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RESTAURANT REVIEW

Comme Ça: Just 'like that,' it's a hit



Wally Skali / Los Angeles Times

The luscious interior of the roasted beef marrow is of ready to be scooped out with a small spoon. On the side is an oxtail jam, the shredded meat cooked and reduced until it's butter tender.

Chef David Myers' West Hollywood brasserie is fashionably French and bursting with life. Reservations are a must.

By S. Irene Virbila, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
5:22 PM PST, January 16, 2008

COMME ÇA, the sparkling new brasserie from David Myers of Sona, is a runaway success, a crossover that's both a seriously good restaurant and a trendy one. It doesn't happen often, but when it does, the excitement lights up the restaurant scene, which has generally been in the doldrums since the economic downturn and now the writers strike. This is the place everyone wants to be, and that pretty much guarantees a crazy mix of people angling for a table and some *grand cru* people-watching.

Comme Ça, French for "like that," is effervescent and fun. As you arrive, you have to make your way through the crowd out front, pacing, murmuring into iPhones, waiting for friends to arrive, or cadging a smoke between courses. Just inside the door, would-be eaters are pressed close against the maitre d's lectern, where a severely chic hostess in black studies the reservations. Those who arrive without one can hope for one of the small tables in the bar, but unless it's late, they're usually all taken.



PHOTO GALLERY
Inside Comme Ca

Heads turn as each new group enters the Melrose Avenue restaurant and either sidles up to the bar -- where consulting bartender Sam Ross, from the celebrated Manhattan cocktail bar Milk & Honey, mixes up wee, twee cocktails with a nostalgic bent -- or spots a table of friends and insinuates itself into what feels like the ultimate dinner party.

And like a good party, it can also get loud. In this case, deafeningly so. But it's a little better in the front dining room, which is also the best spot for people watching.

I've lucked into a white tufted leather banquette that runs along the front dining room's dark wainscoting, where I have a prime view of the scene. A giant *plateau de fruits de mer* is delivered to a tiny table across the room. Loaded with oysters, clams, mussels, crab and what not, the two-tiered affair is so tall, the two diners can hardly see each other across it. Meanwhile, the *fromager*, wrapped up in a big apron and wearing a low black hat raffishly askew, comes out to advise a table on a cheese selection, then dashes over to the cheese bar to put it together. Next to me, a server delivers an East Side cocktail (gin, mint, lime and cucumber) and a Rumble (rum, lemon, blackberries and crushed ice) to a pair of women in spangled black cocktail dresses. They must have been expecting more of a club scene than a serious French brasserie, but as soon as a warm baguette arrives wrapped in brown paper, they drop all pretense and start wolfing down the thick-crust bread baked at Boule, the bakery Myers operates

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around the corner on La Cienega.

A richer classic

HERE'S our *tarte flambée*, a misshapen oval flatbread slathered with *fromage blanc*, skeins of sweet, caramelized onions and a surfeit of smoky lardons. Now we're the ones wolfing. I love the sweet onions against the smoky bacon. Though much richer than the classic you'd get in Alsace, where it's the local answer to pizza, Comme Ça's is quite delicious, so much so that I end up ordering it as a starter for the table every time I go.

Every French brasserie, of course, has *soupe à l'oignon* -- onion soup. Usually it's a sorry affair, but here it's a revelation. Instead of the usual murky broth that tastes like reconstituted bouillon cubes, Comme Ça's version is made with a rich, clear stock and ribbons of soft, caramelized onions capped with a melted layer of good Gruyère. First-class ingredients make all the difference.

Myers' food at Sona is precious, iconoclastic and sometimes difficult to love, but here, surprisingly, he zeros in on French bistro and brasserie classics. He's also been very smart, tapping Manhattan for not only mixologist Ross, but also executive chef Michael David, two of the best at the serious restaurant-trendy scene thing. David cooked at both Café Boulud and DB Bistro Moderne, two of the best casual French restaurants in New York. David is a thorough professional who not only can cook, he also knows how to get the food out in a timely fashion. When you order *moules frites*, the fries that come with the steamed mussels are fresh out of the fryer, heaped into a metal cone-shaped vase, dark gold and irresistible with a proper aioli. The mussel broth is dosed with cream and a dash of Pernod to delicious effect. For \$16, this could be dinner.

Brandade de morue gratinée is the real thing, an oval cast iron casserole filled with a gutsy mix of dried salt cod and potatoes, delicious spread on toast. I love the roasted beef marrow, two tall bones standing upright, the luscious marrow ready to be scooped out with a small spoon. On the side is an oxtail jam, the shredded meat cooked and reduced until it's butter tender.

For something lighter, consider the *salade aux légumes* of crisp, chilled baby romaine jumbled up with fresh artichoke hearts, green beans, and other vegetables in a light, subtle dressing. It beats any *salade* you're likely to get at a brasserie in France.

Of course, nobody's forcing you to order so many hors d'oeuvres -- the menu's term for appetizers. But how can you resist when *escargots persillade* are on offer, and sepia Provençale? That's squid sautéed with tomatoes and a thread of basil oil.

One page is enough

THOUGH the one-page menu covers a lot of ground, it's fixed in the sense that it doesn't change. Oysters will always be waiting for you -- and that *plateau*, which is just what you may want after hitting a film. It's not the best I've ever had (the shrimp don't have much taste, the crab is a little watery), but it's very generous. If two of you polish off the \$48 medium plateau, all you'll need after is a plate of cheese.

And the cheeses are worth every calorie. The selection from *fromager* Todd Jasmin, who performs the same duties at Sona, isn't huge, but it's well-chosen. Every cheese I've had has been perfectly ripe, and often unusual, either raw milk versions of familiar types such as Époisses or Langres, or from very specific locales. He'll try to match cheeses with the wines, coming up with a blue made just miles from a Rhone vineyard or a chevre produced not far from the village where Chenin Blanc or Sauvignon was made.

Installing a cheese bar at the front of the restaurant works better than the ceremonious presentation of the cheese cart in this setting. It's less pretentious -- and most importantly, the better to squeeze in more tables.

I can imagine certain avid foodies pontificating on the *plats du jour* at Comme Ça, collecting them as notches on their belt.

Choucroute garnie is a bit unconventional, but a fine enough version, garnished with house-made sausages, including a blood sausage, and a thick slice of country ham with potatoes (underdone) and sauerkraut (overly vinegary). *Côte de boeuf* for two is perfect for a simple dinner on the town and a great bottle of *rouge*. I like the way they bring it out whole and show it to you and then take it back into the kitchen to slice it.

But there are plenty of inviting entrees from the regular menu too, including what has to be the best bouillabaisse in town. The broth carries the flavor of all the watery creatures that went into it, more than the mussels, clams, shrimp and piece or two of fish that garnish it. And, of course, the vibrant *rouille* gives everything a lift. The duck confit too brings back the taste of France. This one is crisped on the outside, meaty on the inside and served with braised red cabbage and squiggly spaetzle noodles.

The steak (the cut isn't named on the menu) has a jellied texture, and a tendency to arrive overcooked. But those frites, I want to hoard them, they're so good. The kitchen also turns out a respectable *coq au vin* and a lovely skate wing with grenobloise sauce.