

Bistro Cacao

Gallic Grace Near Union Station



TOP to BOTTOM
1. Lamb chops graced by fresh asparagus prepared by Chef Kemal Deger.
2. Bistro Cacao is the perfect romantic setting.
3. Hill residents will recognize General Manager Veronique Onteniente.

ARTICLE BY CELESTE McCALL | PHOTOS BY ANDREW LIGHTMAN

What? Yet another chocolate lounge? That's what we thought when we were invited to the opening party for Bistro Cacao, which arrived last December in the spot vacated by Two Quail. We learned differently.

"We were looking for a name that was easy to pronounce," explained general manager Veronique Onteniente. "Then we realized we had to carry out the theme with a cocoa bean."

At the newest addition to Massachusetts avenue's "restaurant row," the cooking is decidedly Gallic, by way of Turkey. It all began with a partnership among three-long time Turkish friends: Brothers Harun and Yavuz Bolukbasi, and talented chef Kemal Deger.

Deger learned French cooking at culinary school in his native

Istanbul; he arrived in the United States in 1993. Over the next two decades, he honed his skills at local restaurants including Cities (in Adams Morgan), where he cooked with chef Mary Richter. However, Deger considers mentor Yannick Cam (who operated Provence), "the best I ever worked for."

More Gallic charm and expertise comes from Onteniente, who was born in Beziers, in the South of France. If the attractive, former ballerina looks familiar, it is because she helped launch Montmartre (near Eastern Market) in September, 2001. "Back then, we were the only French restaurant on the Hill," she recalled. "It was before Belga and Sonoma had opened."

She remained at Montmartre for five years before moving to Montsouris (Dupont Circle, now



Bistro Cacao
320 Massachusetts Ave. NE
202-546-4737
www.bistrocacao.com
Open for lunch Monday-Friday from 11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m.; Dinner Sunday-Thursday from 5 to 10 p.m.; Dinner Friday-Saturday 4 to 11 p.m.; Saturday-Sunday brunch: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

closed), before spending a year in Provence with her 14-year-old daughter Marine. "I spent a year building memories, and bonding...I



learned new things by going to markets...I was surrounded by olive trees. I was born into food and wine. I learned from my mother who is a great cook, and my great-grandmother went to Cordon Bleu."

At Bistro Cacao, "lunchtime trade is slowly building up, and weekends are wonderful," Onteniente said, estimating that they do about 80 covers (dinners) Friday and Saturday nights, fewer on weekdays. But business has picked up considerably since the outdoor patio—which adds 40 seats to the 68 inside—was unveiled April 1.

The decor has been freshened up since the Two Quail days. Much of the funky Victorian ambience remains, but the addition of rich red drapes and cozy, cushioned booths evoke the Orient Express. "Or," adds Veronique, "Moulin Rouge in the 1930s. It's quiet and romantic."

The restaurant's "green room," which accommodates 25 to 30, is more bistro style, ideal for private parties. Co-owner Yavuz has also added his own touch: antiques.

Most popular dish? Hanger steak. Over several visits, we've sampled lobster bisque, trout stuffed with goat cheese and sundried tomatoes, moules Cacao (mussels steamed in wine, shallots, herbs and lime broth), and excellent vegetable quiche, the latter at Sunday brunch.

"My big thing is wine, says Veronique, who designed Bistro Cacao's wine list. She is especially looking forward to the wine bar, which should open later this spring. The addition will showcase French, Italian, Spanish and some American....from small producers. To accompany the carte du vin: artisan cheeses, charcuteries and assorted tapas.

"I'm a passionate person," Onteniente adds. "I'm happy because I'm doing the work that I love. It's a gift for me." Kemal agrees: "We're so happy to be here, we've all come together. We hope to be one of the best restaurants in DC." ★



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