

The following is a press review (not to be confused with a press release) recently published in The Exeter News-Letter in Exeter, New Hampshire. You never know who is dining in your restaurant...

## A lucky find in Ogunquit - go while you can

By Joan Harlow

Special to RNC

Before the tourists invade, we decided to take a Sunday drive to Maine with the idea of finding a place for dinner.

Some places weren't open yet: There was a 2 1/2-hour wait at Hurricanes in Perkins Cove --oops! However, on the way down to Perkins Cove, I noticed a new sign that simply said

**"98 Provence, dinner 5:30-9."**

Something about the building, the grounds, the sign itself, just looked right. We pulled into the driveway. Yes, they could seat us without reservations, and we knew we were lucky. We just didn't know how lucky.



The building is a house that has been opened up to create a large entry room with bar, and a comfortable-size dining room. Cathedral ceiling, exposed beams, lots of curtained windows and a few trinkets and paintings for color -- this is a simple, pleasant room.

On cool evenings a fire is lit in the stone fireplace. Tables are set with overlaid floral print cloths and matching

napkins. Each table has a candle in an unusual wine-glass shaped holder, and there are colorful Mikasa charger plates at each setting. Someone must be a collector of salt and pepper shakers, as each table has a different set.

There is plenty of room between the tables, so you don't feel cramped no matter where you sit. It is just comfortable, and the noise level is easy to live with.

THE MENU AND owners are French, with sub-titles (petoncles -- scallops; cotelettes d'agneau -- lamb chops; sister - - hostess; brother -- chef.)

There were only two problems: what to choose and how much to eat.

For starters, escargots with a leek and mustard sauce under puff pastry, Roquefort soufflé with a pecan and basil broth, endive baked Gruyere and ham... all sounded good to me.

Two salads are offered: a mesclun with honey-lime dressing, and endive with watercress in a hazelnut oil vinaigrette.

Our waitress, who was not French, was very helpful. She assured us that a salad and an entree would not be too much food. She recommended a wine (most of the wine list available by the glass!). She answered questions intelligently and obviously knew and enjoyed the food.

The first evening we each ordered one of the salads, and they were very good. The dressings were delicate and did not drown the very fresh greens. Between courses, replacement flatware was provided, as was a basket of thin-sliced French bread with a crock of butter. (Inevitably, yup, unsalted.)

For an entree I ordered the tournedos de boeuf, facon roussilon, (beef tenderloin with pine nuts and raisins served with a port reduction). One taste and I was sure that I must have ordered the best thing on the menu -- until I sampled the pave de chevreuil aux griottes (venison medallions with a sour cherry sauce). Then it was hard to choose between them.

That evening the starch was gaufrette potatoes, sliced "waffle cut" on a mandoline, fried perfectly and not oversalted. They even stayed crisp where they came in contact with the sauce. Comfortably full, we declined dessert, thank you, just coffee. We left having spent \$90, and feeling extremely lucky to have landed in this place for dinner.

FORTUNATELY, our second visit was just as good. This time we ordered differently.

I sampled the Roquefort soufflé, my guest the endive with ham and Gruyere. The soufflé was a light custard that gave just a hint of cheese, served in a savory cream sauce. Very rich, very smooth and delicious, it would make a perfect supper with one of the salads.

The same was true of the braised endive. Flavors that were exciting but not too strong, no sharp edges or aggressive sea-sonings, this is the kind of cooking we were beginning to expect from the kitchen at 98 Provence.

The special soup of the evening, roasted garlic and fresh artichoke, sounded too good to pass up, so I asked for two servings to take home. I think I ruffled the composure in the kitchen, not because they wouldn't do it, but they had no appropriate container to pack it in. No matter, they found a commercial gallon container that was clean and sturdy, and our two cups of soup were ready to travel when we finished our meal.

The entrees we chose that evening were terrific. My guest had the calves liver. It was a perfectly cooked dish with wild mushrooms, onions, bits of bacon, with plenty of black pepper, finished in red wine. This evening, the starch was Red Bliss potatoes, cleverly cut to make a cap and stem "mushrooms".

Normally I don't care for cute when it comes to presentation-- the food looks tortured. Taste and temperature can be sacrificed for artifice. This time, however, it worked, and the potatoes were hot and tasted good. The plate was finished with a baked stuffed tomato which was a clean texture with the richness of the liver.

I ordered the goat cheese ravioli with mussels marinere. This is a classic dish and absolutely wonderful. Mussels cooked in wine with a bouquet garni and shallots, then presented plump and sassy on the half shell in a sauce of cream thickened with beurre manier.

FOR DESSERT, we decided to share the house specialty, Floating Island. It had not been on the menu the last time, because the chef did not consider the eggs fresh enough to make it. (I checked with a reputable egg supplier, and he was right. Just after Easter, eggs are apt to be left over from being stockpiled, and older eggs will, of course, not whip as high.)

The dessert was presented in a soup plate, and looked for all the world like Gibraltar rising from the sea of custard sauce. The baked meringue wasn't over sweet and had a bottom crust of caramelized pecans. I liked the nuts and custard, but found the egg whites too much. A few soft dollops of smaller islands in a larger sea would have been nicer, but not as impressive perhaps.

The food on this second trip confirmed for me that there is some very special cooking here at 98 Provence. Yes, it is rich, but if you don't order unwisely, it is not overwhelming.

The presentations are nice, the plates are colorful, with trails of different spices on the rim. Ingredients are top quality and the preparations outstanding. Inventive side dishes, wonderful sauces, and friendly service all make for an enjoyable evening.

(I must mention that the am-bience even continues to the rest rooms, modern American toilets matched with provincial antique sinks and accouterments! It works.)

Open since last August, the restaurant has already made it's mark among those who live in the area and are accustomed to spending, on average, \$90 for two. There were many of them present each evening we were here.

The restaurant is open every night except Tuesday, and I suggest you make a reservation soon before the tourists invade.