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Bistro Cacao: Cozy, romantic French dining comes to Capitol Hill, DC

January 10, 2010 by [Alexander](#)

When it comes to French dining, I'm lucky enough to have eaten at everything from rustic bistros and cafes to classic fine dining. Last night, I was happy to find a new restaurant that nestled comfortably in between the two.

[Bistro Cacao](#), a new French restaurant in the Capitol Hill neighborhood of [Washington, D.C.](#), may occupy a sweet spot. Bistro Cacao opened on last December 15th, just in time for the biggest snowstorm to hit the District in years, and already has earned [excellent reviews on Yelp](#) and other online review aggregators.

We enjoyed a fine meal, with a few service hiccups, and plan to return again.

Atmosphere aplenty

Bistro Cacao is at 320 Massachusetts Avenue, occupying the same cozy space that [Two Quail](#) did for nearly two decades. I gather new hardwood floors and rustic wine racks were added to the previous decor; both are great upgrades. The interior is similar to a well-appointed Victorian home, albeit with a few dozen more tables and a small granite bar. One room feels like your funky great aunt's living room, decorated with antique knickknacks, paintings and candelabras. (The overall effect is pleasant, though I have no idea what green LED lights are doing there.) The other is updated and decidedly romantic, with intimate booths, red curtains and diffuse lighting.

The music that drifts over the scene felt straight out of Buddha Bar, perhaps inspired by the tastes of the Bolukbasi brothers, the restaurateurs behind [Mezè](#) in [Adams Morgan](#) and [Ezme](#) in [Dupont Circle](#).

Room to grow on service

We experienced a couple of surprises. Our table wasn't ready until nearly fifteen minutes after our reservation, with no apologies. And the hostess greeted us at the bar but failed to offer us drinks while we waited and talked with her, pouring a glass of water for another customer and promising a pour when she returned. (The host eventually filled our glasses with water and a decent Bordeaux). Once seated, a waiter appeared to stumble upon us to take our order. And later in the evening, the staff served us dessert menus – twice – before our entrees had arrived.

The more memorable moment came when we asked for a recommendation for a wine to match the duck we'd ordered. The pinor noir that arrived was thin, acrid and bitter. Even with the differences between the Oregonian reds we've been spoiled by over the years and French versions, this was unpleasant. When the host stopped by to ask about our experience of our appetizer, we had to be blunt about asking to return it. The hostess reappeared with two other reds to taste, both of which were much better, but surprised us by drinking both glasses after we'd sipped from them. (Both tasting glasses stayed on the table until after our entrees were cleared.)

That said, we found all of the staff courteous, responsive and quick to respond to any request. I have a feeling the kinks will get worked out.

Tasty French dining

I'll be honest: I'll put up with a dreadful atmosphere or miserable service in return good food. For great food, I can live with both. Bistro Cacao delivered excellent dishes at extremely reasonable prices. That, in addition to its proximity to home is why we'll be back.

We started with *Crevettes Flambées au Pernod*. In theory, shrimp sautéed served with a cannellini bean and porcini mushroom ragu and finished with a lemon Pernod sauce should have been a welcome departure from the norm. In practice, while the shrimp were nicely cooked with a pleasantly smoky flavor, the beans were over-salted, overwhelming the sauce itself. The mushrooms were a bit sparse and didn't lend their earthy richness to the ragu. That said, we finished the plate.



Leg of lamb

Unfortunately, the kitchen was out of venison by the time we were seated, so my companion for this evening of French dining chose the *Carré d'Agneau aux Herbes* (above). I found the mustard and herb crust a touch strong, and didn't take much of whatever herbs accompanied the mustard, but the rack of lamb itself was gorgeous. Tender, medium rare, and delicious when bathed in the rosemary jus.



The other, *Magret de Canard, Gratin de Pommes de Terre et Réduction a la Framboise* (below) was delectable. The duck breast was properly rare and complemented gracefully the raspberry wine reduction. The potato gratin was creamy and gone all too quickly. I haven't braised endives before. I'm a fan. The sweetness added through cooking was balanced by a lingering bitterness well.

We devoured our dessert, a fresh apple tart with marzipan and vanilla ice cream, encircled by a raspberry coulis. Wonderful finish.



Apple tart

Great meal. We'll be back.

French dining gets social

In 2010, it's not surprising that a new restaurant will look for ways to leverage social media. Bistro Cacao has established digital outposts, including BistroCacao.com, a [Facebook page](#) and [@BistroCacao](#) on Twitter. With one tweet – truncated

from Facebook, no less – Bistro Cacao isn't making much use of that platform yet, but the Facebook page has some interesting features, including integration with OpenTables for reservations and use of events and photos.

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