

Taste Test: Petite Maison

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They say the best things come in small packages. After dining at Old Town's intimate new Petite Maison, we'd have to agree.



For five years, chef James Porter of the now-closed Tapino Kitchen & Wine Bar, has been making great impressions on local taste buds (both in the kitchen and as a leader in the Valley's locavore dining movement). Though Tapino is sorely missed, Porter is helping to fill that hole in our hearts—and stomachs—with the recent opening of Petite Maison.

The French bistro opened in August in Old Town, in a small building that formerly housed Baby Kay's Cajun Grill and Buckets. Petite Maison, which very fittingly means "small house," should easily get lost among the nearby buildings and parking structures. However, it's a ray of sunshine with its warm, buttery color and surrounding patio. Because we all know that dining alfresco in the Valley must be done before the temps start climbing in the summer, don't miss your opportunity to enjoy Petite Maison's charming patio this winter and spring. Starting this month, you should take in the twinkle lights and a perimeter of flora and fauna with a romantic Valentine's Day repast.

The pretty doesn't stop with the patio. Inside this intimate 30-seat eatery, inviting wood covers the floor and ceiling (this is also where you'll spy the gorgeous, even glamorous, chandeliers—a sweet surprise in an otherwise rustic spot). Though the inside of the restaurant is itty bitty, you don't feel squashed in the space, even with a full bar that encompasses half of the dining room.

The starter menu features classics that you'd hope to be on hand at a French restaurant, including steak tartare and French onion soup. The tartare was concocted of Angus beef and Banyuls vinegar (Banyuls is a French vin de liqueur, similar to a port), topped with a fried egg and accompanied by house-made crispy pommes. The meat was very flavorful, and we couldn't stop scooping mounds of it onto the addicting potato chips. The scrumptious soup was welcomingly traditional, with thick onion slices and French bread. No surprises here, which is the way we like it with such a classic dish. Wonderfully warming, a bowl of this goodness would be delicious to spoon-up while huddled under a heat lamp on the Petite Maison patio this month.

The lineup of entrees is limited (we had only six dishes to choose from on our visit) but that doesn't mean you won't have a hard time choosing between such mouthwatering selections. The sole cuit au four, which was said to be the lightest entree on the menu that night, featured roasted sole, lobster nage and tomato confit. We savored the flaky fish, especially when accompanied by a sweet bite of the fresh, delectable tomatoes. We barely even noticed the absence of a starch due to the hearty—yet figure-friendly—jumbo asparagus, which just so happens to be an aphrodisiac and perfect for this amorous holiday. The overall stacked presentation was lovely, too—very colorful.

In the spirit of Valentine's Day, we recommend the shareable, for-two bouillabaisse. The stewlike dish was packed with mussels, flaky whitefish, giant scallops, prawns, lobster and clams, all in a saffron-and-fennel broth. In ordering this dish, though, you run the risk of making your partner jealous; there's no way you won't be lusting after the incredible bouillabaisse once you've taken a bite. During our visit, the entree menu also spotlighted a chestnut- and sage-stuffed chicken, bacon-wrapped pork tenderloin, steak frites and duck leg confit, if you'd prefer poultry or meat.

Post-dinner, we enjoyed a divine port-poached pear topped with crème fraîche and port syrup. The fruity dessert is great if you don't want something overly sweet or too heavy, especially after enjoying rich French fare. There was also an imported cheese plate that tempted us—it just wouldn't be a French restaurant without one. Though the featured cheeses change, our selection was Port Salut, double-crème Brie, Gruyère and Roquefort.

To wash it all down, Petite Maison offers lip-smacking French sodas in flavors like passion fruit, Meyer lemon and peppermint, as well as specialty cocktails and plenty of wines by the glass or bottle. We suggest raising a glass of Champagne, toasting to your loving relationships and what's sure to be one of your new favorite restaurants.

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