

Dining the French way

Leigh Cort

Special to The Recorder

If the aroma of freshly baked French baguette or onion soup simmering for hours is an intoxication that you crave during the chilly holiday season. 'Bistro de Leon' is a delectable dining treat. Chef Jean-Stephane Poinard's restaurant is in the heart of St. Augustine's historic downtown making guests' lunch and dinner indulgences a reality.

The restaurant serves authentic and outstanding French bistro fare. Within sight of the Bridge of Lions, Bistro de Leon is on the Plaza a few steps from the bay front. The petite eatery exudes a vibe of relaxation and hominess sprinkled with an international 'chic'. The cheerful and inviting décor sets the scene for a romantic moment, a

celebratory little party or comfort in dining alone. Chef Poinard's personal art and bric-a-brac immediately transports you to Southern France. The Bistro has been a favorite destination for locals and visitors for five years.

A chef who flawlessly blends classic French plus a countless number of culinary styles with a contemporary 'Joie de Vivre', Poinard's fresh and simple gastronomic wizardry imbues his own 'comfort food' from home — Lyon, France. The tapestry of flavors always begins with purveying local produce, fish, meats and specialty items. If there is a gene for cooking, it has been passed on to French-born Jean-Stephane, a 5th generation chef. Cooking is in

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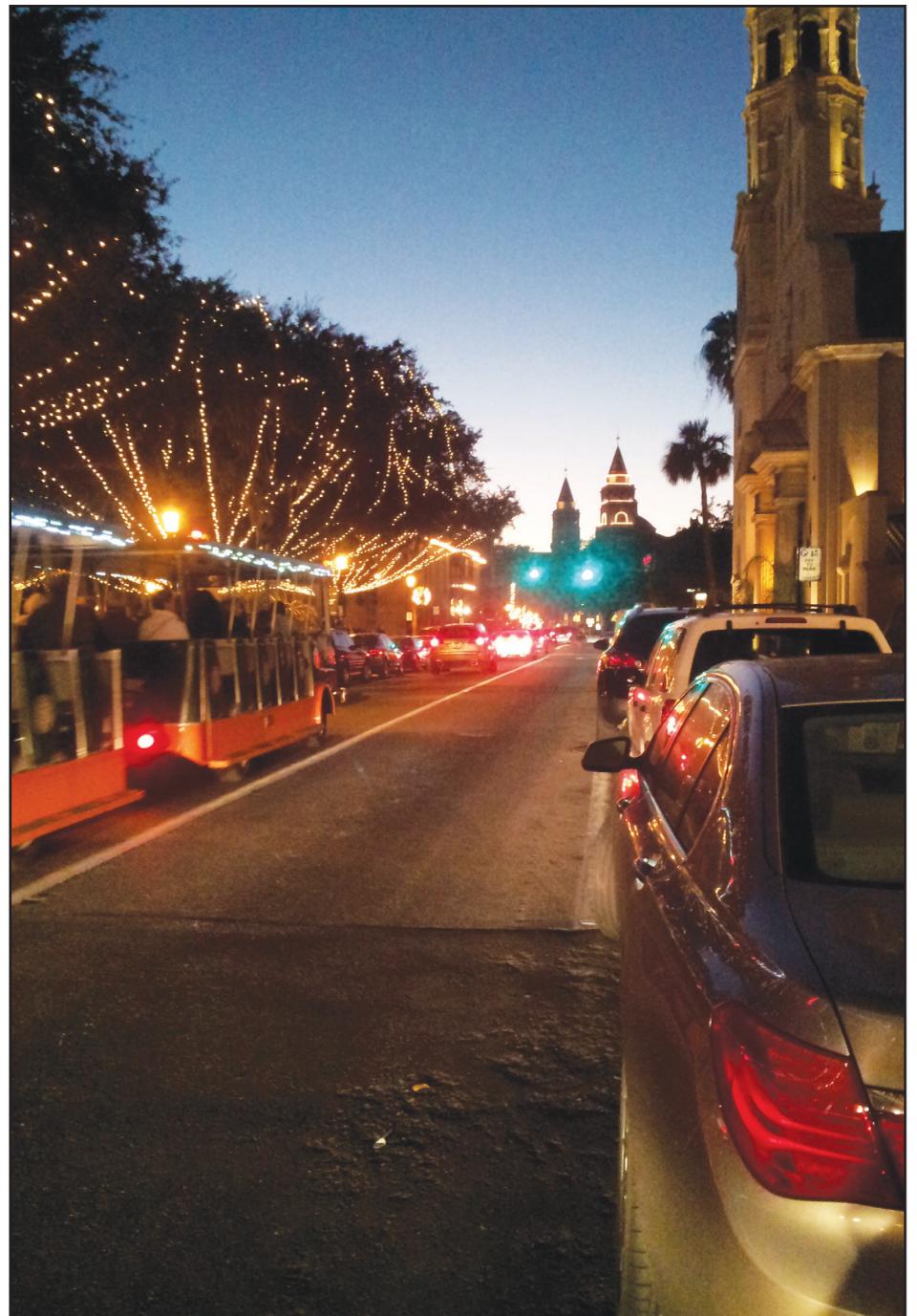
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Above: Cathedral Street from Bistro de Leon in St. Augustine, currently celebrating 'Nights of Lights'

Left: Seafood risotto

Photos by Leigh Cort

Table Talk

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his blood. La Cuisine de Meres (French home cuisine) is what propelled him to the top of the elitist culinary scene in Lyon by 1998.

He and his family owned Lyon's Hotel Restaurant de Paris since 1962, along with four eateries in a French City not dissimilar from St. Augustine's European-style flair. This exuberant restaurateur delighted international patrons with his youthful passion and pleasure in cooking. By the time Jean-Stephane was 20, he had received acknowledgment by Michelin and other prestigious culinary guides. He's most proud of being a member of the exclusive Les Toques Blanches Lyonnaises, a rare fraternity of 100 members in France.

Five years ago, Poinard brought his family to America, introducing his own French cuisine and dining to the First Coast. He craved the Florida weather and the ambience of St. Augustine, which has been attracting Europeans for hundreds of year; its blend of Old World charm and New World culture suited the Poinard family to a tee.

Sunday is one of my favorite nights of the week to dine out after a quiet leisurely day preparing for the week ahead. With 'Nights of Lights' illuminating St. Augustine, the festive feeling is felt immediately upon entering the Bistro. One can hear many languages punctuating the soft French music and each of the 40 seats was recently taken except for my reserved table for two. Tables are positioned close to each other making conversation a pleasant exchange with whoever is nearby. Nobody dines at Bistro de Leon trying to escape others — it's a French 'thing' to talk about food, dream about food, share foodie stories and often sample your neighbor's generous outstretched plate.

Beginning with 'Lyon's Onion Soup', a meal itself topped with caramelized croutons and Swiss cheese, Poinard's version is renowned. At \$7.95, one could segue to dessert and feel satisfied that they ordered one quintessential dish. However, something tasty always tempts your appetite from the kitchen just before a meal begins. Tonight it was a savory Sausage & Brie Canape. My choice of a glass of 2012 Beaujolais Nouveau was a perfect pairing.

A basket of warm circles of fresh-from-the-oven baguette with butter made me wonder how many baguette the Bistro bakes each day. It wasn't a surprise that Chef estimates 30-50 baked daily. The basket kept me company until I began dipping them into the sumptuous sauces of dishes that followed.

On the menu since 2008, the Fish Quenelle (\$18.00) is a classic Escoffier-inspired quenelle (soufflé) of salmon



Photo by Tom Plant/Provided by Leigh Cort

French-born Jean-Stephane Poinard, owner of Bistro de Leon, is a fifth generation chef.

and shrimp, first poached then baked in a ramekin of rich lobster bisque laced with Brandy. It's recommended that you slice open the quenelle and fill with a bit of accompanying rice. The complexity and intensity of flavors make this dish perfect for sharing.

Chef proclaims that "The feast begins with the eyes"; Seafood Risotto with scallops, shrimp, mussels and seasonal fish are artfully arranged atop creamy white truffle oil risotto (\$23.95). What a pleasure that the seafood wasn't overcooked but plump, buttery and succulent.

If you're a fan of duck, the Filet de Canard et son Risotto Cremeux Aux Cepes (\$23) is magnificent. Could it be the sound of these beautiful words that are alluring? You'll love it in English too — Hudson Valley Duck Breast over creamy porcini risotto.

The restaurant's wine list predominantly features France, Chile and California. Wines by the glass range from \$5-\$12. It's fun to pair courses with a variety of wines although buying a bottle is very affordably priced at \$21-\$39.

Whether visiting the Bistro for lunch or dinner there are two options: a 3-course prix fixe meal created daily by the chef OR order from the regular menu. In France, diners often depend upon the chef to choose what they will enjoy. The three course meal is an exceptional choice at \$22.50. It includes a glass of house wine and complimentary mise en bouche (served every night

except holidays). Choosing to eat a little lighter and slightly less expensive? Order an entrée and dessert or just an appetizer and dessert. Entrées on the menu range from about \$13 to \$25.

Recognized for the colorful dessert presentation in the restaurant entrance, it's perfectly permissible to step into Bistro de Leon during the day for a little decadence. It's a vivid contrast in flavors between the homemade ice creams, fruit tarts, sorbets and French Madeleine. Seasonal fruits influence the chef's whim; what he does so well is to let individual flavors stand on their own. Sip an Illy coffee or treat yourself to a steaming Espresso.

When a platter of three warm and beautiful French Madeleine cookies

Bistro de Leon

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were dusted with powdered sugar and served, (\$6.95) accompanied by homemade lemon & lime marmalade, I thought that I might take them home with me. But one bite into the buttery cake with the crispy warm edges made me forget tomorrow.

In fact, I forget that I was in Florida — an evening at the Bistro reminded me that in France, a meal is to be enjoyed and not hurried. The cuisine is the main attraction!

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