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## Culinary Art at Artisan Bistro, Lafayette

By Linda U. Foley



Chef/Owner John Marquez , right Photo Linda U. Foley

New places and good eats are the top of the news in foody Lamorinda. Artisan Bistro is the newest iteration of a quaint, historic building and California/French cuisine in Lafayette. This is Chef John Marquez's-a local boy with a culinary degree from DVC-first restaurant. Just opened in March, his reputation already defines him in terms of organic local produce and creative cooking. To produce everything in house eventually-from butter and ice cream to bread-is the Bistro's artisan focus.

□ I don't have a reservation, but the young waitress graciously seats me on the sun porch. It is lunch time and busy. The building has received a facelift outside and in. Colorful Picasso-esque artwork (by the Chef's uncle John Earl) hangs on the Bistro's mustard colored walls which, unfortunately, are not sound proofed. The erstwhile Kaffee Barbara and the subsequent Gigi's had the same noise issue, however, to many, din is in as in "instant atmosphere." Probably not good for a quiet romantic outing, unless you're into texting.

□ The good sized wait staff dressed in licorice and brandywine-I mean, black and burgundy- adroitly wends its way between the closely spaced tables. When my coffee arrives, I am pleased to see that it is French press and hot, not two things that often happen simultaneously. Cream arrives eventually.

□ I try to make a selection from the interesting menu but feel slightly distracted "eavesdropping" on so many conversations. I take a look at the plates passing me by all of which look intriguing and artfully displayed. A scramble of gaping slick mussels. Plump, succulent, marinated beets. A star burst of endive and frisee salad. A dark round chocolate cake with an explosion of something white and rich curling above. Usually saving my calories for either wine or dessert, I taste the bread which arrives in a nifty bronze wire basket. But my European taste buds crinkle snobbishly at the soft baguette lacking character. Probably something to be corrected in due time.

□ The menu offers an array of dishes from artichoke soup with marcona almond and mint pesto, to monkfish wrapped in bacon. I decide on lighter fare and order the baby spinach salad with anchovies and then goat cheese cake. Love the white anchovies, my favorite, and wished there'd been more, vinaigrette was very light and the homemade croutons most plentiful. The cheese cake looked like something one would see on the cover of Bon Appetit. While too pretty to eat, I'd expected a different crust, and the "goat" deceptively tasted like cream cheese.

□ I meet Marquez in a kitchen which, in my view, is just big enough to cook for a normal- sized family. The heat is staggering but, amazingly, everyone keeps their cool and no one collides with each other entering and leaving the kitchen like figures rotating on a cuckoo clock. Chef John Marquez appears to be too young to have carved such a resounding culinary career path which includes Bridges, Picasso (Las Vegas) the French Laundry, Per Se (N.Y.), Coi and Fringale in San Francisco.

□ The restaurant seats about 60 inside and about 40 on the patio which would probably receive a lift from some plantings. Lunch and dinner menus are similar; the latter includes herb crusted rack of lamb (\$25) and rib eye steak (26). A favorite appears to be croque-madames and croque-monsieurs, a classic French sandwich of toasted bread, jambon de Paris ham and a mild Gruyere. For more information including a solid wine list go to <http://artisanlafayette.com/home.html>.

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