orecchiette pasta (\$26) is incredibly lusty and rich with red wine. The deeply flavoured sauce, studded with chestnuts and squash, is so dark and earthy it almost tastes like liver (in a good way).

Escargot and chicken oyster fricassee (\$18) takes the tender, round morsels of dark meat found on the back of the bird and encases them in a light, golden crisp. They're married with slippery snails, soft garlicky button mushrooms and a chewy spaetzle that's been sprinkled with tiny pieces of hazelnut crunch. It's all pulled together with a bright, glossy, emerald-green broth that's been thickened with calves' feet and finished with parsley.

A few months ago, Mr. Boulud said he would create a special "V" (vegetarian) burger for Vancouver. He hasn't yet whipped up that one, or many other original dishes, but he does make a few nods to the West Coast by using local Dungeness crab (in place of the Peekytoe used in New York) and sablefish (as a substitute for farmed Atlantic salmon).

The menu, mind you, isn't a slave to local ingredients. To wit: big-eye tuna in the niçoise salad (\$17). Chef Istel says the quality is better than albacore. And it's hard to argue his point once you've tasted his melt-in-the-mouth confit belly, which is snuggled up in a warm bed of garlic aioli, under a blanket of lightly seared ahi, salty anchovies, runny quail's egg, soft potatoes and crisp greens.

DB Bistro Vancouver has more charcuterie on its menu than you would find in New York (where cured meats, pâtés and terrines are the domain of Bar Boulud). But here it's a natural fit for Mr. Istel, who originally hails from Alsace.

The young chef, who has worked for Mr. Boulud since 2005, is already making his own sauerkraut and will soon be adding *boudin blanc* and *noir* to the menu, though the cured meats come from the Oyama Sausage Co. on Granville Island.

His creamy pork loin pâté en croute (\$18) is elegantly layered with silky foie and crushed pistachios.

The plate is prettily dotted and swirled with plump raisins, sharp French mustard and house-pickled vegetables cut into cute little rectangles and squares.

Berkshire pork duo (\$29), alas, is the weak link on this menu. Here in Vancouver, we've been spoiled by the insanely succulent pork from Sloping Hill Farm. Mr. Istel gets his from a different supplier and the flavour doesn't compare.

And dessert is a partial letdown. Pastry chef Bruno Feldeisen, who trained at Alain Ducasse's Le Louis XV in Monaco and ran the show at Senses Restaurant and Bar in Toronto, makes wonderful lemony, buttery soft madeleines (\$8), served warm right out of the oven.

But the dark chocolate tart (\$11) comes on a crust so hard it's inedible. I'm still trying to hack through it with a knife and fork when I look up to see Mr. Boulud walking into the restaurant, straight from the airport.

Ah, so that's why everyone's been acting so skittish.

There are plenty of Vancouverites who resent the recent invasion of fly-in celebrity chefs and fail to see how they might raise the bar of competition. Some have even told me they won't step one foot inside DB Bistro.

That's their loss, but perhaps for the best. The restaurant isn't perfect, but apart from the service (which will improve with time) it comes pretty darn close. And if the naysayers ever change their minds, they'll have to eat crow.

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