

COLUMN Taste & Tell

Experience fine French country dining at 98 Provence

By N.L. ENGLISH August 10, 2008

98 Provence has been open on Shore Road in Ogunquit since 1995.

98 PROVENCE 262 Shore Road, Ogunquit. 646-9898; 98provence.com

RATING: **** 1/2

HOURS: Open at 5:30 p.m. Wednesday to Monday for dinner; fewer nights off-season. Closed from the second weekend of December to early April

CREDIT CARDS: Mastercard, Visa, American Express

PRICE RANGE: Entrees \$22 to \$32

VEGETARIAN DISHES: Yes

KIDS: No Kids Menu

RESERVATIONS: Recommended

BAR: Full

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS: Yes

BOTTOM LINE: Precise seasoning, fine ingredients, and exceptional quality intersect in dinners that are both impressive to the eye and gratifying to the belly. Ratings based on a 5-star scale

OGUNQUIT — Consistency is the hobgoblin of restaurateurs. Chefs must cook expensive cuts of meat and delicate seafood exactly right time after time, year after year.

But that's what has been done each time I have dined at 98 Provence, this summer and back in 2001. (The restaurant opened in June 1995.)

"Even dishes that we've been serving for two months, we'll try to improve on," said Pierre Gignac, chef and co-owner. "I've got a great team in the kitchen this year, so that really helps."

98 Provence is a favorite place for locals and tourists, especially French Canadians. Its professional rigor reveals itself in disciplined dishes that hold both mild formality and self-indulgence, with a little sharp sour something and a luscious mouthful of creme.

Gazpacho made with yellow tomatoes was both sharp and rich. Foie gras sat in a peppery aspic, and cumin revved up Moroccan couscous beside a perfectly braised lamb shank.

There's nothing precisely snobbish about Provence, but something in the atmosphere, something a smidge abrupt, does give a certain tension to the place.

The staff is in full gear as soon as the door opens. It's charged up and carefully attentive, even in the small room where you first enter, with a fireplace, wood floors and a short bar. To the right is a large dining room with exposed beams.

Johanne Haseltine (sister of the chef), Gignac and wife, Lisa Stratton, are the restaurant's owners. Haseltine runs the dining room and welcomes dinner guests. "I'm all the front," she said.

A Campari with soda (\$8) was bitter and sweet, just right in the heat as an aperitif. Next, from the good wine list, we tried the 2006 Louis Jadot Pouilly Fuisse (\$48), a shining and clean white wine with a fine acidity. Another wine later in the meal, a fabulous Four Vines Biker Zinfandel (\$39), seemed to show off just a touch of salt in the midst of its glossy berries and dark smooth tannin.

A bowl of yellow gazpacho, as smooth as silk, was centered on a more voluptuous puree of avocado and cream that alternated enjoyably with the sharp zinging flavors of the gazpacho. This was the first of three courses from

the \$39 prix fixe bistro menu I had chosen.

Another offered on the night of my visit began with tuna tartar, went on to lemon sole with seafood fricassee, and ended with a goat-cheese cake. Anything on the fixed-price menus may be ordered individually.

Three different fixed-price menus are offered every night, ranging in price from as low as \$29 up to \$45.

My friend pried out chunks of foie gras terrine (\$14, from the a la carte menu) from a little ramekin, and applied them in generous slabs to thin, crunchy toasted slices of baguette. The precarious layer of the jiggling peppery aspic on top became in the mouth a cool, hot pleasure next to the smooth goose liver. Shredded red beets, sweet and slightly sour, mixed in another refreshing taste.

Bibb lettuce salad (\$9) was gorgeous, the plate piled with most or all of a small head of lettuce, the biggest leaf on the bottom and the rest piled up in a graduated mound of tender green. Each leaf was dressed perfectly with a light mustard and herb dressing; the mustard was restrained enough to keep from overwhelming other flavors, making its sharp self heard.

Flavorful tuna was set in two small cutlets on a fine ratatouille with capers and Nicoise olives, with orange tomato coulis and an edge of arugula oil.

The tender tuna had been marinated with summer savory, Gignac said, before it was grilled.

Tender lamb shank was served on Moroccan couscous with dried apricots, currants, cumin, lemon zest, pinenuts and Merguez sausage (a Moroccan sausage made with harissa paste, lamb and garlic from D'Artagnan). Grilled, unctuous eggplant and a thick slice of good red tomato completed this appetizing plate of food.

The shank is marinated in fresh mint, dried mustard and tarragon overnight, then braised for six to seven hours, Gignac said as he was making a batch of chilled olive soup with vichyssoise and a Portuguese extra virgin oil.

Even in the chilly rainy weather, his chilled soups are selling well. Venison, roasted monkfish and mussels are more things you might encounter on the wide-ranging menu.

When I read the dessert menu, I asked myself, "What is nougat glace?" It's frozen, sweetened whipped cream with candied, crunchy nuts, accompanied by a slaw of thin-sliced apple, blueberries and blackberries.

And it's wonderful.

The berry cobbler, with cooked-down blackberries and raspberries intense under the melting vanilla ice cream, was capped by browned biscuits that might have been more tender.

But the strong, smooth-bodied coffee that finished the meal was everything it could be.

N.L. English is a Portland freelance writer and the author of "Chow Maine: The Best Restaurants, Cafes, Lobster Shacks and Markets on the Coast." Visit English's Web site, www.chowmaineguide.com.