

# Bistro Aix: Still the 'it' place to dine

By **BELINDA HULIN**  
 The Times-Union

When informed that Bistro Aix took top honors as Weekend readers' favorite non-chain restaurant, I thought, "Of course." I mean, what's not to love about a place that serves *steak frites*, smoked salmon pizzas and a great selection of wines by the glass?

Well, maybe the noise level on a busy night. And the prices, which tend to stray a bit higher than your average "bistro." And the fact that you can't go there without running into people you may or may not wish to see.

But let's not quibble. Five years ago, Chef Tom Gray and his partners created a chic San Marco eatery that would fit into the *mise-en-scene* of virtually any cosmopolitan American city. The brick and wood interior, display kitchen and cozy booths gave it a contemporary yet comfortable ambience, and the menu successfully walked the fine line between exotic and accessible. Within hours of opening, Bistro Aix became the "it" restaurant in town, attracting throngs of power lunchers and after-work diners.

Happily, Gray and partners had the stamina to both withstand the early hoopla and to maintain the food quality and upbeat atmosphere after things settled down. Today, Bistro Aix has become one of Jacksonville's anchor restaurants — a place locals can count on for good food and good service and to be there when we need a better-than-average meal in unpretentious surroundings.

Usually, I find myself at Aix at lunchtime, when my idea of heaven is cup of paprika-colored, intensely flavored Smoked Tomato Soup with Creme Fraiche and Chives (\$6) and either a Crispy Crab Cake Salad (\$10) or a platter of warm just-fried Potato Chips with Warm Blue Cheese (\$7).

Recently, a friend and I met there for a midweek dinner and



**BRUCE LIPSKY/The Times-Union**

For five years, Bistro Aix chef Tom Gray has worked to deliver fresh ingredients prepared in imaginative ways.

I diverged from habit with a first course of Mixed Greens with Duck Confit and White Beans (\$9). The dish, generously studded with tender, fat-preserved duck and tiny, al dente white beans, offered a complex mix of tastes and textures. The beans provided a perfect foil for the rich, savory duck and a sweet-tart dressing elevated the flavor profile of the entire dish.

My companion ordered the steamed Mussels (\$8) and was served a bowl of shiny black bivalves with the classic thyme- and garlic-kissed white wine broth and a drizzle of saffron aioli. The mussels were just-cooked and tender, and the sauce begged to be sopped

with Aix crusty bread. The saffron-garlic mayonnaise was drawn over the mussel shells for an attractive presentation, but the artistry made the aioli a little difficult to access.

For a second course, we split a small plate of excellent, creamy Wild Mushroom Risotto with Oak-Fired Shrimp (\$12), which came with a refreshing moat of sweet green pea purée.

An entrée of Grilled Salmon (\$20), with a side of creamy whipped potatoes, arrived moist and juicy, augmented only with a very light lemon-garlic butter sauce. It was a simple, satisfying dish. The Grilled Center Cut Pork Loin (\$21), on the other hand, was

## restaurant review

### Bistro Aix

1440 San Marco Blvd.  
 (904) 398-1949

Cuisine: American and Mediterranean

Hours: 11 a.m. to 10 p.m.  
 Monday-Thursday: 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. Friday: 5 to 11 p.m. Saturday, and 5 to 9 p.m. Sunday.

Reservations? Yes.

Children's menu? No.

Credit cards: All major.

Bar service: Full bar.

Cost: Expensive.

extraordinary. On a drizzly winter night, I can't think of anything I'd rather have than this hearty slice of wood-infused, just-cooked pork, served on a bed of sweet, fluffy parsnip purée and adorned with a thatch of lightly dressed watercress. The dish was spiked with aromatic white truffle oil, heightening an already earthy, sensuous dining experience.

Bistro Aix's back bakery counter does a brisk business in sweet treats for takeout, so there's always something interesting for dessert at the restaurant. I highly recommend the delicate, almond-flavored Basque Cake (\$6), served with a dense, rum-flavored cream and red grape sauce. The deceptively simple-looking confection is wonderfully dense, with a texture somewhere between cake and marzipan. Warm Chocolate Belgian Cake (\$6) looks like an upside-down brioche and tastes primally chocolate, with a moat of dark chocolate sauce and a dollop of whipped cream.

Unlike some trendy eateries in town, Bistro Aix has never had a wildly extensive menu. But the dishes it does offer showcase fresh, high-impact ingredients in imaginative ways. It's easy to go there often without getting bored by the food. That's one of the secrets of Bistro Aix, I think — it wears well. That could be why so many of our readers love it.

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