

Restaurants

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Gracious dining, commendable cuisine at Restaurant Marché on Bainbridge

Chef Greg Atkinson and his wife, Betsy, are co-proprietors of this congenial Bainbridge Island newcomer. He's putting a French bistro spin on a market-driven menu of Northwest ingredients with very satisfying results; she's the cordial hostess.

By PROVIDENCE CICERO

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On a hot August night, Betsy Atkinson welcomed a wilted party of Seattleites to Restaurant Marché. "I'm so sorry you missed your ferry, but we're glad you finally made it," she said. "Come look around, see where you'd like to sit."

We might have been arriving for a party in her home, and in a way we were: She and her husband, Chef Greg Atkinson, are co-proprietors of this congenial newcomer to the Bainbridge Island dining scene.

She settled us in an upholstered booth that caught a breeze from the open patio door. We were near the bar's separate nook, and within sight of the counter fronting the kitchen where flames gyrated above a wood-burning grill.

A server arrived promptly, and quickly supplied us with cold drinks, warm bread and good butter. Then came a gift from the kitchen: an amuse bouche of raw albacore dabbed with sesame oil curled on a dainty gaufrette potato chip.

Greg Atkinson has enjoyed a multifaceted career as a chef (at Friday Harbor House and Canlis), a teacher (at Seattle Culinary Academy at Seattle Central Community College), and as an author (several books and articles including regular contributions to The Seattle Times). He's a pro and it shows at Marché, where he's putting a French bistro spin on a market-driven menu of Northwest ingredients with very satisfying results.

Start out with smooth chicken liver pâté and chase each voluptuous mouthful with a bite of tart cornichons, or sweet, pickled red onions put up in-house.

If Provençal fish soup is the soup of the day, go for it. Saffron wafts from the briny depths of a gorgeous, tomato-bolstered seafood broth harboring a delicate halibut quenelle, a creamed fish dumpling of surpassing lightness.

Black cherries and brandy combine in a forceful sauce for tender duck breast, crisp-skinned and cozy in a nest of grilled broccolini and Einkorn, an ancient wheat grain with a chewy texture similar to farro.

Another potent reduction sauce moistened the meat-filled crevices of braised oxtail. Thursday's "plat du jour," the oxtail was paired with gnocchi Parisienne, which didn't quite achieve the desired lightness of being.

Carrot flan, in contrast, was so light it seemed almost to hover above the plate. Offered a la carte, the flan was also the focal point of the "Market Vegetable Plate," a collection of seasonal vegetables that works as a vegetarian entree or as a side dish for the table to share.

Wood-fire cooking does wonders for a Skagit River Ranch sirloin and for wild salmon, too. The meat was served sliced with a pile of creamy-centered, skin-on frites and impeccable aioli. The fish lolled in a lagoon of tomato-butter sauce on a raft of tarragon-laced haricots verts.

Those crisp green beans turned up again entwined with peppery young greens in salade Niçoise. The minimalist mosaic included lush, pale-pink slices of seared rare albacore, warm, crisp rounds of fingerling potatoes and tiny black olives, thoughtfully pitted.

Excellent sorbets highlighted two desserts. Apricot sorbet complemented dense, dark-chocolate marquise. Strawberry sorbet vied with an array of fresh berries that tumbled from a cornet-shaped almond cookie.

How nice it was to sit in cushioned comfort, to have a conversation without shouting across the table, to enjoy the attentions of a youthful staff, still learning but brimming with earnest enthusiasm.

And how often in this era of exhibition kitchens does the chef come out to say hello? Atkinson did, going from table to table, asking each how everything was. It was another reminder of the sort of gracious dining that appears to be nearly extinct and it offers Seattleites another good reason to hop a boat and head to Restaurant Marché soon.

Providence Cicero, Seattle Times restaurant critic, co-hosts "Let's Eat" with Terry Jaymes at 4 p.m. Saturdays on 97.3 KIRO FM. Listen to past shows atwww.KIRORadio.com/letseat.

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