

How To Order in a French Restaurant and Not Get Fat.



I've been on a French Bistro kick. I must admit I've been on this kick for about 2 years now. I currently much prefer to eat simple food prepared lovingly with local ingredients over eating a chemistry experiment with all the pomp, circumstance and endless tasting courses. Those places do serve their purpose but I think eating in small, locally-owned restaurants in Chicago is fine dining too.

And fine dining it is. You can eat wonderful things and not gain weight if you're just careful about what you choose to order. And if the menu offering isn't exactly what you'd like, the restaurants are much more accommodating these days. Let me tell you what I ate last night.

Following a business meeting I walked a block to one of the fancier French Bistros in Chicago. Henri is located on Michigan Avenue which automatically elevates its status. It also elevates the rent for the restaurant so the prices are a bit steeper than the tiny bistros in the neighborhoods but the décor, the service and the food presentation make it worth that little bit more. The chandeliers are stunning. My favorites.

As soon as we were seated and “watered” a young man brought perfectly shaped French bread rolls and butter to our table. In most restaurants I won’t eat the bread. The carbohydrate content of bread very closely equates to dessert. Your liver can’t tell the difference between bread and dessert. It’s all just varying amounts of sugar so I don’t usually eat it. When I do eat the bread served before a meal I just consider that I’m getting part of my dessert early. The secret to making the bread slightly more appealing to your body in not jacking up your blood sugar level is to go liberally with the butter. The fat in the butter will tame the glycemic index value on what you’re eating and the butter slows down the uptake so it’s not such a sugar jolt in your system.

Already, to many, I sound like a heretic. For decades we were told the butter is what’s bad for us. Eat the bread. Skip the butter. Well, that was wrong. As I shout so often, it’s now been proven that FAT doesn’t make you FAT. It’s the carbohydrates that do. So if you’re going to eat the bread, slather it with butter and enjoy in moderation. Save the bread consumption for the warm, wonderful bread. Skip the rest.

For a first course I ordered the fois gras pave. I’m a huge fois gras fan and when formed into a mousse, I’m salivating. The term pave just translates to “cobblestone” so anything formed into a pave is going to arrive on the plate looking like a square or rectangular block. This dish was served with a few peach bits, some peach preserves and a dusting of pistachios. And of course, on the side they served the traditional toasted brioche. Bread again. But when you are at Henri you know the bread will be the finest available so you indulge just a bit. In this case the fat is not coming from the butter but from the fois gras. I keep my brioche consumption to an absolute minimum by stacking the fois gras on a little thick. They serve 5 brioche triangles with the dish. I don’t eat quite two. I

leave the rest.

For the dinner course I ordered the venison tenderloin. Venison is even leaner than beef tenderloin and was offered as the game course of the day. The venison arrived perfectly prepared. Maybe 5 ounces tops. The dish was surrounded with a few teeny seasonal vegetables and a three tablespoon smear of the best pureed cauliflower I have ever seen and tasted. I told my husband the flavor was “transcendent” and the waiter overheard me. He commented over his shoulder that he couldn’t believe his taste buds earlier in the afternoon when, he too, had a chance to sample it. It was white as snow and fluffier than warm marshmallow cream. Divine.

So I ordered fat for first course. And lean for the second one. I skipped dessert altogether. I was full and perfectly satisfied. We enjoyed a Cote Rotie for our wine accompaniment and were ready to leave very happy diners.

When the waiter brought the check he also came with a teeny plate that had two perfectly cut $\frac{1}{2}$ ” square brownies with a chocolate mousse dab on top. Decadent, delightful and just the exquisite last bite.

I woke up today .4 pounds lighter than I did yesterday. So much for getting fat in a French restaurant.

As a side note: When I order dessert in a French Bistro I often order a cheese course with a bit of late harvest French wine or maybe an Armagnac. The French are masters at tempering their cheeses so the lushness of the flavor stands out. They GET IT when it comes to cheese. They don’t serve it to you refrigerator cold and the little bit of fruit accompaniment (often figs or dates) satisfies my sweet tooth. No big, sugary dessert required. If I do experience a regular dessert it’s often split amongst 4 – 6 people and I am perfectly happy with a

bite or two. Any more than that I'd be out on the curb with my head spinning from the sugar. Once you get that stuff cleared out of your system your tolerance for the side effects of sugar plummets. Your body is trying to tell you something. Sugar = BAD.

Other Favorite French Bistros in Chicago: if you come to Chicago these are the places to check out. I often get email from readers who are coming for a conference so save this list for reference.

Chez Moi. Chef Dominique will accommodate any low carb diner. He's happy to come up with special tidbits for appetizer or dessert. Many of his entrees are low carb too.

Kiki's Bistro. This place has been on a quiet little street called Franklin for decades. Kiki is a perfect example of a French gentleman with a bit of flirt in him. The décor is very country, barn French.

Bistrot Margot and Bistrot Zinc will make you feel like you just stepped into Paris.

La Sardine and Le Bouchon have the same owners. La Sardine is Le Bouchon's big sister. You can find me at Le Bouchon for lunch. It's about six blocks from my house. Parisian authenticity all around.

Café Absinthe has been on my radar for almost 30 years. And a perennial favorite. The lighting in here is done by a theater designer and is so romantic and dramatic. The draperies too.

Chez Joel is a teeny place on the south side of Chicago. Well worth the venture down there.

Gemini Bistro gets high acclaim and has freshly roasted chickens for take-out when we Chicagoans want to eat French bistro at

home. This place has a busy, buzzy feel. Lots of chatter.

And this weekend, for our 28th wedding anniversary we will be dining at the NEW French bistro Maison Brasserie.

Can't wait.

Cheers,