

# One of the finest BYOBs

LA COLOMBE doesn't cut corners, and its high standards have made it a longstanding favourite

## La Colombe

★★★  
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554 Duluth Ave. E.  
(near Berri St.)

Phone: 514-849-8844

Open: 5 p.m.-10 p.m.,  
Tuesday and Sunday; 5:30  
p.m.-11 p.m., Wednesday to  
Saturday (6 p.m. and 9 p.m.  
sittings on Thursday, Friday,  
and Saturday).

Wheelchair access: Yes

Reservations: Essential

Vegetarian friendly: Not really

Parking: Difficult on  
weekends. Try the lot on Roy  
St. near Rivard St.

Licensed: No, BYOB

Price range: Four-course table  
d'hôte, \$42 (plus à la carte  
extras).

Last Sunday, while nibbling my morning toast, I reached for the New York Times to read Thomas L. Friedman's column, which began with this: "I go into restaurants these days, look around at the tables often still crowded with young people, and I have this urge to go from table to table and say: 'You don't know me, but I have to tell you that you shouldn't be here. You should be saving your money. You should be home eating tuna fish. This financial crisis is so far from over. We are just at the end of the beginning. Please, wrap up that steak in a doggy bag and go home.'"

I then proceeded to choke on my latte.

The recent economic meltdown has become the white elephant in the room of every restaurant review. Fine dining is not about catching a sandwich at the hot little Cuban place. Fine dining is about spending serious moolah – usually about \$100 a person – on one of the world's great vices, gourmet food. But let's say we all followed Friedman's advice and avoided restaurants in favour of Hamburger Helper enjoyed in the home dining room. What would happen then? Our chefs would lose their shirts. Thousands of people in this city alone – from waiters to dishwashers – would be unemployed, suppliers would have no one to sell to, and we critics would be reduced to – God forbid! – running recessionista recipes instead of restaurant reviews.

Bailouts are okayed for banks,



PHOTOS: GRAHAM HUGHES THE GAZETTE

Chef and owner Moustafa Rougabi has been drawing loyal diners for 20 years.



The warm foie gras (left) and the deer chop in a poivrade sauce with black risotto.

brokers and billionaires. But who is going to bail out the hospitality workers when people stop frequenting our excellent restaurants filled with hard-working and generally underpaid individuals who have been toughing it out in Montreal's fluctuating economy for years? No one, that's who. That's why restaurants must be supported in good times and bad. Shun them now, and there will be nowhere to celebrate when things get better.

That said, now is indeed a crucial time for restaurateurs to start looking at how they do business. Three words – value for money – have never been as relevant. Maybe it's time to reconsider charging for that amuse-bouche or pushing the \$50 veal chop.

It is with this spirit that I feature La Colombe, a bring-your-own-wine restaurant that offers plenty of bang for your buck without shirking on local

luxury ingredients. Duck, foie gras, deer and Quebec's wonderful cheeses are on offer, and the four-course menu will set you back a very fair \$42, up a mere \$5 from three years ago. And if ever you happen to have a stash of gold bars under the Sealy Posturepedic, you can opt for an extra course or fancier fare for a few bucks more.

Now approaching its 20th anniversary, chef and owner Moustafa Rougabi's 36-seat restaurant is as popular as ever. Sure, the seating is tight, but this room, with its hardwood floors, black bistro chairs, a corridor of a kitchen along the right-hand wall and a coat rack and bathrooms squished in the back still manages to be elegant.

At dinner here last week, I sampled most everything on the menu, and save for a too-celery-centred vegetable soup, everything I tasted was seriously delicious.

The goat's cheese gratin plate featured a crouton topped with a tangy round of broiled chèvre paired with a crisp salad tossed with just the right amount of vinaigrette. The smoked-salmon plate consisted of three silky slabs of salmon, smoked in house, that melted on contact with my eager palate. There were accompaniments – a bit of sauce, a tuft of greens – but the fish was so good they were hardly necessary.

For a special occasion, I'd wholeheartedly recommend the hot foie gras. It will add \$22 to your bill, but the portion is the most generous I have ever seen, and the combination of honey sauce and gingerbread served with this crisp-exterior and pudding-centred liver is scrumptious.

Those three dishes cost extra but if you stick to the \$42 menu, your second course (after a hopefully better soup than mine) will be either a

masterful duck terrine accented with just the right hit of orange, or a shallow bowl filled with escargots bathed in a rich blue-cheese sauce. Trust me, it's great – and I'm not even a big blue-cheese fan.

I am a deer fan, though, and the côte de cerf du Boileau here is exquisite. Paired with an original, dark risotto (which I'm guessing is moistened with red wine and meat juices), the hulking and succulent chop is cooked to the ideal medium-rare. Only serious carnivores need apply. Wow.

Then again, all the main courses merited a "wow" rating, including the most tender veal filet I've had in ages, and a firm-fleshed square of mahi-mahi topped with a swirl of yogourt cream enhanced with caviar: Duck magret is a dish you see in most French restaurants. Most are good (it really is tough to ruin a duck magret), but chef Rougabi's is that much better because he keeps it simple, with a light cherry sauce and a mound of celery-root purée. It's a dish I enjoyed here when I last reviewed the restaurant three years ago, and it's just as delicious now as then, so full marks for consistency.

Rougabi is known to be a fan of Valrhona chocolate, and his desserts do this luxury brand justice, especially the chocolate marquise served with vanilla crème anglaise, better described as six bites of heaven. His pear Bourdaloue tart is another fave. Made with a crisp butter crust, poached pears and a thick layer of baked almond cream, it's a French classic that never fails to satisfy.

Service provided by the sweet and soft-spoken wait staff was flawless. Expect to pour your own wine, but bottles are opened with care and placed on ice by request.

Foodies know there is but one drawback to dinner at La Colombe: With a strong local customer base that latches onto tables like piranhas, last-minute reservations hard to come by. So book now, even for 2009, perhaps not for a frivolous night of excess, but for a birthday, anniversary or for any occasion to celebrate the hope that happy days will be here again.