

# Dining Out - Page 9

## The Sun, Lowell, Massachusetts

### Maine's Provence: It's wonderful

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Sun Correspondent

Any place that has the temerity to name itself after one of the gastronomic capitals of the world must be crazy, love to put a gun to their heads, or are confident they're running an operation worthy of the name.

#### Review

In the case of 98 Provence, a seasonal room that opened late last summer on Shore Road in Ogunquit, Maine, it seems to be the last of those three choices. I'm accustomed to eating well in the Ogunquit area when I'm in the mood for a casually elegant dinner. There are too many options, too much serious competition for a pedestrian restaurant to last very long. But our recent meal at 98 Provence was exceptional.

I'm always loath to heap such praise on a place because I worry about people going there after me and getting burned. But the plain and simple truth is my wife and I had a wonderful meal and look forward to returning, strictly as "civilians", with friends.

The spot's general atmosphere is sort of country calico with a French twist. The single dining room seating about forty at tables and chairs features tablecloths, candles, knotty pine, and barn board.

Service was good. Our waiter was friendly and helpful. But he was nevertheless a summer hiring and overlooked one or two small details.

We split a salad, and he just plopped it on the table rather than divide it for us. Water was served only when requested, something that shouldn't happen in a restaurant with 98 Provence's kind of prices. But I'll take personable and good over rude and very good any day.

The menu wasn't especially extensive. There were ten appetizer options, and nearly the same number of entrees, augmented by daily specials.

But it doesn't take long to appreciate their logic: It's easier to do a few dishes extremely well, and that was what we found to be the case.

We chose superb appetizers. The grilled portabella mushrooms with goat cheese croutons and braised garlic (9.95) was a delightful mix of textures and flavors. The beefy mushrooms with their rich, earthy taste contrasted nicely with the sharp goat cheese... and garlic, of course, goes with almost everything except maybe chocolate chip cookies.

As good as the order may have been, though, it didn't overshadow the beef carpaccio with marinated fennel and fresh gouda (8.95)

Carpaccio is razor-thin slices of raw beef, pure and simple. So high grade beef and cheeses, herbs, and other ingredients that accompany it can set it apart from other orders.

Again, the beauty of this dish lay in the contrasts. The fennel and greens added a nutty tang to the rich beef, while the mild gouda contributed more texture and flavor.

The salad we selected was a pleasant variation: endive and watercress with hazelnut oil and vinaigrette (\$5.95). The greens were fresh and lively, the dressing a smart accent.

Oh, the decisions we faced for entrees.

How about the tagliatelle pasta with lobster and vegetables and lobster essence oil? The beef tenderloin with pine nuts and raisins?

My wife chose the filet of salmon with basil oil and porcini mushrooms (\$15.95). She is a very wise woman.

The salmon was expertly prepared with a rich, clean flavor highlighted by the subtle basil and the porcinis.

But I didn't regret my selection, a dreamy veal steak with a delicate oyster, mushroom, and cream sauce (\$21.95). The steak was a terrific piece of meat, the sauce a deft, flavorful creation that I wanted to pour on everything else I sampled the rest of the night.

Thankfully, I fought that temptation. Otherwise, I likely would have spoiled the poached pear in a port wine sauce with homemade passion fruit sorbet we split for dessert (\$4.95)

## 98 Provence

Shore Road, Ogunquit, Maine

Food ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ 1/2

Service ☆ ☆ ☆ 1/2

Atmosphere ☆ ☆ ☆ 1/2

Major credit cards accepted.

Reservations recommended

Non-smoking environment.

Full liquor license. Handicap access.

Phone 207-646-9898

# Ratings

☆☆☆☆ **Excellent**

☆☆☆☆ **Very Good**

☆☆☆ **Good**

☆☆ **Fair**

☆ **Poor**

**Evaluations are based on an anonymous visit  
by the Sun's restaurant critic.**