

Food

DINING | Bistro Vendôme

Inside or out, lovely French dining

By Tucker Shaw
Denver Post Dining Critic

No question about it: Bistro Vendôme is one of my favorite places in Denver to sup.

I dig, in particular, Vendôme's pleasant patio, a small, quietly busy collection of two- and four-top tables tucked

★★★★ | Great into a brick-lined courtyard off Larimer Square. A shady canopy of trees rustles overhead, allowing just enough breeze to take the edge off the hot summer nights.

It's a lovely setting in which to lean back in your chair, swing your shoes from your toes, swirl your glass of Saint Hilaire Blanc de Blancs bubbly, and languidly peruse Vendôme's informal French-bistro-inspired menu.

On the menu, you'll find such Franco-philic treats as *boeuf tartare* (chopped raw beef tenderloin with aioli, dijon-style mustard, capers and a fried quail egg), *carpaccio de betteraves* (thin-sliced roasted beets with goat cheese, pickled onions and walnut vinaigrette), and, naturally, *steak frites* (more on the frites later).



Photos by Omar Vega | The Denver Post

Bistro Vendôme's shady patio: One of critic Tucker Shaw's favorite places to sup and sip.

DINING: Pick appetizers wisely, as well as where you sit on patio

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To start, choose the *terrine de foie gras*, a supple-soft paté served with toasted brioche and an intoxicating compote of rhubarb, raisins and grapes, or the classic French onion soup. Also worthwhile, the charcuterie plate, a simple country-style assemblage of cured meats. And if you're feeling adventurous and it's hot out, the crab salad with cantaloupe sorbet and crispy prosciutto can be a refreshing starter.

App to be avoided: the *soupe aux peches et yaourt*, a cold peach-yogurt soup with pistachios that might make sense as a morning smoothie, but was too heavy for pole position at the top of the meal.

Approach the *crêpes Vendôme* with caution. This tasty wrap of roasted chicken, olives and fried capers topped with a fried egg and doused (perhaps too liberally) in *sauce béarnaise* was rich and rewarding, but you'll wish you hadn't ordered an entrée to follow. The crepe belongs on the *plats principaux* side of the menu — far too filling to work as an *hors d'oeuvre*.

Speaking of *plats principaux*, there are several worth trying. Tops on my list is the *poulet roti aux herbes*, a succulent, crispy-skinned half chicken lovingly roasted with fresh herbs and stacked alongside a delicate cauliflower gratin and handful of mâche lettuce. At \$16, it's a decent deal; if you've had an appetizer, eat the breast tonight and take the thigh home for tomorrow's lunch.

Also pleasant, the *roulade de veau*, buttery pan-seared veal parked on a mantle of potato purée and a richly colored smoky tomato coulis.

If the *saumon grillé* (grilled salmon) was a bit over-accessorized with artichokes, capers, sun-dried tomatoes, black olives, horseradish-flecked potatoes, and a cucumber-and-chive-infused *crème fraîche*, it was nonetheless a competently cooked, flavorful chunk of fish. (If I were making this dish, I'd lose the overpowering sun-dried tomatoes.)

I have a divided opinion on the *steak frites*, split right down the middle of the plate. The steak, well prepared and flavorful, was satisfying — not the best steak in town, but not a bad bistro cut. But no matter how I try to appreciate Vendôme's signature sweet-herby fries (and I have, a half-dozen times or more) they just don't speak to me.

Legions of fans adore these cloyingly sweet fries (a quality imparted to the hapless potatoes by a sugar and champagne vinegar bath), so I'm willing to chalk up my own distaste for them to my own personal (some would say crippling) fancy-fry phobia. But I'm a simple boy, and I prefer a simple French fry.

That said, Vendôme's fries are, if funny-tasting to me, expertly produced and reliable.

You're safe to skip the *étouffée de crevettes*, a deconstructed seafood stew with crab-stuffed shrimp perched around a mound of pretty but barely seasoned green lentils. Ditto the *truite en papillote* (trout roasted in parchment with green beans and butter) which looked pretty, but delivered precious little trout flavor.

The wine list is, appropriately, entirely French, with more than a few bottles under \$30. For couples driving home after dinner, there are a half-dozen or so half-bottles on the list and several by-the-glass pours. Best of all, there are two \$6-a-glass house wines (a modest Rothschild Mouton Cadet Blanc and a bright Le Coq Rouge from the Languedoc), both of which are eminently drinkable.

Come on a weekend for a brunch of *pain perdu* (French toast with honey) or a *croque madame* (fried ham and cheese sandwich with fried egg). Or, come pre-theater (5-7 p.m.), when Vendôme features a classic three-course *prix-fixe* menu for under \$30 a head.

Service at Vendôme ranges from just-fine to quite helpful; don't be afraid to ask for opinions on the wine or the food from the staff. They've tasted the menu and understand the preparations. If they seem overworked, hang tight — Vendôme recently hired the able David Kaufman (formerly of The Truffle cheese shop) to manage the joint.

(Fair warning if you plan to dine *en plein air*: There is a vent in the middle of the outdoor patio that, based on my own olfactorily gathered intelligence, connects to an occasionally prolific source of sewer gas. Look down when you're shown your table, and if you're situated above the vent, ask to be reseated. Enough said.)

Bottom line: Supper at Bistro Vendôme, while not perfect, is nonetheless perfectly lovely. Many of the dishes are excellent; others, inconsistent. Tread carefully and manage your ordering wisely (avoid the obvious culinary potholes, like the peach and yogurt soup) and you'll score a treasure of a meal.

Dining critic Tucker Shaw can be reached at 303-954-1958 or at dining@denverpost.com.

More online: Find an archive of Tucker Shaw's previous dining reviews, and tell us what you think of Vendôme's fries.

> denverpost.com/restaurants



Beet salad: thin-sliced roasted beets with goat cheese, pickled onions and walnut vinaigrette.



Sorbet and ice cream flavors change daily.



Top of Tucker's list: lovingly roasted herbed chicken with a delicate cauliflower gratin.

Bistro Vendôme

French | 1420 Larimer St. (through the Kettle Arcade).

303-825-3232 | ★★★ | Great

Atmosphere: Comfy-cozy French-country décor. Several distinct eating areas including an ample bar in front, bright dining room in the middle, pleasant patio out back, and seating in the arcade.

Service: Busy and knowledgeable. Not indulgent, but friendly enough.

Wine: Mercifully short, all-French list with a few splurges and a few bargains. House white and house red available by the glass.

Plates: Appetizers, \$6-16. Main courses, \$15-\$23.

Hours: Dinner 5-10 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday; 5-11 p.m. Friday-Saturday; 5-9 p.m. Sunday. Brunch 10 a.m.-2 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.

Details: All major credit cards accepted. Reservations suggested, but walk-ins welcome. Valet parking across the street. Private dining room available.

Six visits.

Our star system:

- ★★★★: Excellent.
- ★★★: Great.
- ★★: Very Good.
- ★: Good.
- No stars: Needs work.