

# Hybrid over troubled waters

**A**N ALGERIAN-FRENCH restaurant in Broughty Ferry? An unusual proposition and one that sounds somewhat improbable. The French bit is fair enough, but Algerian? Supposing I was brave or mad enough (given the bloody state of Algerian politics) to set up an Anglo-Scottish restaurant in Algiers, why should it be any good? And would the locals be in any position to tell if it was the real McCoy, whatever that might be? Non-indigenous restaurants tend to lose authenticity when operating in a diaspora.

Which is why I did a double take when I found myself in Café Montmartre with a splendidly aromatic couscous royale sitting looking up at me. Now, I've eaten couscous in Tunisia, in France and nausea (couscous in France has the equivalent popularity of chicken tikka in the UK) and in London, but this was the best yet. The thing about your typical North African couscous meal is that it's rarely bad, but often boring, a formula meal which too easily becomes routine. But this was a textbook version.

First, there was the couscous itself – each tiny grain separate – with its steaming wheaty nose. Then the accompanying bouillon, a spicy broth scented with chilli and cumin with the customary soft, but not mushy, root vegetables and a

Algeria and France may not see eye to eye, but **Joanna Blythman** has discovered a restaurant which combines their cuisine harmoniously

sprinkling of firm, floury chickpeas. Vegetarians might make a meal of this, but couscous royale gives you a snapshot of all the meat variations: a generous skewer of moist chicken, a sweet lamb chop and lean, adeptly-spiced merguez sausage, all boldly and skilfully char-grilled.

If you have ever made the mistake of eating merguez in a French motorway cafeteria you will know how horrible the commercial kind can be: gristly, fatty, staggeringly salty. And even quite good couscous restaurants will serve you the customary accompanying hot condiment – harissa – straight out of a tin. Thankfully, the proprietors of Café Montmartre are clearly perfectionists. Unbelievably, they make their own, and it shows.

Thierry Haddanou, born in Algeria but brought up in the Pyrenees, is front of house. His wife Anne is the cook, an Aberdonian who spent most of her childhood in the Far East. They met working in London restaurants. Café Montmartre has recently moved from where they started five years ago into

larger premises just around the corner. The decor is unremarkable – flickering oil lights and faux candelabra, prints of Paris, and nicely set tables with proper linen and big generous balloon glasses. It is a fun place with a Friday-night feel to it and lots of regulars. At the weekend, we only just managed to get a table and no wonder. Even if you never ventured down the Maghreb route, Café Montmartre works well just as a French restaurant.

Lucky Dip in the bistro staples produced a sound salad of sweet vine tomatoes and lamb's lettuce, topped with melting goat cheese on toast spread with a basil pistou. There was also a soft spinach-stuffed crêpe, the spinach and the covering béchamel sauce both assertively seasoned with nutmeg and topped with melting, gratinated cheese. This was a warming, almost Alpine sort of dish. Decent baguette on the side too, something you can't even count on in France.

There are also favourites like rack of lamb roasted with rosemary or duck confit or blackboard fish of the day specials such as Dover sole Meunière, lemon sole stuffed with salmon in saffron sauce.

Otherwise the action centres on "Les Grillades" – steaks. Rib eye, sirloin or fillet all get different classic treatments: Bordelaise, Roquefort, green peppercorns and so on. The Béarnaise was a model of its kind, mellow with a tarragon accent and truly excellent daubed on char-grilled sirloin (no poncey towers of beef here) and properly French thin matchstick fries. You can tell Gary Rhodes from me where to stuff his British chips.

The desserts were obviously fresh, carefully prepared and presented prettily. The chocolate mousse was neither too light nor too solid. It tasted of chocolate not sugar, but was not so unremittingly dark that it would defeat those who find very bitter chocolate just too grown-up. The raspberry Charlotte (a mousse in sponge fingers) was a bit bland, but enlivened by two coulis: tangy passion-fruit and sharp, highly perfumed raspberry.

Thierry Haddanou is energetic and welcoming, and his enthusiasm for wine is infectious. Having sworn never to drink North African wine in my life again after suffering the worst-ever hangover following a tussle with the infamous Sidi Brahim (imagine licking tarmac), I found myself ordering, on his recommendation, a bottle of Algerian Cuvée du Président (£17.95). This is produced near the Atlas mountains and doesn't even state a vintage on the label but was a revelation, with the spicy, peppery warmth and raspberry fruit you get in good southern Rhones but with more concentration and wonderful length.

Different and interesting like Café Montmartre itself, this place is a one-off, and all the better for it **m**

"The sirloin was served with properly French thin matchstick frites. You can tell Gary Rhodes from me where to stuff his British chips"



**Café Montmartre**

289 Brook Street, Broughty Ferry (01382 739313)

**Lunch:** £4.95-£8.95

**Dinner:** £20-£30

**Food rating:** 17/20

Illustration: **Adrian McMurchie** [www.mcmurchie.co.uk](http://www.mcmurchie.co.uk)