

La Goulue Sur Mer Arrives in Southampton, With a Dash of Chaos and a Side of Style



 **Steven Stolman** on Jul 8, 2025

   

“Is it true?” said the anxious DM on my Instagram account. “Is La Goulue really opening out here? OMG!”

Such was the topic at nearly every early season gathering ... “Really? When? What? Do you have a number for reservations?”



But, given the Venn diagram of Southampton, the Upper East Side, Palm Beach and what is arguably the most renowned of all the French bistros that popped up in New York during the last quarter of the 20th century, the anticipatory hysteria wasn't surprising.

Consider the provenance: Jacqueline Onassis, Catherine Deneuve, every Birkin-toting blonde at lunch or with their Wall Street husbands at dinner. Indeed, it was only a matter of time, and it seemed as though that time had come.

Why all the fuss? Well, for starters, La Goulue was the first to offer New Yorkers the kind of food that has captivated visitors to Paris since the days of the Belle Epoch: traditional dishes like poulet fermier, steak frites and Coquille St. Jacques, in an evocative space that just felt, well, so very French, with its Art Nouveau lighting, white tablecloths, honeyed paneling, oxblood leather banquettes and Thonet chairs, all served up by waiters straight out of central casting. In their tidy black vests and long white aprons, it didn't matter if they were really named Gus from Astoria. On the floor at La Goulue, they were all Pierre and Marcel, with the attitude to match.

And then there was the cheese souffle, a cloud of delight that received the seal of approval from both Drs. Atkins and Tarnower. One could eat it every single day and still fit into showroom samples from Blass or Oscar.

All this was the brainchild of Jean Denoyer, a French expat whose first stateside job was as a manager at Yellow Fingers, the 1960s UES discotheque. From there, he dabbled in retail apparel, both in New York City and Southampton, where a shop named simply Denoyer thrived at 66 Jobs Lane.

But it was the first La Goulue, on East 70th Street, that became an immediate darling. And when it moved to a larger space on Madison Avenue, the customers followed, just as they did to satellites in Bal Harbour and Palm Beach.

His second concept, Le Colonial, a take on 1920s Saigon, also wowed for a bit (it still does on Chicago's tony Oak Street), while Orsay, more brasserie than bistro, moved into the old Mortimer's space, where it continues to attract a neighborhood crowd.



The Denoyer world was never drama-free, however. Spats with landlords and business partners have been as much of a constant as the Salade Folle, an irresistible pile of perfectly cooked haricot vert tossed in a creamy truffle vinaigrette. Indeed, there was even an eight-year absence between the closure of the Madison Avenue location in 2009 and its current home on East 61st Street just east of Madison Avenue.

But in the restaurant world, such turbulence is part and parcel to the ilk. And in the case of La Goulue, it's breathtakingly irrelevant. All people want is that cheese souffle in a room that feels as if the ghosts of Nan Kempner and Casey Ribicoff were gossiping at the next table.



Enter La Goulue Sur Mer, blessed by Denoyer but solely owned and operated by Southampton locals Anthony Punnett (who partnered with Denoyer at Le Colonial Los Angeles) and Joseph DeCristofaro, well-known for his ownership of the infamous Old Stove Pub and, long before that, a player in the whole Hamptons controlled-circulation magazine space.

Housed in the standalone Hamptons Road building that began its life in 1923 as Balzarini's — admittedly the most unhip restaurant in the Hamptons, and proud of it — it served up copious amounts of Northern Italian dishes year round in the kind of cozy, carpeted space that made conversation with elderly parents possible. But talking wasn't tantamount; stuffing one's face with osso buco and homemade spinach lasagna was the order of the day. One vivid memory: the desktop pay phone sitting on the front desk that took quarters for local calls.

From 1998 until 2018, the location housed Red Bar, an American brasserie founded by Kirk Basnight and David Loewenberg, which for two decades was the epitome of cool for Hamptons dining, what with its open, airy square room lit solely by stylish pillar candle sconces, making everyone look gorgeous.

Contrary to Balzarini's, however, conversation at Red Bar was an exercise in futility. If it were still around today, diners there wearing smartwatches would be receiving nonstop loud noise warnings from start to finish. Regardless, it was always packed and fun and buzzy.

And then, practically overnight, Red Bar disappeared. The specific reasons are irrelevant at this point, but the community was bereft. Then came COVID and the building that was such a source of joy for so many for so long sat fallow — until last summer. As quickly as Red Bar had closed, the enigmatic Enchanté opened. Billed as a modern French bistro, hopes were high, as were the prices.

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So the excitement surrounding the opening of La Goulue Sur Mer is understandable. Could lightning strike twice? At least it would be different, since the majority of the Southampton Village deluxe dining options opened in recent memory have been uniformly Italian — not that there's anything wrong with that, but man cannot live on rigatoni alone. Wouldn't a little friséé salad or coq au vin be nice for a change?

With barely a month between lease signing and a targeted soft opening date of June 27, Anthony and Joe certainly had their work cut out for them. Enchanté's go-go glitz needed to be softened in order to please Jean Denoyer enough to allow this new venture to bear his mark. That meant rushing vintage Thonet chairs and Art Nouveau lighting fixtures over from France and bathing the entire room in that iconic buttery yellow color that traditionally was simply the result of decades of nicotine-laden smoke on top of plain white walls.

Thanks to Farrow & Ball, that patina is now present. The bar remains tiny and sexy, what with its black-and-white floor and array of back-lit booze, but has been supplemented with a louche cocktail lounge that was once an unloved overflow dining room. It works.



The deafening acoustics of the Red Bar era remain, although white tablecloths and sound-absorbing panels are trying their damndest. More are scheduled to be added, along with flickering votives, silver pepper mills, an Edith Piaf soundtrack and other accoutrement associated with the traditional French bistro shtick. In a charming nod to Southampton, old Bert Morgan photographs of swells from years past line the walls of the two tiny restrooms.

Is it really La Goulue? The food says a resounding “yes,” once you get it — that is, if you get it. Like all Hamptons restaurants, staffing is the biggest challenge, not just on the floor but also in the kitchen, and it will only get worse for reasons too hot to handle at this juncture in time.

On friends and family night, when only half the restaurant was purposely seated and a limited menu was offered, it was simply lovely. The asparagus was properly peeled and accompanied by a velvety hollandaise sauce. The steak frites was exactly what it should have been, as were the local deep sea scallops served over celery root puree drizzled with beurre blanc. The bread was warm and the butter was cold and plentiful. Only crème brûlée was offered for dessert, but no one seemed to care.

On another night, the first for public a la carte dining, it was like an episode of “Fawlty Towers.” An OpenTable glitch double-booked the entire restaurant, creating an angry mob at the door and, adding insult to injury, the computerized ordering system that worked just fine the night before decided to take a dump, sending half the orders into oblivion.

Management and staff were apologetic bordering on tears, glasses of wine and starters were comped, and for those who didn’t storm out with the kind of attitude unique to New Yorkers, the seared salmon with black lentils in mustard sauce proved to be the perfect summer meal — save for the fact that it arrived close to midnight — as did the roast chicken with pommes puree.

But this too shall pass, and with time La Goulue Sur Mer will definitely become a welcome new addition to the Hamptons dining scene. Bien Sur!

La Goulue Sur Mer is at 210 Hampton Road in Southampton,
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