

Hip Cassis morphs from bistro to lounge

Cassis Bistro, Tapas & Lounge

420 West Pender St.

Tel: 604-605-0420

Reviewed by Tim Pawsey

THE HIRED BELLY STANDS IN AWE OF anyone who puts their heart and soul—not to mention their hard-earned cash—into a new restaurant. But we're even more impressed when the team involved is made up of 20-something types, driven by sheer energy and uncompromising belief in what they're doing.

Cassis is hip, but in a low-key way. It's a clever chameleon of a room that morphs comfortably from daytime bistro to mid-evening lounge. Safe to say that the clientele morphs with it. When we visited, the next table was filled with out-of-towners from Montreal and Toronto, thrilled to find an option to hotel dining that offered good quality and affordability. Later in the evening came a sampling of R&B brews, while later still the tunes were cranked as the night crowd moved in.

Ultimately, it's about survival. Today's restaurants need to be flexible to compete with bars and even the ubiquitous coffee shop, not to mention cater to capricious consumers. And, at first glance, Cassis does it well.

Dishes are by no means fancy, nor are they large, but they're honest and appealing—and they're all under \$10. There aren't too many places where you can score a hearty, well-made, small bowl of stew for under 10 bucks. In fact, almost everything on the menu here is less than \$10, and lunch items (good panini, soups and crepes) are even more reasonably priced. A smart, late-night menu veers to thin crust pizza, Dungeness crab dip with chipotle cream cheese and chocolate fondue.

Surprising too, for these budget prices, is the cut-above tableware that



(L-R) Azza El Siddique, Dan McClintock, Sam Willcocks and Ben Coté showing off dishes of daube de boeuf and crab dip at the recently launched Cassis.

photo Tim Pawsey

likely stems from the team's hotel experience at Diva at the Met, the Vancouver Renaissance and Pan Pacific.

A smoked chorizo minestrone, shy on chorizo but not on vegetables, arrived in a piping hot, small tureen and, once through a thin scalding top, revealed plenty of flavour. It's perfect for warding off unseasonal rains (\$4.20).

More successful is the daube de boeuf that could stand on its own in a French country kitchen. It's intense, tender, flavourful and comes with decent slices of porcini (as promised) (\$4.20). A glass of lacklustre Calona Heritage Merlot sufficed (\$6.20). More attention needs to be paid to the wines by-the-glass list in days to come, particularly with the availability of some VQA wines. In the meantime, the wine prices seem to fly in the face of the bistro's affordable character. Maybe it's a little bit of a hotel pricing hangover.

Suffice to say, this is a work in progress, but I have a sense these guys know where they're going. Ruled by 20-foot ceilings, with newly finished fir

floors, splashes of maroon and lively art, the room is also testament to the effort it took to launch. The team took it over four months ago and transformed it from a grungy club to the sparkling part dining, part lounge space it is today, completing all the renovations themselves.

With hearty stews, decent beer on tap, jazz in the background and easy-to-handle prices, Cassis has plenty of promise, wrapped up in a dash of élan that you just don't expect on this sometimes gritty stretch of Pender. With starters, mains and a shared dessert you could do dinner for two for \$25. Sounds good to us.

Wine of the week

• Mission Hill Five Vineyards 2002 VQA Pinot Noir

The winery's new range of entry level VQA wines from its own sites and growers in central and south Okanagan represent excellent value. This Pinot is no exception: medium bodied with a hint of barnyard on the nose and dried fruit and cherry flavours through the close. Widely available and well-priced at \$13.99.

Food

Cassis brings French menu and ambience to downtown

If you've ever spent any time traipsing around Paris, Lyon or Beaune, no doubt you've come back to Vancouver completely smitten with the well-worn, high-ceilinged, atmosphere-steeped bars and bistros in the oldest parts of those venerable French cities.

Mois, chéri, who could resist? They're pure, unadulterated Old World to our all-too-familiar New World, and that's the attraction: the French have generations of



BY ROBIN MINES

Dining

Cassis Bistro
420 West Pender,
504 605-0420, \$S

history and culture behind them that no amount of creative North American imitation can possibly duplicate.

Cassis comes close. It's a small miracle of instant authenticity on an elderly stretch of Pender Street near Richards, with bone

structure to rival any charming little café on the Left Bank. It took five months' worth of elbow grease by Ben Coté, Sam Wilcox and Daniel McClintock to get down through the ancient layers of linoleum, plywood, tar and plaster to uncover its humble, turn-of-the-century good looks, and even if you're not hungry you should wander by for a drink at the bar just to admire their freshly-painted labour of love.

Better yet, wait 'til you've pecked and have a real meal. Chef Ben's idea of heaven is traditional, slow food French country cuisine served straight up.

It's low-end, scaled-down

food," he explains. "You know, lots of stews. It's been done the same way for a hundred years and I'm not going to change it. For me, that's just the way it is."

And that's just what you get at Cassis, with just enough West Coast flair—a dried tomato chip here, a touch of chipotle there—to nudge it into the present century. Salade Niçoise. Coq au vin. Daube de boeuf. Names so familiar, a kid in French 9 could translate them. It's wholesome, nourishing food, put together by Ben and crew in a semi-open kitchen so miniscule that four guys barely have enough space to do their own 360.

Sit down with a bubbly glass of Mounousseau from the Loire Valley (the wine list is a short, sweet mix of Old and New World), grab a menu, and get ready for a pleasant shock: nothing's over \$10. Not even a luxurious little tureen of bouillabaisse, redolent of orange peel, fennel and saffron, swimming with scallops, prawns, halibut cheek and clams and beefed up with garlic aioli.

Feeling romantic? The cheese



Ben Coté, chef and owner of Cassis Bistro at 420 W. Pender, is flanked by staffers Satya (left) and Emma. Photo by Doug Shanks

fondue with gruyère, emmenthal and white wine is a sexy thing for two of you to share. And whoa, that veau (blanquette de veau, that is): finished with cream, a spoonful of Dijon mustard of the side for DIY customization, Ben's veal stew is as classic as

it gets—just the thing with an order of perfect baby green beans (vegetables are à la carte) no thicker than a cocktail straw.

And just in case you think these guys are slaves to French tradition, get a load of Ben's favourite dessert: a banana split.

announced to
beside by Ben

himself with chocolate sauce maple brandy sauce and peach coulis in an eloquent gesture of Old-meets-New élan. Parisiennes eat your hearts out. ☺

See menu price guide on

page A35

Restaurants

B.C. has a bounty of

restaurants serving great food, like the antipasti from Sonora Room in Oliver. C2

BY MIA STAINSBY

RESTAURANT CRITIC

Youth might be short on experience but it's flush with nerve and nimbleness. The owners of Cassis, all in their early 20s are just full of it. Luckily, there's talent backing up their bounding optimism.

They saw the previous business for sale one day and signed the papers to take it over a few hours later. "Funny how it came about," chef/co-owner Ben Cote says, untrammelled by the law of averages on restaurant survival.

After renovations, Cassis is charmingly attractive with high ceilings, black chair coverings, asparagus-green walls, old-wood floors, black and white blow-up photographs of ash (you read right) and a bar stretching down one side.

Until Cassis came along, that block of West Pender had little sex appeal. They've added a little buzz, and the buzz amplifies as the night progresses and the music ramps up to lounge mode.

Cote, 23, had a couple of excellent mentors during his apprenticeship — Rob Sulatycky, former chef at Bacchus, and Michael Noble, former chef at Diva at The Met are both highly acclaimed chefs. Cote went on to cook at The Four Seasons, Pan Pacific and Renaissance hotels before starting a catering business and then, opening his own place.

His French ancestry prodded him to pursue a French bistro theme. His isn't a show-off menu in terms of experimentation and creativity. It's solid French bistro fare — bouillabaisse, coq au vin, daube, choucroute. Cote patiently coaxes flavours and melt-in-mouth from the stews in long, slow cooking processes. He shops well for the freshest of ingredients, organic produce and likes the idea of foraging around in



VANCOUVER SUN

Cassis owner-chef Ben Cote with Aza El Siddouque (left) and Satya Maharaj (right) at Cassis.

the back of a farmer's truck at the back of the restaurant.

And, listen up — the prices are insanely low: bouillabaisse goes for \$9.20; coq au vin, \$8.20; daube de boeuf, \$8.20; and choucroute (braised smoked pork shank, house-made sausage, pickled cabbage), \$8.20. The meals, being just slightly smaller than full entree portions, could be supplemented with sharing side dishes like the cassoulets, scalloped potatoes or roasted mushrooms. For late nighters, the cheese fondu, crab dip and bruschettas are great for sharing. Desserts, which aren't done in-house, aren't quite as compelling as Cote's cooking.

A few weeks after opening, Cassis

opened for lunch as well as dinner. I haven't lunched there yet, but next time I'm dithering with colleagues on where to grab lunch, I know where it'll be. Lunch features crepes, thin-crust pizzas, soups, salads, panini and some of the dinner stews.

Thanks also to their youthful nimbleness, the chef and cooks seem to cohabit peacefully in a teeny little kitchen. Well, not exactly peacefully — during one visit, a pan dropped clangorously to the floor and an industrial-sized blender seemed to be having a fit.

Servers helped to make for a pleasant experience — the Ashton Kutcher clone is exceedingly helpful and the beautiful ones, well, they'd

make Tyra Banks envious.

Restaurant visits are conducted anonymously and interviews are done by phone. Restaurants are rated out of five stars. (mstainsby@png.canwest.com)

CASSIS

420 West Pender St., 604-605-0420. Lunch, Monday to Friday, 11 to 3; dinner, 7 nights a week, 5 to 1 a.m. Website: www.cassisvancouver.com.

Overall ★★★★★

Food ★★★★★

Ambience ★★★★★

Service ★★★★★

Price \$\$

Mark Laba's **Adventures In Dining**



Stewing over small stuff

Cassis

WHERE: 420 West Pender, Vancouver
PAYMENT/RESERVATIONS: Major credit cards, 604-605-0420
DRINKS: Fully licensed
HOURS: Mon.-Fri., lunch 11 a.m.-2:30 p.m., dinner 5:30 p.m.-1 a.m.; Sat.-Sun. dinner only 5:30 p.m.-1 a.m.

In high school, I had a French teacher named Madame D. with a face like bouillabaisse and a body like a crockpot. "Vite, vite, vite," she'd yell at me but I still continue to stumble over French pronunciations as if there were baguettes tied to my teeth. I may not speak French very well but I can eat French like there's no tomorrow.

Hit this new place in the belly of the city, housed in an ancient building with high ceilings, massive windows front and rear, and oozing all the character of a Raymond Chandler novel with funky updated furnishings, abstract paintings and a bustling bistro atmosphere, along with one of the tiniest kitchens I've ever seen.

Peaches and I met up with Shirley Temple II and Roy Rogers Jr. and snagged the comfortable couches at the back in the lounge area complete with one of those wacky fake fireplaces with red light flickering off the plastic logs. "Whaddya think about fondue?" I asked, scanning the menu. "We're fondue virgins," Shirley replied. "I think our tastebuds have waited long enough for the right cheese to come along."

So we began with this melted



Kim Stallknecht — The Province

Ben Coté is the owner/chef of Cassis on West Pender.

gruyere and emmenthal mire (\$9.20), coddled with white wine and herbs, burbling over a small flame with crisp foccacia strips for dipping. Very comforting dish, although Roy was a little unsure of double-dipping etiquette until we glommed onto the idea of snapping the foccacia sticks in half. The Dungeness crab dip with chipotle cream is equally soothing and, at \$11.20, the most expensive item on the menu.

The eatery is the creation of chef

Ben Coté, trained by some of the best fancy pants local culinary giants, along with pals Daniel McClintock and Sam Wilcox, young bohemians with classic French-country cooking sensibilities. The proof is in the stew details, not to mention the smoked chorizo minestrone and French onion soup (\$4.20-\$5.20).

"I put in all the important stuff and take out the extras to get to the essence of the ingredients," Coté told me.

Sampled the ever-popular daub de boeuf (\$8.20), beef stewed in its own juices for four hours until it's nice and relaxed, then finished with Burgundy wine and porcini mushrooms. Fragrant and fuming with earthy undertones, simple ingredients fusing into rollicking flavours like a bunch of robust French folk playing Twister in a overheated Provence rec-room.

Just as good is the veal braquette (\$9.20) or the choucrout (\$8.20), a smoky porker of a dish with homemade sausage nuzzle up to a braised-pork shank, a plopped atop pickled cabbage for a pungent undercurrent.

The bouillabaisse and coq au vin are also excellent, from sea life awash in a fennel-scented tomato broth to poultry marinated in Pinot Noir (\$8.20-\$9.20).

These are small portions but filling, especially when you order a side vegetable or cassoulet dish like the scalloped potatoes (\$4.20) ratatouille with eggplant and zucchini (\$5.20) or the navy bean cassoulet, punched up with tomato and chorizo (\$6.20). There's also a lunch menu with thin-crust pizzas, paninis and crêpes.

Finished with two excellent desserts, a zingy lemon tart (\$4) and a banana split, the banana flambéed first in brandy and the dish up with ice cream and chocolate, raspberry and pecan brandy sauces (\$9.50).

"Vite, vite, vite, eat quick," I said "or else I'll vacuum up all the desserts." Madame D. taught me something after all.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Slow cooking French country-style with some nice wines to smooth the palate and nasal passages.

RATING: Food: ★★★★★ Service: ★★★★★ Atmosphere: ★★★★★