

Published February 24th, 2016

Rêve Bistro: An Oasis Of Culinary Excellence In Lamorinda

By Sophie Braccini



Paul and Laura Magu in their new Lafayette restaurant, Rêve Bistro Photo Sophie Braccini

What makes a good casual neighborhood bistro in France, aside from the checkered tablecloth instead of a white one, is excellent quality food at an every day price. This is the spirit of Rêve Bistro in Lafayette, recently opened by Paul Magu - a rigorous and ambitious 5-star chef. Magu was trained both in France and in the United States, climbing the ladder of culinary responsibilities. Coming from the Ritz Carlton and St. Regis hotels in San Francisco, he could have chosen to open a very pricey spot. Instead, Magu opted to fulfill his dream (Rêve in French) of creating a neighborhood bistro where locals can flock a few times a week.

Magu decided in his teens that cooking was to be his life - not the most obvious choice for a diplomat's son. Magu's taste was formed in the French kitchen where his mother prepared dishes for receptions. At age 18 he decided to go the technical school route and started years of training, part-time in school, part-time in professional kitchens. Magu trained at the Ferrandi culinary school and his second internship was at The Lido, one of the largest cabarets in Paris, with a kitchen of 38 people. "I was blown away," remembered Magu. "It is such an organization, running like clockwork." After he got his degree, Magu was selected by his school to compete for the Meilleur

ouvrier de France (best worker competition) and got second prize. This distinction allowed him to get a job at Gérard Besson's, a two Michelin star restaurant.

"This is where I learned the most about cooking and about discipline," said Magu. For the chef, cooking is an art, but one that requires rigor and scrupulous attention to quality at all stages of the cooking process, from the selection of the ingredients to the way clients are served at the table.

At Gérard Besson's, Magu learned a lot about game and winter vegetables. "I love this season," he said. "I enjoy everything - the specific sauces, the venison, the mushrooms." Magu then moved up the hierarchy and went to work at Paul Ducasse's restaurant. "In every restaurant I worked I learned something different," he said. "With Ducasse, I learned the respect of the product, not overpowering it with seasoning, just adding enough to magnify without hiding."

In 1998 a friend of his parents who lived in Houston, Texas told Magu about the best French restaurant there, La Colombe d'Or, and of their need for a new chef. Magu did not hesitate, and headed to Texas with an 18-month visa in his pocket. "I loved it there," he said. During that time, a New York chef who was going to take over the Ritz Carlton in San Francisco stopped at La Colombe d'Or and asked Magu to join his team.

Magu joined the Ritz in 2000, first as dining room sous chef, then chef of the banquet department. "Then I moved to the St. Regis where I stayed until 2015," said Magu. He always thought that one day he would have his own place. While working at the Ritz he met Laura, who was in charge of hospitality. "To me she was the most professional," he said. Laura Magu now manages the serving staff at Rêve Bistro, on top of raising their three young daughters.

Rêve Bistro's menu is seasonal. Magu has connections in the Bay Area and he knows where to

get the quality he wants, and he has the confidence to reject what is not up to his standards. The menu combines what people expect from a French bistro with modernized concepts that are found in the best bistros today, such as a surprisingly delicious raw kale salad, tender, with no trace of bitterness and nicely paired with apples, radishes and seeds. In the same spirit, the main dishes include the classic bistro "steak-frites" and the "moules-frites," and add dishes with venison, guinea hen, cod or braised beef cheeks. Vegetables are also interesting, as accompaniment or as a vegetarian dish: mushrooms, quince, celeriac root, and chestnuts. The winter menu will change to the spring menu by the end of March.

Rêve Bistro was an immediate success from the day it opened, just through word of mouth. "We take reservations," said Laura Magu, "but we keep a few tables open so people can come up spontaneously." On the first Saturday night after their soft opening, a line formed outside the door of the intimate restaurant on Moraga Road in Lafayette. Because of limited parking and city regulations, it is only open in the evening. The restaurant has a charming garden that will open as well as soon as weather permits.

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