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Quite simply a delight

FOOD AND DRINK

Casanis

★★★★☆

In Bath, it seems, there's always room for one more French bistro. Babonians, American tourists and defectors from Bristol all love to soak up some Gallic ambience when in town. And why not? For one reason or another Bath has proven itself capable of producing French restaurants that are authentic and consistently good.

Casanis, the newcomer on a former derelict site near The Assembly Rooms, is no exception. Entering this navy-fronted Georgian building means stepping into an intimate dining space spanning two floors, perfectly designed for a tête-à-tête. Pale sage and cream walls, stripped wooden floors, heavy drapes at the period windows, chandeliers and thick linen tablecloths and napkins all make for a cosy restaurant where the next couple of hours can gently slip by without a second thought.

This is husband-and-wife team Laurent and Jill Couvreur's first restaurant. Laurent, born in Nice, is the chef, and has previously cooked at London's The Ritz Club, been in charge of the kitchen at another Bath favourite Le Beaujolais on Chapel Row and, more recently, manned the stoves at The Manor House Hotel in Castle Combe. Jill's CV includes film-making and she experienced front-of-house at a restaurant serving Provençal cuisine in New York. The restaurant opened three weeks ago and the pair hope their combined experience will be a hit on this side of the Atlantic.

First impressions noted, they focus very little to worry about. The focus is on French cooking from Laurent's home region of Provence and all the Mediterranean heartiness combined with French style that this involves. It was practically compulsory, then, to try the bouillabaisse, or Provençal fish soup (£5.95), the most classic example of Provençal cuisine on the menu. It was a thick, gutsy broth, laden with fish flavours and herbs, and came with the traditional small pot of saffron rouille that was wonderfully heavy on the garlic. As well as a small pot of grated cheese and roasted croutons. This added some theatricals to the experience, trying a blob of the rouille here and a sprinkle of the cheese there. The cassiolette de brandade de



Gallic charm: It may be a crowded scene when it comes to French restaurants in Bath, but Casanis stands out for its authentic and uncomplicated fare

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Morue – essentially a purée of cod, potatoes and garlic (£5.75) – was as smooth as one of Serge Gainsbourg's numbers and came in a charming little brown-handled rustic pot.

The bottle of wine was slipping down alarmingly well, too. From a short but well-considered list we had chosen, with a little help from our efficient waiter, Mas De Lavail Cuvée Tradition 2004, Côtes Du Roussillon Villages (£17.95). A warming, lighthearted and berry-flavoured red, it had much to recommend it.

Next out of the kitchen was a plate of grilled sea bass (£14.95) and a deep bowl of beef stew (£13.75). The sea bass was a simply cooked fish with no frills or fuss, except slices of lemon and roasted tomatoes tucked into it, and a side of vegetables and boiled potatoes. It wasn't the most adventurous fish dish I've had, but it ticked all the boxes as far as classic French cooking goes, and was difficult to fault technically.

The hearty beef stew had a lightish gravy and came with herb mashed potatoes and vegetables; it was also fairly straightforward but satisfied all the same.

Pudding, a shared tarte au chocolat (£5), was fabulous and, again, fell on the side of simplicity. The pastry may have been slightly too thick but the chocolate itself pulled off the trick of being neither too sweet nor too bitter. We wolfed it down with a dish of vanilla ice cream (£5).

With coffees to finish, the bill came in at £74.35, which is comparatively good value for a three-course dinner for two with a better than average bottle of wine. Every dish was presented with great care and was well thought out. The homely feel of

Casanis, with its low lighting and antiques scoured from shops and markets in the South of France, scores way above other flashier restaurants I could mention in Bath, which feel slightly draughty and are more taxing on the wallet.

For a relaxed lunch or dinner, Casanis promises to serve up the classic style of France, and it certainly delivers. Bien sur, the Laurents might say in response. I can't wait for my next meal there.

Lucie Wood

4 Saville Row, Bath, Tue to Sat noon to 2.30pm and 6pm to 10.30pm, Sun noon to 2pm. Tel: 01223 780055.
www.casanis.co.uk

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