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## COVER STORY

March 28, 2007

### Restaurant of the Year 2007: Can Can Brasserie

How can a French brasserie represent the best that Richmond's restaurant scene has to offer? And why now, after Can Can has been open for more than two years, does it merit our restaurant critics' ultimate stamp of approval as Restaurant of the Year?

Here's the reasoning from our reviewers:

"I've found myself often going to Can Can when I'm not reviewing a place," B.P. Fox says, "because there's always something everyone likes there — friends, in-laws, children. You can get the best burger in town, plus an excellent sole meunière, and I'm still dreaming about the pork belly they had as a weekly special for an all-too-brief time.

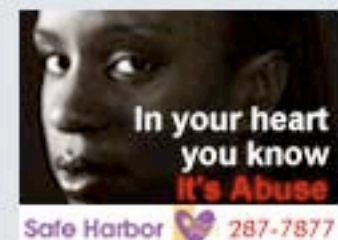
"I love their attention to detail: the pots of softened butter, the tiny pitchers of simple sugar for iced tea, fabulous bread, carafes of decent rosé at a decent price, and, of course, the almost exact reproduction of Balthazar in Manhattan, down to the wall color. All of this would have been impossible to appreciate if they hadn't gotten their service together, which was so awful in the beginning I vowed never to go back. Until my in-laws wanted to go and I couldn't say no. I just crossed my fingers and it was great. Not a problem at all. So I found myself there again and again."

Patrick Getlein's assessment: "Can Can manages to avoid being just a set piece of a restaurant and actually channels something of the spirit of generosity at the heart of the brasserie concept, while turning out excellent brasserie classics like steak frites, coq au vin, beef bourguignon and oysters.



From the Plats Principaux (entrée) section of the Can Can menu, the pan-roasted rockfish is served with onion spaetzle, wild mushrooms, pickled fennel, stewed leeks and lemon-garlic sauce.

photo by Scott Elmquist



"There's nothing new here, of course. The menu has been in existence for a century or more, but Chris Ripp and company bring a level of care to their preparations that make these classics anything but tired. The frites, so perfectly fried to just the other side of done, come wrapped in white paper and arranged in a silver vase like a bouquet of salty brown flowers. The moules are almost an afterthought for the richly flavored white wine and garlic broth. Mopping it up with bread from their boulangerie is overtly encouraged.

"The staff has worked hard to get their act together since first opening. The place can get loud, and that makes it a little difficult to hear a conversation, even your own. But it's that joyful noise that adds the spark of new life to this otherwise Old World-style restaurant."

Don Baker finds himself heading to Can Can many mornings for an espresso, croissant and the New York Times. Can Can, he says, "has brought pizzazz to the Richmond dining scene, has spared no expense on its physical facilities, has kept prices moderate and offers great private party rooms and a bar that's always busy." In addition, Baker considers Bob Talcott, Can Can's wine director, to be the best sommelier in town, greeting guests at the bar with relaxed charm and hosting wine dinners that are informative and congenial.

Joe Cates looks at Can Can's prowess more globally and reflects on the significance of location: "Carytown officially becomes the center of the Richmond culinary world by bringing together the following elements: a French patisserie at Jean-Jacques Bakery; two great seafood markets; an impeccable French dining establishment in 1 North Belmont; a real butchery; a seriously great chef, Dale Reitzer at Acacia," and excellent wine shops, ice cream, kitchen gear, pizzas, deli sandwiches, chocolates and what feels like more per capita Thai food than anywhere outside Bangkok.

Can Can, he says, completes the picture with its versatile menu, its extended hours of operation and its egalitarian atmosphere — frites are more ubiquitous than roast corvina, for example. Most dishes are prepared in a California-French tradition that's lighter and more accessible to a range of diners than the richer European manner.

Proprietor Chris Ripp has continued to refine the kitchen operation with no apparent desire to become a celebrity chef, something of a rarity in today's food world. Ripp is serious and generally well-regarded within Richmond's tight food community for his training and focus.

Can Can's kitchen, run by executive chefs Joe DePaola (who's leaving soon to teach) and Christopher Chase, is immaculate and precision-oriented; a phalanx of workers receives professional training in a nearly round-the-clock environment — a factor that could benefit Richmond's food scene exponentially as capable young cooks and bakers emerge from the rigors of this operation.

And while its service staff may need to develop additional finesse, there's usually enough bustle among the clientele to distract from minor flaws; comment cards and managers are expected to address the rest. Complaints about seating procedures and noise levels are among the most repeated. At least one reviewer hopes for wireless access and more adventurous specials. "They could use a little more wow in that area," B.P. Fox suggests, "but they've even turned the lights down, and I never thought I'd see that happen."

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Can Can's business-savvy benevolence, headed by President Dan Brantingham, includes Tuesday-night art shows with visiting performers and artisans. The bar has occasionally become an eye-catching runway for fashion shows that bring attention and traffic not only to the restaurant but also to the retail district, particularly its clothiers.

The place changes character throughout the day, offering a yellow-toned moving image that can also be enjoyed from the street; passersby become as much a part of the brasserie's scene as the energy of those within it.

From its corner windows and sidewalk chairs, a good cross section of the city's life comes into view. It's a landmark that's memorable, Cates says: "When friends have hit the Carytown shops and shared a meal in Can Can, and then say things like Richmond is a really cool little city, it makes me proud to eat here."

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