

BRIGHT LIGHTS, BIG-CITY VIBE ; CAN CAN A LOUD AND LIVELY PLACE TO MEET FRIENDS, ENJOY MORE-THAN- JUST-BISTRO FARE

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On our early Thursday night visit, service was as choreographed as the namesake dance. Greeting us as "lady" and "sir," a head waiter offered specialty cocktails (\$6.50-\$15) while we perused the menu. An assistant waiter swooped in with bread baked in-house, and appetizer forks arrived on a silver platter moments later. A service director watched voyeuristically, ensuring the timing of courses was perfect.

We started with seared sea scallops (\$11) and a salad of beets (\$9.50). Thinly sliced and perfectly golden, the scallops arrived atop a bed of salsify (an oyster-flavored root vegetable), leeks and chanterelles. The mushrooms' nuttiness and leeks' onion tang added subtle layers of flavor to the seafood's succulence. A delicate butter sauce brought it all together.

Homemade desserts range from seasonal to traditional, so we tried the chocolate molten cake (\$8.50) and almond tart (\$8). Dusted with sugar, the soft cake came between two thin chocolate wafers. Oozing warm chocolate lava, it was hot-cold heaven with the scoop of chocolate ice cream surrounded by cookie crumbles. I shook with sugar-induced glee as I poured the accompanying blackberry soup shooter over the whole display.

Freelance writer and graphic designer Dana Craig considers dessert the most important food group. The Times-Dispatch pays for the meals on her unannounced visits to restaurants. Contact her at dcraig@timesdispatch.com. Dining Out

We're all a little voyeuristic at times. When someone leaves the blinds open and the lights on, we can't help but look inside. There's just something mischievously fun about sneaking a peek at something you shouldn't.

Don't deny it, because I've seen you do it. You had your noses pressed against the glass at Can Can Brasserie, Carytown's newest French restaurant, lasciviously awaiting the opening since construction began. The process created such stories and spectacle, naming the place after an exhibitionist dance seems only fitting.

A French artisan took 500 hours to complete the 50-foot zinc bar, complete with oyster bar and breakfast area. A full-time baker, pastry chef and wine director were hired to assist chefs Christopher Ripp (also proprietor), Joe DePaola and Christopher Chase. Staff training took 2 1/2 weeks. When the soft opening finally occurred, the place was slammed, and rumors of worn-thin servers and long waits quickly circulated.

After almost four months of working out the kinks and adjusting to massive nightly crowds, does Can Can live up to all the hype? It does ... as long as you know what you're getting into.

Like a traditional brasserie (literally meaning "beer hall"), Can Can opens early, serves late and attracts an eclectic crowd. Boisterously informal, it's a place to be seen ... and heard. Decibel levels are deafening at times, especially on weekends and during later hours when the bar crowd takes over.

The open, blazingly lit interior is abuzz with action as armies of waiters zigzag through the smoking bar and cafe areas. Red leather banquettes pack diners in, making impetuous eavesdropping on others' conversations part of the experience.

Bright yellow walls, dark wood and metal racks of fresh bread enliven the nonsmoking dining area. Tables are covered in quilted paper, and folded dish towels act as napkins.

The vibe is obviously different than at a classic French restaurant, so don't expect intimate dining and mood lighting. But this isn't just a place for frites, either. Skilled service and finely crafted cuisine prevail, so prices run higher than at a standard bistro.

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I'm not going to lie. The entirely French wine list (\$15-\$56 per bottle; half-carafes \$8; full carafes \$15) was intimidating, but our waiter easily suggested a glass of 2002 Alsace Pinot Blanc "Classique" (\$8) after I explained my usual favorites.

Eric wasn't up for a French lesson, so he stuck with a Hoegaarden (\$4.50) from the list of German, Belgium and French draft and bottled beers.

The only thing "simple" about this place is the food, and I say that positively. Entrees are not complicated or hidden by overpowering sauces and sides. Each main ingredient's essence is the star, accented by fittingly minimal accompaniments.

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Three kinds of beets were served over mche greens and dusted with crushed walnuts. A quiet yet tangy walnut vinaigrette and goat cheese added welcome tartness to the beets.

My roasted salmon entree (\$19) was simple and fresh. The waiter noted that the chef tends to cook things rare, so his suggestion of medium-well was right on the money. Roasted skin-on, the flaky, moderate fillet paired nicely with earthy lentils and wild mushrooms. Bold red wine shallots gave intermittent bites surprising intensity.

Eric's snapper au pistou (\$18) was the reason bread stayed on the table throughout the meal. The lightly crisp fish was served in a shallow bowl of pungent basil broth with finely diced fennel and squash. Brasseries are informal, remember? So, I had no problem reaching across the table to soak my bread in the tasty broth.

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The warm almond tart's pastry shell was chock-full of slivered almonds and served with a small yet intensely flavored scoop of ginger ice cream. Dense and filling, this dessert deserved heeding the waiter's advice to share.

Even though Can Can is open the majority of the day, don't be surprised if you drive down Cary Street early one morning and see me with my face pressed against the window. I'll be peering inside lustfully anticipating the morning's beignets and crepes ... ready to battle the crowds with earplugs in hand.

Can Can

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