



JUICY: Beef tenderloin with glazed vegetables



RICH: Home-made foie gras terrine with apricot marmalade



TASTY: Grilled seabass



GREAT TEXTURE: Walnut-crusted lamb chops



FLUFFY: The Grand Marnier soufflé



SWEETS: Chocolate fondant and lemon tart

From the PM's kitchen, no less

Nouvelle cuisine... fusion food — all these aren't big in Jerome Deconinck's vocabulary as he stands by traditional French flavours, writes TAN BEE HONG.

JEROME Deconinck has a mission — to offer fine French cuisine at affordable prices in an intimate ambience. With that in mind and after six years spent amongst Malaysians, he has opened Le Francais French Dining restaurant, in the newest block of chic F&B outlets in Kuala Lumpur's Bangsar neighbourhood.

Location is everything. The advantage of quiet elegance puts this row of restaurants, One Bangsar, many notches above the nearby nightmarish zone of Bangsar Baru.

Though the saplings in the front are still struggling to take root, the month-old restaurant already has a homey, lived-in feel inside. The seating area with cream-coloured chairs and wine-coloured table cloths, is next to tall glass windows. Heavy velvet curtains in red, red wine hues can be drawn to create some semblance of privacy should the diners require it.

Deconinck's experience belies his youthful 27 years as he had started out in the business when he was but a young lad of 15 in his hometown of Annecy in the French Alps. He was on the kitchen staff of French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin when he was enticed to come work at the French Embassy in Malaysia in 1999. He was only 21. He remembers friends asking him where Malaysia is and looking it up in a map.

Hot and humid were his first impressions of the country but he liked it enough to stay on and get married to a Malay here.

"I come from a family of food lovers. I remember sitting in the kitchen when I was only four or five, watching my father cook," he recalls. "In fact, it had always been the family dream to open a restaurant."

To say that Deconinck is passionate about food is almost an understatement. He leans forward, his eyes gleam and his voice cranks up a few decibels when he describes his plans for Le Francais. "We are a semi-fine dining restaurant. It's a place to go for good food and a good time. We want to make it affordable rather than intimidating."

He is willing to listen to customers and do what he can to make sure everyone has a good time, including cooking dishes

not on the menu. But one thing Deconinck will not do though, is compromise on his exacting personal standards. "I am no fan of fusion, there's just an overdose of that here. What we offer is hearty, traditional French food just like that which we serve at home in France," he says. "Everything must be fresh. My customers ask why I don't serve escargots (French snails), but the only escargots one gets here are tinned and I will never serve tinned products."

His menu, though by no means extensive, is sufficient to keep everyone happy. One can order a *la carte* or opt for an *a la carte* set menu at RM138 for a three-course meal or RM158 for a four-course meal.

There are at least five types of entrees to start with. My favourite is the *Foie Gras De Canard* (RM42), a *foie gras terrine* served with *apricot marmalade* and *toasted brioche*. The *terrine* is soft and smooth, the rich creaminess of the liver balanced by the sweetness of the apricot

the main courses. For my friend though, it was the much-talked about *Beef Tenderloin with Red Wine Sauce* (RM58) and after the first mouthful, proclaims it to be perfect — cooked just right with a pink centre and a gorgeous sauce.

My own Walnut Crusted Lamb Chops (RM66) definitely live up to Deconinck's reputation. Each chop has a thin layer of fat to keep the meat moist and comes topped with a medallion of ground walnuts. So yummy I couldn't resist picking up each rib to chew a little on the bone. Le Francais is a friendly enough place to be able to do that and not feel like the kid caught with the candy jar. If you don't take beef for religious reasons, tell the waiting staff to hold the sauce and get you some Dijon mustard instead though actually it's wonderfully flavoured enough on its own.

Other meaty mains are Basquaise Chicken Leg (RM38) and Magret de Canard (duck) with foie gras stuffed prunes and demi glace (RM72). Like I mentioned, the menu may be small but there's something for all tastebuds.

Fish fanciers will enjoy the Grilled Seabass (RM46). The fish fillet is served with saffron-flavoured tomato puree and baby leek so well roasted it makes eating absolutely effortless. Still, I'm giving my vote to the lamb chops.

Otherwise, there's Seared Salmon Fillet with Orange Butter sauce (RM48) and Grilled Scallops with Capsicum Sauce (RM58).

As for dessert, I cannot make up my mind between a Grand Marnier Soufflé (RM38) and a Chocolate Fondant (RM30). A soufflé is something I never attempt to make at home. It's tricky at best and demands hard work and exacting timing. But well-done, it's heavenly and I never pass up any chance to order it in a restaurant. Deconinck's soufflé is light and airy enough to elicit gasps of pleasure with each mouthful. Bits of sugar crystals on the sides of the bowl give a nice crunch when one bites into them and the flavour of Grand Marnier is subtle.

My friend's Lemon Tartlet (RM32) is tangy, served with strawberries and chestnut ganache. Lovely if you like the tartness of the fruit as the real flavours of the citrus shines through.

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marmalade.

Dill-scented *Salmon Tartar* (RM30) is easy on the palate. Not as rich as foie gras, the chopped salmon nevertheless has a melt-in-the-mouth quality on a whimsical note. Candied tomatoes provide an interesting contrast in texture.

If you like soup, Le Francais offers *Cream of Garlic*, *Cream of Tomato* and the *Soup Of The Day*.

We decide to go straight for



LE FRANCAIS: Intimate dining but friendly



DECONINCK: Chef to French Prime Minister

The restaurant is open daily for dinner only (except Tuesdays) though on request, Deconinck will cater to group lunches. It seats 50 comfortably.

From Fridays to Sundays, a set lunch is available at RM50++ (two-course) and RM70++ (three-course). When we were there, there was a choice of Salmon Terrine or Chilled Cream Of Asparagus for starters, chicken fricassee with raisins and steamed seabass with fresh basil and cauliflower for mains with a traditional French dessert, *Ile Flottante* (Floating Island), and coffee/tea to complete the meal. The set lunch menu changes on a daily basis, depending on the freshest ingredients available in the market.

A wine list is available with wines sourced mainly from France and Australia. "These are wines I know well," says Deconinck, "so I can advise customers what goes well with a particular dish."

For Father's Day, families of four need only pay for three three-course set lunches as Dads get to eat for free.

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