

BISTRO *at the* BEACH



THE AMBIANCE TAKES
A HIT, BUT MARCHÉ
MODERNE'S MENU IS AS
SUBLIME AS EVER IN ITS
NEW NEWPORT BEACH DIGS

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Marché Moderne's langoustine is part of the lineup at what critic Brad A. Johnson calls the best French bistro in California.
PAUL RODRIGUEZ — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

REVIEW

MARCHÉ MODERNE HAS POWER TO MOVE, STILL

By Brad A. Johnson
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"The pace is always calm and transcendent."

Those were the words I wrote the last time I reviewed Marché Moderne, when Florent and Amelia Marneau's charming French bistro was still located inside the mall at South Coast Plaza in Costa Mesa.

That was one of my favorite things about Marché: the elegant tranquility of the dining room in the midst of a vibrant mall. With no direct outside entrance, it was a refuge more than a destination. Yet somehow the Marneaus magically pulled diners into the mall, all the way to the third floor, even when they had absolutely no intention of shopping. Marché became a destination restaurant in spite of itself.

"The pace is always calm and transcendent."

Those words keep echoing in my mind as I sit in the new Marché at dinnertime, watching staff rush through the room at frenzied speed. I try to ignore the deafening clangs of a busboy stacking plates and polishing silverware just inside the kitchen door.

Moving a 10-year-old restaurant to a new location is always tricky. Things change even if the name does not.

Marché Moderne moved out of the mall in January and reopened miles away in September in Newport Beach's Crystal Cove Shopping Center, a destination strip mall on the coast surrounded by dozens of shimmering olive trees.

Gone is the old pace. The larger space means waiters have more ground to cover, a tradeoff for giving customers more elbow room.

Many of the old restaurant's design elements have been re-created here. Hatbox lamps still dangle from the ceiling. A familiar-looking, 10-seat bar flanks one side of the interior, a counter made more for dining than drinking. Muted browns and earth tones decorate the walls, while the old black accents have been swapped for white in a brighter, more contemporary space whose front windows slide open to let the ocean breeze flow in. Booths are still swathed in velvet, and the new chairs invite hours of lingering just like the old days.

Waiters and bussers still wear black, while the kitchen crew now sports white with contrasting blue aprons.

A row of VIP tables still gives a handful of diners a front-row view of the action in the kitchen. But gone are the front-and-center, wood-fired oven and the charcoal grill that anchored the old kitchen. The perfume of smoldering mesquite and the hiss of lamb sizzling on the grill made the original



Florent, left, and Amelia Marneau recently re-opened Marché Moderne in Newport Beach after moving the bistro from Costa Mesa.

PHOTOS: PAUL RODRIGUEZ — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



Braised rabbit à la moutarde is among the exquisitely executed dishes from the bistro's rambling menu.



Napoleon vendredi et samedi is served Fridays and Saturdays.

space so intoxicating. The new bistro is more sober.

A shiny, modern kitchen is now showcased behind glass, its lingering aromas restricted to what might pass in front of your table en route to someone else until your own dishes arrive. It feels as if a little bit of the restaurant's soul has gone missing, traded for a crown of sparkling jewels. It is beautiful, certainly.

However, lighting has been a work in progress. Whoever designed the lights was clearly more focused on how their own handwork might look in pictures than how customers might actually feel under the unflinching glare of poorly positioned spotlights. For the first couple of months, if you were seated in one of the elevated booths, or at one of the tables directly in front of the kitchen, the overhead spots were pointed not at your table but directly at the top of your head, creating an upside-down "Blair Witch" effect that cast a ghastly shadow on the menu as you

attempted to read it. And then around 8 o'clock, those lights would abruptly shut off. No dimmers. No subtlety. Just boom, off.

It seems like such an amateurish blunder for such a professional, experienced team. "The lights are on a timer," a waiter explains, shaking his head in exasperation. Some of those lights have since been redirected to create an uneven glare on the brick, which I guess is better than "Blair Witch" on your head.

Gone, too, is lunch. For now the bistro serves only dinner.

In many ways, though, the new Marché is better than the old. The furniture is nicer. The wine rack, more dramatic. The patio, more lovely, the outside air scented with orange blossoms from a neighbor's tree. Amelia is almost always the one to greet you at the front door.

Head chef Florent seems re-energized, even though much of the menu remains unchanged. The four-page

menu still offers way more choices than common sense might dictate, a rambling collection of dishes from a chef incapable of self-editing. In a lesser restaurant, such an unfocused menu would annoy. But not here, because absolutely everything is terrific.

One bite of stewed rabbit and I'm squinting with joy, completely oblivious to the spotlight glaring in my eyes. One bite of smoked duck and I'm feeling the restaurant's soul begin to reveal itself.

"I'm watching you," says a woman at the next table when my grilled veal chop arrives. She's already told me about her love affair with the veal chop — and how she wants to take a bath in the green sauce that accompanies the potatoes. "I'm not looking away until I see you taste those potatoes," she says.

I poke one of the fingerlings with my fork and drag it through a vibrant green sauce and bring it to my lips. "Hurry!" she says, "I can't

stand it ..."

She keeps talking but her voice goes silent as my mind turns inward. I savor it slowly. Basil. Yogurt. Lemon ... "You're right," I say. "This is really good. But a bath?"

"Yes! I want to rub it all over me," she says, a little too believably.

The hits are nonstop. Steak au poivre. Moules frites. Hamachi crudo with yuzu-jalapeno sorbet. Charred octopus with chorizo emulsion. Celery root soup with fresh stone crab. Roasted langoustines layered atop uni risotto (possibly the best thing on the menu). Ravioli stuffed with foie gras and chestnut puree. Seared tuna with duck-skin cracklings. Whole roasted Dover sole. Green-tea panna cotta with a coconut madeleine pulled straight from the oven. A beautiful macaron that smells and tastes like roses. The kitchen doesn't miss a beat.

This isn't the same Marché Moderne. I miss

MARCHÉ MODERNE

Rating: ★★★
Where: 7862 E. Pacific Coast Highway, Newport Beach
Hours: 5-10 nightly
Don't miss: Crab and celery root soup, langoustines with uni risotto, veal chop, steak aux poivre, stewed rabbit, smoked duck, matcha panna cotta
Best place to sit: Front dining room

About the noise: Loud clanging just inside the kitchen door but otherwise comfortable

County health inspection: Several minor infractions but no major violations

Cost: Caviar \$68-\$108, starters \$11-\$35, entrees \$26-\$49, desserts \$12

Phone: 714-434-7900

Online: marchemoderne.net

What the stars mean:

0 = poor, unacceptable

1 = fair, with some noteworthy qualities

2 = good, solid, above average

3 = excellent, memorable, well above norm

4 = world class, extraordinary in every detail

Reviews are based on multiple visits. Ratings reflect the reviewer's overall reaction to food, ambiance and service.

parts of the original just as I welcome the new. Although it's still growing on me, and there are still kinks to be ironed out, I do believe this is already — once again — the best French bistro in California.