



Tableau, restaurant inside Le Petit Theatre, earns Three Beans: New Orleans restaurants review

Tableau features Gulf shrimp two ways, both photogenically classic: head-on with grits in a tan butter sauce or coated in red remoulade and topped with boiled egg quarters, the kind of dish Auguste Escoffier would have demanded with his lunchtime Chablis if the Frenchman happened upon Chartres Street circa 1910. But if you count the sundry other ways the crustaceans pop up in supporting roles at Tableau, the opportunities to eat them run toward the countless.

The shrimp on the grilled asparagus and in the seafood gumbo - a superior soup to the house's weak-flavored duck-andouille brew - are smaller than the remoulade's, but they're equally fine specimens. Better yet is something called St. Roch, essentially a \$10 garnish of shrimp and mushrooms I ordered with the redfish meuniere -- the best of the three Gulf fish preparations -- and again atop the paneed veal. In each instance it was as if my meat, perfectly prepared, had fallen into bed with the contents of a seafood stew.

This is French-Creole seafood cooking in action: a bacchanal of fresh local catch from the more-is-more school. It also is an instructive snapshot of restaurateur Dickie Brennan's aesthetic, one that has quickly propelled Tableau into the ranks of New Orleans restaurants where visitors and locals can happily coexist.

Brennan opened the restaurant last spring inside a renovated portion of Le Petit Theatre du Vieux Carre. The deal that brought Tableau into this cherished space was controversial during its consummation. In some quarters, it may still be. Le Petit, which continues to produce plays on its stage adjacent the restaurant, is one of the country's oldest community theaters. And there may be no more primo local commercial real estate than this one, at the edge of Jackson Square.

With Tableau, Dickie Brennan and Company has proven itself a respectful steward of the historic site. Like the company's other restaurants (Bourbon House, Dickie Brennan's Steakhouse and Palace Café, all in the French Quarter), its latest aims to unobtrusively add a



touch of class to its wrought iron surroundings.

The restaurant appears to be as tall as it is wide, with private dining areas (third floor) stacked on top of a lounge, more dining rooms and a wrap-around balcony (second floor) overlooking Jackson Square. The street level space feels, thanks to a series of French doors, like a virtual annex of the square, built from a palette of tile, dark wood and fixtures that could have been swiped from the hallway leading to a castle's dungeon.

The look is one you've seen before, including at Brennan's other restaurants, and the vernacular architecture enforces the menu's allegiance to history. It starts, fittingly enough, with the bread. It's based on a Leidenheimer recipe that dates back over a century, when the

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baker's biggest selling product bore the earmarks of its founders' native Germany. The fermented dough bakes into a loaf with a crumb that is denser and dryer than conventional New Orleans French loaves, and crust that requires muscle to tear.

The bread won't put any artisan bakers out of business, but it shows customers respect by giving them something to think about. Use it to absorb the remains of the French onion soup, its broth thick with bits of andouille.

Tableau incorporates modern touches, too. No one is going to mistake a restaurant with this many flat screen televisions, not to mention specialty cocktails and wines on tap, for an antique. But most of the business' inspirations are drawn from the past.

Much of the food suggests chef Ben Thibodeaux is stimulated by Tableau's mission. You won't find more anatomically correct poached eggs than the ones crowning Tableau's Lyonnaise salads or, more to the point, the eggs Sardou, which appear as if they'll release their yolks with a harsh glance. The beef filet is just as exacting. I only wish the list of sides included pommes frites to mop up its béarnaise.

That desire was born of this kitchen's emphasis on the French half of the French-Creole equation. Thibodeaux, like Brennan himself, has spent time cooking in restaurant kitchens in France, and much of Tableau's food has the flavor of a Hemingway-era Paris bistro's.

Take the chocolate pot de crème, a model of French-Cajun miscegenation due to its cayenne heat, or the Aymand cocktail, an apple-y mixture based on rum and the French aperitif Pineau de Charentes.

Or take the sauce-work in general, which is particularly impressive. An excellent chicken dish pairs a roasted breast with a paneed boneless thigh, the former draped in dark poultry demi-glace, the latter in some more of that béarnaise. The Gulf fish meuniere is as much a fine excuse to eat flaky flesh as it is beurre noisette freckled with bits of caramelized butter. The menu is riddled with strong arguments for dragging under-appreciated sauces out of mothballs: sauce foyot, for example, a meaty béarnaise that provides the finishing touch on a healthy veal chop, or its

faintly tart, tomato paste-enriched cousin, sauce choron, which coats a plate holding fried oysters.

The Le Petit property would not have been worth the \$3 million Brennan and Company paid for it (a number that doesn't include renovation costs) if it didn't present an opportunity to serve so many customers. Tableau is a high-volume restaurant, pure and simple, and when it falters it tends to be because it's behaving like one.

Judging from the crowds, Tableau already is enjoying the benefits of its high-traffic corner. But I suspect the rush to serve so many customers at once was to blame for our limp fried eggplant and, on another night, the fact that two dishes, escargots bordelaise and broiled oysters en brochette, arrived near room temperature.

And the front of the house isn't yet marching in lockstep. One night we didn't take our seats until 20 minutes after our reservation time, partly because it took so long to capture the hostess' attention. A confusing system that assigns separate servers to food and drink orders once led to our not receiving any wine until our entrees were nearly finished. Another time an end-of-meal drink order never materialized – and that was after we were talked into a more expensive Burgundy. Tableau's floor staff is not short on charisma, but too often it felt as if it was being deployed to pad our bill.

The line between useful advice and a hard upsell can be blurry, and in Tableau's defense, its staff, in serving so many out of town diners, has to provide a lot of the former. The restaurant's dessert menu is one of the largest around. It's helpful to know that pretty much everyone on staff recommends the praline monkey bread pudding, which is delicious, and I myself appreciated the tableside tutorial on tart a la bouille, a relatively obscure Cajun custard pie.

Both are desserts anyone could appreciate. Such is the service provided by Tableau, a restaurant that, by virtue of its location, is going to be serving a taste of New Orleans to countless visitors lured by its proximity to the city's more famous attractions. If you're in the Quarter and looking for a meal, Tableau is the convenient choice. Most customers will leave feeling it was the smart choice, too.

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