

## The Incredible Case of the Disappearing French Chef

Or, why successful Marché Moderne and newcomer Knife Pleat are truly exceptional—and not only because of the food.

By BENJAMIN EPSTEIN



Florent and Amelia Marneau of Marché Moderne and, left, Florent's coq au vin

and pickled rhubarb is the menu must-have. Desserts such as the Caramel—with VSOP cognac mousse; almond cake and crumble; and caramel cream and ice cream—are alone worth a visit.

MARCHÉ MODERNE opened in Costa Mesa in 2007, and for the Marneaus the timing also proved surprisingly fortuitous. “There have been trends,” Florent Marneau, 50, acknowledges. “There was a Spanish trend, and there is Italian, obviously. But we are so into what we do—we breathe French food every day—for us it has never left. The elegant clientele that comes in here, enjoys a bottle of Bordeaux and a multicourse meal—it never really goes away. I look at 5,000 to 6,000 guests a month. For us, it is French all the way.”

It's been two years since the elevated bistro moved to a stunning space on the coast with Provençal-style stone walls, walnut beamed ceiling and white-tile-and-marble exhibition-style kitchen. It is one of the few restaurants that use white tablecloths and—aside from forays into earthenware—elegant white china, albeit often in creative shapes.

refined, there is nothing nouvelle about it.

There are oysters du jour and several types of caviar, but don't overlook the tasting of five Bordier butters with “une bonne baguette.” Among starters are a crustacean degustation, with Maine lobster, Hokkaido scallops and sepia cuttlefish from France, and two versions of octopus, one from the restaurant's opening in 2007, the other very of-the-moment. Stars among entrées include roasted duck breast with pithivier of duck, potatoes, chanterelles and truffles. Coq au vin and steak frites au poivre pay tribute to the bistro. Amelia's macarons and Napoleons are unforgettable.

The new brunch may be the county's best. Our picks: deviled eggs with suckling pig, pork-belly rilette and Sriracha; potato crisp with smoked salmon and caviar; and Oeuf & Boeuf with short rib, Kobe beef tallow and sunny-side-up egg. Various flavored mimosas each come with a matching house-made marshmallow. The Café Citronné cocktail with limoncello, espresso and tonic actually goes with pastries.

KNIFE PLEAT and Marché Moderne are widely considered the county's best French restaurants. There are French-Belgian, French-Swiss, French-American and Cal-French restaurants in Orange County, but few others have you thinking “Vive le France” from start to finish. Recommended among those is modest Pescadou Bistro, on the Balboa Peninsula for 20 years, and French bakery-café Moulin—Laurent Vignaud just opened in Costa Mesa his fourth Moulin in five years.

“There are a few younger French chefs in L.A.—Ludovic Lefebvre, Christophe Émé—but French is more popular in New York and Boston than here in California,” notes Esnault. Lefebvre and Émé are star chefs; there are no young French chefs in Orange County whose reputation extends beyond the eatery's walls.

Reflects Amelia Marneau, “This has always been our dream, to do this day in and day out, in the very traditional way they do in France, where the husband and wife own and operate a restaurant. I'm not sure how many chefs are training in France, getting that kind of nuanced, in-depth culinary experience, then choosing to come to Orange County versus San Francisco or L.A. or New York.”

Only time will tell if Esnault and the Marneaus are part of a final flowering in the county of the cuisine that had been at the epicenter of Western cuisine for three centuries—given the squeeze by pizzerias and farm-to-table concepts—or if they are on the vanguard of a new era of French fare that has yet to find a label.

Either way, two of the county's very best restaurants are in deft French hands and generating excitement like few others.

Enjoy them now. ☛