



THE DISH

## Vancouver's Provence Marinaside is a timeless classic that remains cutting-edge

The restaurant has remained true to its French origins while refreshing itself to stay top of class



Provence Marinaside serves whole Dungeness crab drenched in a lemony olive oil that you crack, pick and dip until the sauce drips down your elbows.

PHOTOS BY BEN NELMS/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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Provence Marinaside



1177 Marinaside Cres., Vancouver

604-681-4144; [provencemarinaside.ca](http://provencemarinaside.ca)

**Price:** Dinner appetizers, \$11 to \$24; mains, \$26 to \$49

**Cuisine:** Southern French

**Additional info:** Open daily, from 8 a.m. (9 a.m. Sat. and Sun) to 10 p.m.; reservations accepted

★★

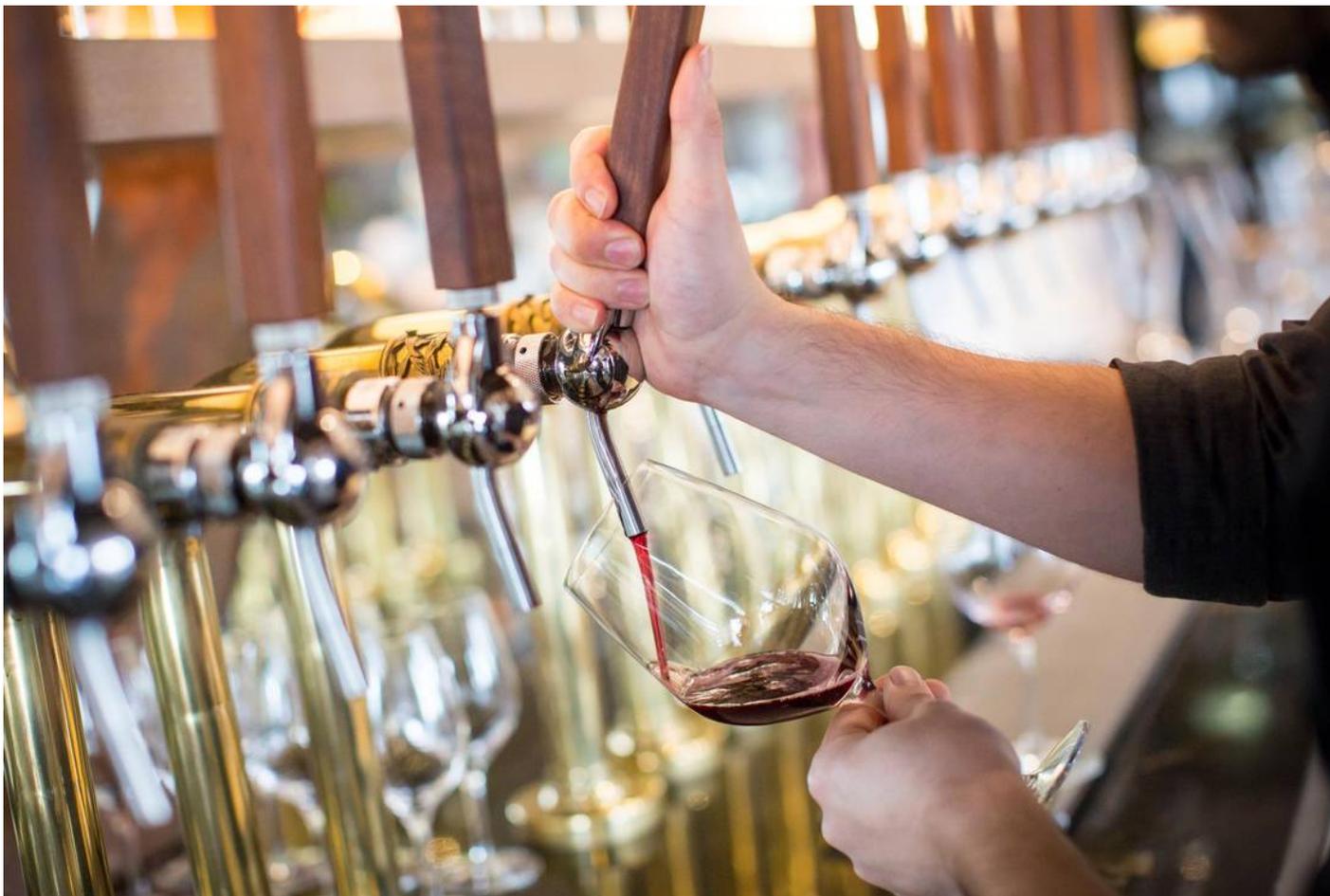
**M**amie Suzanne's Provençal fish soup smells like the bottom of the ocean in low tide. For some of us, this is a wonderful thing.

Lush, smooth and opaquely orange, the bold broth is made from whole rockfish (guts, head, bones and all) that has been simmered with tomatoes, white wine and aromatics, then strained through a food mill. The traditional recipe came to Vancouver courtesy of Suzanne Quaglia, the late chef-patron of Le Patalain in Marseille, when her son, Jean-Francis, and daughter-in-law, Alessandra, opened Point Grey's Provence Mediterranean Grill in 1997. The version currently being served at Provence Marinaside has been tempered slightly with the addition of halibut bones (local rockfish being much stronger in flavour than the small rockfish in France). But other than that, it's a true classic.

I honestly had no intention of reviewing Provence Marinaside when I accepted an invitation to a complimentary dinner, for a guest and myself, late last month. The Yaletown restaurant, which opened five years after the now-sold Point Grey original, is celebrating its sweet 16th anniversary. That party night was toasted with balloons, cupcakes and a free glass of bubbly. The festivities continue until the end of March, with 17 dishes that have been on the menu since the beginning – including Mamie Suzanne's fish soup – discounted by 16 per cent. At most, I thought I might post a photo and short tribute on Instagram.

But then, as I was dipping a crostino with garlicky rouille and grated Gruyère into that pungent soup, I thought "Where else can you find one so uncompromisingly fishy?"

Tearing through a mess of plump wild prawns swimming in satiny, brandy-flamed Provencal sauce, it occurred to me there aren't many local restaurants cooking with this much rich butter – while still catering to modern dietary preferences by plating the dish with crisp zucchini and butternut-squash spaghetti in place of potatoes.



Between Provence Marinaside and The Wine Bar next door, sommelier Joshua Carlson offers 201 wines by the glass.

Looking around the recently renovated room with its clean lines of beige, metal and wood, I tapped my toes to the swingy jazz trio that plays here every Wednesday night and took a sip of perfectly persevered Joie Plein de Vie Brut.

Between Provence Marinaside and The Wine Bar next door, sommelier Joshua Carlson offers 201 wines by the glass – the most extensive program in Western Canada. He has three systems: 47 keg taps, Coravin (which inserts a thin needle through the cork and pressurizes the bottle with inert gas) and Le Verre de Vin (for 27 sparkling wines) that keeps them all fresh for weeks. The range is vast, from cheap and cheerful B.C. blends to high-end Saint-Émilion Grand Cru Bordeaux, and will include a new crop of exclusive this spring. I remember sampling a whole whack of wines-on-tap at The Wine Bar a couple years ago. They all tasted gassy and slightly off. But the systems are now dialled in. All five wines I tasted that celebration night and on a subsequent visit were pristine.

And, of course, I went back. Because a restaurant like Provence Marinaside – one that has remained true to tradition while refreshing itself to remain not just relevant, but cutting-edge and top of class (the wine program won a gold award at the Vancouver International Wine Festival last week) – deserves a closer look.

Last Saturday night, a couple of brave souls were sitting outside on the patio, buried under blankets and being roasted by heaters. I can't say I would want to dine that way, but when the weather warms up and the sun shines over False Creek and the dining-room windows slide fully open, there aren't many waterfront perches more pleasant than this.

It's easy to forget about this patio – and the entire restaurant, really. Located across from the marina, it's part of Yaletown, but in a world of its own. I doubt there is much crossover with the young, cologne-soaked, max-volume-lashed bar crowd that carouses along Hamilton and Mainland streets only a few blocks over.

On Saturday night, it was all families. Not young families. The parents were older professionals, of many ethnicities, with grown kids in their late-teens and 20s. A couple of the kids had brought along their new girlfriends and boyfriends. (You could tell by the awkward glances and stilted conversations.) I bet a lot of them grew up in Point Grey and have been eating at Provence since they were children.



Chef de Cuisine Sheldon Maloff prepares a dish at Provence Marinaside.

Lucky them. Classic French cuisine is currently having a revival. The James Beard Foundation has named it as one of the food trends to watch. And just look at the crowds thronging to St. Lawrence. Yet, there is a whole generation that has never even tasted a proper French sauce or experienced the delight of watching a whole fish deboned tableside.

You can order that fish at Provence. It's a small sea bream (imported fresh, twice a week from France) oven roasted with tomatoes, lemon, dry fennel, olive oil and white wine. It's light and simple, but thoroughly satisfying.

There is also whole Dungeness crab drenched in a lemony olive oil that you crack, pick and dip until the sauce drips down your elbows. Or juicy free-range chickens roasted to order, crusted in Herbes de Provence. And supple, lightly fried frog legs served with escargot (because why not put all the best outliers together on one plate?) in a vibrant green, herbed compound butter so garlicky it will ward off vampires.

Desserts, which include rubbery lemon tart and wan chocolate mousse, are entirely forgettable. But what do you expect for \$6 a piece?

Service, although gracious, can be a bit slack when the dining room is full. Second courses came out quickly, before the appetizers were finished. A promised second breadbasket (warm focaccia and baguette) never materialized.

But no one in that busy room seemed disappointed. In fact, the mood was joyous.

I would hesitate before recommending Provence Marinaside to a hipster diner who can't get enough David Chang on Netflix or is always chasing after the next new thing. But the sad thing about some of those diners, many of whom happen to be cooks, is that they'll never know the difference between a quick, Sriracha-based chowder and a real fish soup built from bones. If they want to taste the difference and expand their palate, perhaps they should check out this timeless, yet of-the-moment classic that we are fortunate to still have in our midst.