



The New Mexican's Weekly Magazine
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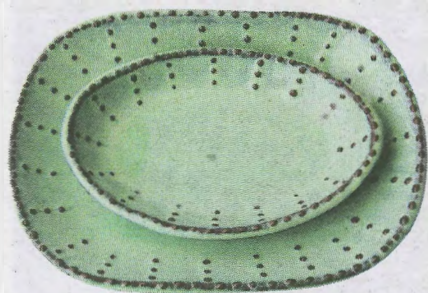
Pasatiempo



Wise Fool's *SeeSaw*

Bill Kohlhaase | For The New Mexican

Truth in cooking



Bouche

451 W. Alameda St.
(entrance on West Water Street);
982-6297

Dinner 5-9:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays;
closed Sundays & Mondays

Noise level: conversational to
strong conversational
Handicapped-accessible
Wine & beer
Credit cards, no checks



The Short Order

Charles Dale's neo-bistro **Bouche** offers French classics — onion soup, escargot, steak tartare, foie gras, and steak with frites — done exceedingly well and without the overindulgence of butter and sauces found in classic French cooking. The small room fills up quickly with those seeking duck confit, pan-seared halibut, short ribs pot-au-feu, macaroni au fromage, and wonderful crusty house-baked bread. Service is cordial and on-the-spot. The wine list is just comprehensive enough. Recommended: the charcuterie plank, sautéed foie gras, steak tartare, seven-herb ravioli and crispy frog legs, black mussels in white wine and red chile, and tarte Tatin.



Ratings range from 0 to 4 chiles, including half chiles. This reflects the reviewer's experience with regard to food and drink, atmosphere, service, and value.

Charles Dale's Bouche bistro takes to heart revered chef Richard Olney's declaration that "good and honest cooking and good and honest French cooking are the same thing." At Bouche, honesty is reflected in what comes out of the kitchen — nothing is hidden under sauces or extreme seasoning — and goodness comes of attentive preparation. French cooking, as Nice native Dale must know after stints in New York and Aspen, travels well. His cooking embraces classical and nouvelle styles, with the fresh, less-heavy qualities of the latter accomplishing the sensory, even sensual completeness of the former. Dining at Bouche — could there be a better name for such a pleasurable establishment? — is a tactile experience. When a bowl of ravioli in tomato broth arrives with its crispy frog leg, you're greeted with the beautiful pale color of the sauce, the aroma of the herbs inside the plump stuffed pasta, and the roughness against your fingers of the breaded leg's golden, greaseless skin before it crunches between your teeth to reveal the tender, delicately flavored meat beneath.

The bistro's modest space, which seats no more than 40 inside, is the former location of Aqua Santa restaurant and, before that, The Noon Whistle. The room has a pleasant, well-worn feel, with attractive wood-plank floors uneven enough to require shims under a few tables. The kitchen is open and fronted by a tall table and stools that give five lucky diners a view to the best show in the house: your server breaking and separating an egg before sliding the yolk carefully atop a patty of steak tartare. Uncooked beef and yolks seem something out of the past; my last such plate was in a Parisian café so old that Karl Marx reputedly fortified himself with the dish there. Dale's tartare needs no nostalgic seasoning. The velvety smoothness of the fresh organic yolk, locally sourced from Pollo Real, coupled with the texture of the Dijon-spiked chopped tenderloin is something to savor. A glass of gentle Côtes du Rhone that didn't compete with the meat's flavor (our server had suggested the stouter, younger Malbec) was exactly what we expect of great dining: the coming together of exceptional ingredients expertly prepared and accompanied by a complex, empathetic wine.

Bouche features classic French bistro selections like escargot, roast chicken, and a cheese course for dessert. The onion soup was smooth, dark, and only slightly sweet, a piece of wonderful crusty house-baked bread serving as an island for rich, stringy Gruyère cheese. Everything on the charcuterie plank was first rate, right down to the cornichons, but especially the bowl of duck rillettes, the dark shreds of meat tender and tasty. The macaroni au fromage, served in a rectangular cast-iron vessel, was so rich with white cheddar and Gruyère that I had to forgo dessert. Beef short ribs, done pot-au-feu style, were fall-apart tender.

Dale doesn't shy away from traditional dishes no matter what politically incorrect reputation they might have developed in recent years. Foie gras, seared and served with a strudel-like apple roll and a tangle of curly frisée, was a melt-in-the-mouth experience, a crisp rush of its browned surface followed by the slow dissolve of concentrated flavors on the tongue. A special of sweetbreads, perfectly pan-finished,

made us forget why we hadn't searched out this exquisite dish for the last decade or so.

The Bouche wine list, not so long that it's overwhelming, emphasizes French and California bottles with a few outliers, and it has enough by-the-glass selections to match with almost anything. A glass of the 2011 Simonnet-Febvre Saint-Bris Sauvignon Blanc swam beautifully with the black mussels in white wine with bits of scallion and red chile. The 2010 Clos La Coutale Cahors Malbec made a nice match with a savory duck confit, its skin perfectly done. The 2009 Row 11 "Tres Viñas" Pinot Noir gave soft contrast to the shallot glaze on an exactly rare tenderloin. The frites that came with the steak, done with just a bit of duck fat, were exceptional.

Dessert choices caused some good-natured disagreement at our table. We resisted the Nutella chocolate mousse in favor of a buttery, beautifully formed tarte Tatin with a scoop of caramel ice cream. Then there was a trio of firm profiteroles, each sandwiching a scoop of ice cream over which our server poured a warm vessel of chocolate.

Service here isn't stuffy or terribly formal but welcoming, attentive, and knowledgeable in ways one expects from a restaurant of this quality. Dale works the floor with sincerity, describing ingredients and technique, and taking compliments graciously. No matter how cordial the place is, it's the food that takes center stage. It may be the best you'll have all year. ◀

Check, please

Dinner for four at Bouche:

Charcuterie plank with terrine of foie gras.....	\$ 30.00
Onion soup "Les Halles"	\$ 10.00
Seven-herb ravioli and crispy frog leg	\$ 16.00
Sweetbreads	\$ 18.00
Black mussels in white wine and red chile	\$ 24.00
Braised beef short ribs pot-au-feu	\$ 26.00
Duck confit with white beans and kale	\$ 24.00
Glass, 2011 Simonnet-Febvre Saint-Bris Sauvignon Blanc.....	\$ 9.00
Glass, 2009 Row 11 "Tres Viñas" Pinot Noir	\$ 12.00
Glass, 2010 Clos La Coutale Cahors Malbec	\$ 13.00
Tarte Tatin & caramel ice cream.....	\$ 9.00
Trio of profiteroles with warm chocolate sauce.....	\$ 9.00
TOTAL.....	\$ 200.00
(before tax and tip)	

Dinner for one, another visit:

Tenderloin steak tartare.....	\$ 14.00
Salade César.....	\$ 12.00
Macaroni au fromage with wild mushrooms	\$ 12.00
Glass, Kermit Lynch Côtes du Rhone 2009.....	\$ 13.00
TOTAL.....	\$ 51.00
(before tax and tip)	

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