

Pascal Olhats brings another taste of Paris

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Pascal Olhats has been the go-to French chef in Orange County for more than 25 years.

His iconic Pascal Restaurant in Newport Beach has had a recent name change and is now Tradition by Pascal, but it has been in the same location in a strip mall off Bristol since it opened 21 years ago. That space is attractive, but not entirely atmospheric. Even with a great little epicerie next door, I have to close my eyes and taste the jamon to think of Paris.

But it is the City of Lights that jumps immediately to mind when I visit Pascal's newest venture, Brasserie Pascal. He's moved into a space at Fashion Island formerly operated by David Wilhelm and his group. They had turned the space (the former Café Rouge) into a classic turn-of-the-19th-century Parisian bistro with dark woods and long banquettes. But it didn't realize its full potential until this spring when Olhats took control.

The setting is a perfect backdrop for this kind of classic, homey French cooking. We come early one weeknight, to a room that is bustling. There are several people crowding the bar, and the dining room is nearly full. Still, crusty bread with a pot of deeply flavored aioli arrives as soon as we are seated.

We start with a French Martini (\$13), a vodka concoction garnished with Roquefort-filled olives. The Kir Royal (\$11) is a lighter and equally festive aperitif. It is a mix of sparkling wine and Kir de Cassis served in a long, skinny glass.

The menu is a trip to dishes of bistros past. Nothing fusion or experimental: There's not a drop of foam or lemongrass anywhere on the menu. And this is a good thing.

We start with a selection of appetizers. The Crudités Salad (\$8) is a lovely sight, with perfect, thick slices of tomatoes topped with a fine French vinaigrette. Dewy lettuce cups hold a celery rémoulade, a sort of spicy coleslaw with the earthy green taste of celery.

The Assiette de Charcuterie (\$11 for a small) is ample for our group of six. The shiny slices of garlic-spiked sausage and pieces of smoked duck are rich enough to sate our growing appetites. A generous amount of cornichon, those tart tiny gherkins, are also offered on the plate.

Warm Goat Cheese (\$11) is served in a compact crouton over a high bed of mixed baby greens. Warm walnut-studded toast is served with it. Assassin Lyonnais (\$10) is a hearty first course: The chubby slices of pink garlic-filled pork sausages are served over a warm potato salad.

Escargots (\$12), those garden snails drowned in garlic, are topped with flakey pastry hats. Plump and tender, they even make a satisfying main course.

From the specialties there is a list of old-fashioned dishes offered. But only one is served each night; on this night it's the Ragout d'Agneau (\$21), a warm, stew-like combination of flavorful braised lamb in a wine-enriched gravy.

Artichoke and Spinach Crepes (\$14) are rich and tender vegetable-filled pancakes. They are surprisingly hearty.

Perhaps the lightest offering on the entree list is the Trout Meunière (\$18), a wonderful version of this dish that roughly translates to mean in the manner of the miller's wife. Food types suppose that it's the use of flour on the fish before it's pan fried that gives it this name. Still, it's the fine browned butter sauce seasoned with a splash of lemon and the toasted almond slivers that make this dish special.

Sliced Grilled Sirloin Steak (\$24) is cooked to order and topped with a Béarnaise sauce. The tarragon-infused classic white sauce is done perfectly here, so too the fries with which it is served.

I also like that the youngest diners are not forgotten. A three-course dinner (\$11) includes a starter of the soup of the day – a wonderful cumin lentil – or salad. Next, there's a choice from a few well-selected entrees, including pasta. The kids meal ends with a just-right-size hot fudge sundae.

No one in Orange County makes a better Tarte Tatin than Olhats. This simple and rustic dish raises all of its ingredients to the next level. The apples are caramelized and soft enough to nearly eat with a spoon; the thick layer of apples rests on a tender crust (\$7). Crepe Suzette (\$7) is also fine. The thin, delicate pancakes are served hot with a sauce flavored with brown sugar and orange juice; it emits an intoxicating scent.

At the end of my first dinner, I have one of those rare moments when I'm so engrossed in my meal and the warm lights of the surroundings that a glimpse of the parking lot outside is unsettling. Modern America is outside. I imagine it is kind of like how Dorothy must have felt waking up in Kansas after Oz.

When I return for an early lunch, we are among the first to arrive. We slide in to our window-side booth and are quickly greeted by an offer of water and a basket of that warm, crusty bread and the garlicky aioli. The menu doesn't change for lunch, but there are a few selections that are only available before 3 p.m.

Among them is Steak Frites, topped with an herby compound butter and slender herb-flecked French fries. I note that the table is missing a pot of hot mustard, like those found in brasseries in France, but both the Dijon and ketchup are served on request.

French Onion Soup (\$14) is also well done here, a sherry sweet onion-packed broth topped with a thick slice of Gruyère cheese and a slice of bread. It's a warm and hearty potage, which I order before a Salade Lyonnais (\$11). That classic French salad is reliably done. It's a wonderful combination of curly frisée topped with a poached egg and bacon and tossed with vinaigrette. Although I miss proper lardons – those smoky cubes of pork fat that are traditionally served on this salad – the crisp American bacon is almost an adequate substitute.

That and a well-priced happy hour are the few American exceptions to this oh-so-French experience.