

WATER'S EDGE[®]

Life in Northeast Florida & Coastal Georgia

Dining Out

Essentially French

A bistro in the French countryside? No, you're in St. Augustine.

By Catherine Enns Grigas / Photographer Ed Hall



It was Saturday night and the little bistro was bustling. The wooden tables, spaced just far enough for elbow room, were close enough to politely eavesdrop on conversations. Down a few seats, a gentleman in a suede jacket spoke softly in French. Next to me, a woman wearing a diamond brooch spooned up the last of her crème brûlée and asked to see the breakfast menu. On the other side, three ladies, exhausted from shopping, sipped on glasses of red wine and nibbled on duck paté. The word “delicious” seemed to be repeated quite often. Madame, the busy proprietress, leaned over, winked, and said in her charming French accent, “Tomorrow, I quit.”

And then from the back of the café, a lovely voice burst into operatic ecstasy. It was a short sample of an aria, pitch perfect, done not sotto voce, but with the volume turned all the way up. The diners, all surprised and delighted, turned around to see the source – a young woman, perhaps inspired by her meal, seated in the corner – and then they burst into applause.

An evening in a quaint bistro in some scenic hamlet in the French countryside? No. I was in St. Augustine at Bistro de Leon, a place that is as authentically French as its owners, the fifth generation chef Jean-Stephane Poinard, and his wife, Valerie. Yes, I thought, somehow I had been transported to France. After all, where were the T-shirts and baseball caps, the de rigueur dining uniform of a tourist town? Everyone seemed so elegant, so cosmopolitan. Dare I say it – so French?

Chef Jean-Stephane and Valerie have been able to capture the essence of the French dining experience with all its joie de vivre in their little eatery on Cathedral Place. Buttery croissants, earthy cassoulets, delicate crepes and hearty soups all come out of their kitchen. Both of them have the heritage to do it right: Chef Jean-Stephane is a restaurateur from Lyon, known as the capital of French gastronomy, and Valerie is a winemaker from Domaine de la Fond-Moiroux, home to Beaujolais, Brouilly and Gamay wines. Their friend and mentor, who just happens to be the world-renowned chef Paul Bocuse, recently showed up for dinner.

Don't expect a fancy or expensive place, however. Bistro de Leon, just down from the Bridge of Lions, has a cheery, informal atmosphere with rose-colored walls displaying French memorabilia. While I was there, two wide-screen televisions played the French film *Le Grand Restaurant*, minus subtitles.

The Poinards have perfectly duplicated the *bouchon* – Lyon's small, homey bistros that serve traditional regional fare such as roasted pork, homemade sausages and duck patés intended to be washed down with giant carafes of red wine from nearby Beaujolais – in St. Augustine.