

BISTRO VENDÔME

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When people ask me where they ought to go on a first date, I often say Bistro Vendôme. When they ask where they ought to go with a big party, I often say Vendôme — and ask for the private room to the left of the bar, an intimate spot that seats ten comfortably. When I'm asked what restaurant is the most beautiful in town, I often say Vendôme again, thinking about the hidden patio, the dim lights gleaming off the rims of the wine glasses after dark, the spray of tables spread along the hallway outside the restaurant's doors, as though the place was just so bulging with trade and good times that it couldn't contain its own popularity and exploded.

But still, I don't eat at Vendôme that often. A year or so ago, I had a brunch at Vendôme that became my defining experience for what a great brunch can be: French omelets and pain perdu and flutes of champagne in the private room, looking out over the tables set outside. Not long after that, I had a long dinner there that was extraordinarily loved by all concerned — by snarling, jaded foodies who, before stepping inside, had had little but reflexive disdain for Denver dining. And when a couple of gastronomers in town for the International Association of Culinary Professionals wanted to go out, I decided to take them to Vendôme — hoping that the restaurant I've recommended so often to others would continue to work its magic.

To be honest, it wasn't my first choice. Turned away by first one restaurant, then another in Larimer Square, Vendôme was my fallback on a Friday night with a party of three and a wicked hunger. But the restaurant was every bit as good as I'd remembered. Crammed into a table near one of the hostess stations in the main dining room, we drank a bottle of cold white wine, ate good bread torn to pieces with our hands, devoured unbelievably good frites glazed in a sugar gastrique. And when dinner arrived, it had all the hallmarks of the classic French bistro meals that Vendôme idolizes: rustic, controlled, delicately rough and deceptively simple. I'd ordered steak frites *classique*, soaked in what might have been the best béarnaise I've had in Denver, sided by still more frites. From across the table, I stole bites of the *cuisse de canard*, spoons of tiny French lentils and golden raisin relish, and dreamed about the plates of poulet roti and straight Norman mousse de foie au Calvados I saw being walked across the room.

Next time, I thought. There'll always be a next time.

— JASON SHEEHAN