

In Lee, Très, Très Bien

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Above left, Chez Nous owners Franck Tessier and Rachel Portnoy. Top, a vegetarian antipasto. Middle left, a slow-roasted duck breast with confit, sweet potatoes and sautéed spinach. Middle right, a banana-toffee tartlet with a mini Chocolate malted. Above right, the dining room.

They are a study in contrasts. He is happily carnivorous, while she is a dedicated vegetarian. He began studying to be a chef at age 15, while she came to her craft at 26, slightly late for the culinary world. There should be tension, opposition—but instead the gregarious and gifted French chef Franck Tessier and his charming American wife Rachel Portnoy, a superb pastry chef, make magic as the owners of Chez Nous, located in Lee, Mass. And what's more, they seem to be thoroughly enjoying it.

Chez Nous is a simple name loaded with many implications. It suggests that the food will have a French flavor, while also revealing that this is a husband-and-wife team's project. It is a name that subtly promises an atmosphere that is warm and inviting. "The concept was just a simple, homey French restaurant," Ms. Portnoy explained.

That's a modest assessment, as the interior of the historic building that houses the restaurant has an enchanted rustic feeling. In the main dining room, grapevines gracefully entwine around the wooden beams of the ceiling and sprigs of fairy lights are curled around them. A second, more intimate room also has incorporated the grapevines, but instead of twinkling lights, bunches of faux grapes adorn the vines. Touches of the vine motif continue in a third room, the red room, so-called because its walls are a deep vermilion and feature a pattern that reminds one of the wallpaper that would be found in a formal Victorian parlor. Arrangements featuring the grapevines rest atop a breakfront, as well as on the mantel of a gorgeous fireplace.

The most striking use of those vines is over the doorway that leads to the bar. There, a small set of delicate, shiny copper pots hangs from them, an image that has become something of a signature for Chez Nous.

Such thoughtful touches dot the restaurant, and include the small, colorful ceramic head of an elephant deity that hangs on one side of the bar. "To ward off bad spirits," Mr. Tessier explained with a laugh. (continued)

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It's certainly working, as a good feeling infuses the space. The couple tends to laugh a lot, enjoying each other, their work and their customers. Ms. Portnoy greeted them all warmly, seeming to know everyone who came in, or at least took the time to make them feel like she did. A brief glance at the license plates on the cars assembled in the restaurant's parking lot revealed that many of them had traveled from nearby states—a smattering of New York, New Jersey and Connecticut plates joined several from Massachusetts and one from Kentucky.

Opening this restaurant has been a longtime goal for the couple, who were brought together by their talents. After years working in London at Le Gavroche, a restaurant granted two stars by Michelin, Mr. Tessier went to The Point, a Relais & Chateau resort in Saranac Lake, N.Y. for his first position as executive chef.

In 1997, he was in need of a pastry chef and received a résumé from Ms. Portnoy, who had recently departed the world of academia to study at Le Cordon Bleu in London and apprentice in France. Thus began their personal and professional partnership. The secret of their success is mutual respect and a shared passion. "We both love food and cooking. It's just a common denominator," noted Ms. Portnoy.

Lee might at first seem an odd spot for two continental culinary figures of such ability, but they saw an excellent opportunity nestled in the beauty of the Berkshires. "We are on the way to Jacob's Pillow. We are on the way to Tanglewood. We are on the way to Stockbridge," Mr. Tessier stated. "Shakespeare & Company is five minutes from here. And Lee is the first stop on the Mass Pike. It's an interesting location and a very nice town."

The couple first came to Lee approximately three and a half years ago when Mr. Tessier took a position as co-chef at From Ketchup to Caviar, the restaurant that preceded Chez Nous in the space. Ms. Portnoy opened a thriving bakery down the street, Cakewalk, which she sold last March when the couple bought their restaurant. After a quick turnaround, Chez Nous opened on April 7.

It was an auspicious date for anyone within driving distance who loves good food. Mr. Tessier describes his cuisine as "tasty food with French tradition and style, but an innovative style too," adding that "everything we serve is basically everything we love. We don't cook anything we don't like."

And there is a lot to love on the menu, which changes seasonally. Sampling a selection of the menu available just on the cusp of autumn was richly rewarding. A Mediterranean-themed vegetarian antipasto was an entrancing introduction to the couple's cuisine. A chickpea, cucumber and tomato salad was refreshing and cool, while a sampling of the Old Chatham Shepherding Co.'s feta cheese in a garlic herb marinade was enjoyably tart in flavor and spread beautifully on the grainy, satisfying triangles of peasant bread served with the appetizer.

Best of all was a Moroccan red pepper, pomegranate and walnut pâté, a striking, creamy red paste that proved smooth, savory and nothing short of heavenly. The only thing that might improve this antipasto offering is a more thoughtful plating of the components involved. That might occur when

this appetizer makes its seasonal shift. Ms. Portnoy indicated that for late fall she was considering the possibility of roasted eggplant and a Waldorf salad for the antipasto.

At one point, Mr. Tessier declared, "I am in love with braised meat, meats cooking on a stove slowly like a lamb shank or a chicken fricassee." Anyone ordering that Mediterranean chicken fricassee will also fall under its spell. Organic chicken on the bone is served like an abstract stew, a tower of chicken surrounded by vegetables and covered with a sauce dominated by a note of preserved lemon. The chicken truly was perfection, so achingly tender that it practically slid off the bone and melted in one's mouth. The vegetables were done lightly so as to retain crunch and flavor. The only detraction was that the potato gnocchi incorporated into the dish were a tad overdone, but once they were soaked in the savory sauce, it really didn't matter.

Mr. Tessier mentioned plans to add a chicken braised with a green lentil mustard for the winter season that promises to be just as exceptional.

One of the specialties of the house is the grilled escolar, a South American fish that is thick, firm and a touch sweet. Mr. Tessier said they selected it because "we didn't want to put salmon on the menu because everybody is doing salmon... I've got something quite unusual that is not at the supermarket everyday." It was served with a delectable warm, minted Niçoise salsa composed of olives, tomatoes, peppers, capers and herbs and served over a mound of jasmine rice.

The couple intends to keep the fish on the menu, but serve it in a style more appropriate for the season. It will be fascinating to see what they devise.

With the arrival of dessert, it was Ms. Portnoy's time to shine. She did not disappoint.

Her milk chocolate and hazelnut mousse torte was satisfyingly sweet without being cloyingly so. The texture was creamy, with a gratifying hint of crunch provided by the crust. The accompanying praline mini-malted was a lovely touch, the Platonic ideal of a Bailey's Irish Cream without the alcohol.

The mini-malted will remain, but was to be served with Ms. Portnoy's banana toffee tartlet, a much demanded local favorite. A sweet potato pudding and a crumble featuring apple and ginger may also appear.

The wine list at Chez Nous is an intriguing mix. It is divided up in print not only as reds and whites, but also as "Old World" wines from France, Italy and Spain and "New World" wines from the likes of Australia, Canada and the west coast of the United States.

Perhaps the most surprising thing about Chez Nous is its affordability. Appetizers run from \$5.95 to \$8.95, salads from \$6.50 to \$8.50 and main courses from \$10.25 for a burger to \$28.95 for the rack of lamb. Desserts are generally less than \$7. In general, a meal that is pleasing to the pocketbook and palate may be had for \$35 to \$40 per person.

Chez Nous serves dinner only, Wednesday through Sunday, from 5 p.m. to closing. Chez Nous is currently a beloved neighborhood bistro, but is certain to blossom into a regional dining destination. The phone number is 413-243-6397 and the Web site is www.cheznousbistro.com. 