

# Eating Out

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ACCORDING to a recent survey, the UK offers among the lowest quality of life in Europe despite residents earning the highest incomes. The price of fuel and other essential goods, below average spending on health and education, short holidays and late retirement place the UK just above Ireland at the bottom of the European quality of life index. The weather adds to the grim tally, and I have to admit my joie de vivre has been faltering of late. France is miles above us in the league, beaten only by Spain as

## French flavours to savour

the best place to live, so I wondered if catching the Gallic vibe was the key to cheering up our summer. Swept along by this thought, we sashayed in the direction of Cafe Montmartre, on Aberdeen's Justice Mill Lane. We walked in and it was as if we'd just strolled in off the Champs Elysee, such is the authenticity of the restaurant.

The whitewashed walls, wooden floor and timber rafters give a traditional cafe feel, smartened up with the white tablecloths and immaculate settings, and we immediately felt the warm glow of a French welcome. This could have had something to do with the co-ordinated little black dresses and torturous high heels – Aberdeen gets a lot more dressed up for dinner these days – but we were charmed by the proprietor who was so archetypally French. The menu was traditional, with much meat and many wines. The amount of choice was perfect, and we were in heaven, with onion soup, tomato and goat's cheese salad, moules mariniere, foie gras pate and oven-baked snails to mull over, and that was just for starters.

I went for the spinach crepes, baked in a bechamel sauce which arrived piping hot at the table as a very generous portion. At various points through polishing it all off, I did consider leaving some room for the delights to come, but it was all so delicious that



before I knew it there was an empty plate in front of me. The crevettes across from me were wallowing on a bed of spinach in garlic and butter herbs and suffered a similar fate as they disappeared and were also declared delicious. At this point, our patron had seen our wine choice and came

over to remonstrate. Ah no, what were we thinking of with the Cotes du Rhone, he gently tutted. Deftly guiding us towards a more suitable choice, the Fleurie, a lighter red, he assured us this would complement our excellent food choices. By now we were simpering like

proper Carla Brunis, as he indulged us and complimented us in such a charming manner it was impossible to resist. And of course he was absolutely right about the wine. The main courses were all suitably buttery, creamy and immaculately French. There was chicken stuffed with crab,





Cafe Montmartre owner, Thierry Haddanou, serves up another French treat



Above: Charlotte aux fruits des bois, sponge finger cake filled with vanilla mousse and topped with wood berries. Below: Creme Brulee a la vanilla au coulis de framboise, caramelised vanilla cream pot, served with raspberry coulis.

Photographs: Jim Irvine



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■ Cafe Montmartre, 58-60 Justice Mill Lane, Aberdeen. Phone 01224 584599. Visit [www.cafe-montmartre.co.uk](http://www.cafe-montmartre.co.uk)

the night's special was salmon and mussels in a creamy saffron sauce, there was lamb, and Normandy pork with apple, cider and cream. An entire page was devoted to cous cous, which gave a little more choice for anyone less staunchly carnivorous, but really, why would you want to stray from the traditional cuisine of the country that gave us fine dining? I chose the duck in an orange and port sauce. By this time we were ordering in French, much to the delight of our host. There is every possibility he was also chuckling at the poor foolish Scottish ladies, but we preferred to think he was dazzled by our mastery of the language. Or the words canard and filet mignon, at least.

When my duck arrived, it was beautiful, in every sense of the word. The presentation was superb and if anything the dish was even better. The meat slid off the bones and lay gloriously basking itself in the sweetly citrus sauce. I have rarely tasted duck that was so divinely cooked, with a crackly crisp skin. It came along with potatoes dauphinoises, and garlic-drizzled vegetables which had seen their fair share of the butter dish. I really don't think I could fault them, apart from perhaps making the first course so damned good, I was filling up fast. The steak across from me was judged to be one of the best she'd tasted and very reasonably priced compared with some high-end competitors in the city. The

accompanying French fries were suitably thin, crispy and, well, French, I suppose. As she was waxing lyrical about her filet mignon, it gave me the ideal opportunity to peruse our fellow diners. Apart from the aforementioned smart dress code, there was a good mix of the young and old, families and couples and there were even a couple of booths for a more intimate dinner a deux. The muted music aided the atmosphere rather than drowning out conversation. Having waited a respectable length of time, we decided to look at the desserts. The tarte du maison sounded like a wonderful confection, with pastry, and fruit and creme patisserie, but I went for the bitter dark chocolate mousse. This was the only bad decision

of the evening because I was sadly disappointed. It wasn't particularly mousse-like, nor was the chocolate dark, and it involved too much sponge. I know, sponge. In a chocolate mousse. Maybe this was the bit that was supposed to make me bitter. But the sorbets across the table were amazing. Obviously all painstakingly home-made, there was a choice of five or six, although I only got to taste two of the three on my dining companion's plate before her spoon started ricocheting off my knuckles. The lemon particularly is a national speciality and this one didn't disappoint. The bill for our three courses and hand-picked bottle of wine – and a couple of pre-dinner drinks – came to £93.

So while dining out at Cafe Montmartre may not help you through the credit crunch, or make up for the dismal weather in this country, maybe taking a leaf out of our continental neighbour's book and spending some time savouring life – and their fantastic cuisine – is the way forward. Vive la France.	QUALITY OF FOOD	5
	MENU CHOICE	5
	SURROUNDINGS	5
	LOCATION	4
	SERVICE	5
	VALUE FOR MONEY	4
	TOTAL [OUT OF 30]	28