

## Cuisinett: French Comfort Food

A few years back, Frenchman Geoffroy Raby noticed something. "The French food here," he observed, "it is heavy, expensive, and not kid-friendly." The owner of San Carlos' Cuisinett had an idea. "I thought, ok, let's do the opposite."

"The opposite" is Cuisinett, where the ex-pat from Lille has traded the stiffness of fine dining for the relaxed ambiance of a neighborhood cafe. Under exposed brick and an open ceiling, family diners and date nights coexist in harmony. It is where the decadent moules frites, a hearty bowl of meaty mussels and french fries, can be served alongside a deliciously uncomplicated ham and cheese Sandwich Parisien.

"I wanted to serve what I would eat at my home, at a cafe or a friend's house," said Raby, his accent underscoring his authority on the matter. "There, you get roasted chicken, pork chop, or mussels. There's ratatouille, there's quiche."

In addition to breaking down the stuffy labels of French food, Raby was keen to avoid what he calls the "beret and baguette" stereotype. With a menu inspired by six regions of France - Nord, Sud, Est, Ouest, Sud-Ouest, and Centre - Raby fashioned Cuisinett to give customers a taste of the whole country, not just Paris. The menu offers homey dishes and flavors typical of the different regions. The moules frites is a classic from Raby's Nord. In the Centre of France is the mustard-focused city of Dijon. On the menu is the Sandwich Dijonnaise, where succulent pulled chicken meets a sharp whole grain mustard on a crunchy baguette.

But before there was Cuisinett, its regionally-inspired menu, and Raby's plan to undo French stereotypes, there was a catch: Raby is not a chef. He is a marketing



*Geoffroy Raby*

and business guy. Moving to San Francisco in 2001 was supposed to be a finite adventure, a way to experience the States and learn English before attending business school in France.

When the year was complete, though, Raby was not ready to say goodbye. He re-charted his course and attended school for marketing and finance in San Francisco. To earn money on the side, Raby worked in restaurants. What started as a means to an end led to a post-graduate career in restaurant insurance and kitchen equipment sales. With each step Raby's convictions were confirmed: French food was getting pigeonholed.

Armed with a list of one hundred potential recipes, Raby needed a chef consultant to help craft a viable menu. He reached out to a number of French chefs in the Bay Area, but not everyone shared his vision.

"They all told me it was not doable, that I was killing the idea of what people have of French food," Raby recalled. He finally found the partner he needed in fine-dining chef Guillaume Bienaime. Raby recalls with a smile Bienaime's reaction: "Wow, that is challenging. Let's do it."

"We looked at all of the dishes on my list and determined what was feasible," Raby said. "If something wasn't possible, we asked, could we do it in a simpler way?"

Reverse engineering recipes made it possible to keep classic French dishes and flavors without compromising Raby's vision for simplicity and quality. The red-wine based coq au vin, is one example. Instead of being served as a traditional stew, it is one of the seven regional sauces that can be served over rotisserie chicken, pork or steak.

Bienaime also helped Raby save ratatouille, a vegetable dish revered throughout France. Unlike most stories of culinary inspiration, Raby confessed that he actually hated the soupy, overcooked ratatouille traditions of his own region in northern France. Bienaime introduced a version from Provence in the southern part of the country.

The key, he explained, is to cook the vegetables separately to keep their firm, hearty texture. The result is a ratatouille thick with sturdy vegetables drizzled in housemade herb and basil oils. The final touch of texture is the crunch of a parmesan crumble. No death by sauce for Raby's ratatouille.

Cuisinett is an unassuming gem, a place where a typically high-maintenance cuisine is enjoyed without pretense. The key is to pay attention to the details. The drinks offered, like the barrel-aged Gavroche Red Ale, or a flighted trio of French rosés, are part of a specially curated selection that cannot be found elsewhere.

The windows that open onto the sidewalk outside the restaurant invite the summer air to weave with scents of melted brie and simmering sauces. Cuisinett may be a breezy take on French cuisine, but do not be mistaken: it is ripe with culinary treasure and exploration.

Cuisinett is located at 1105 San Carlos Ave. **C**