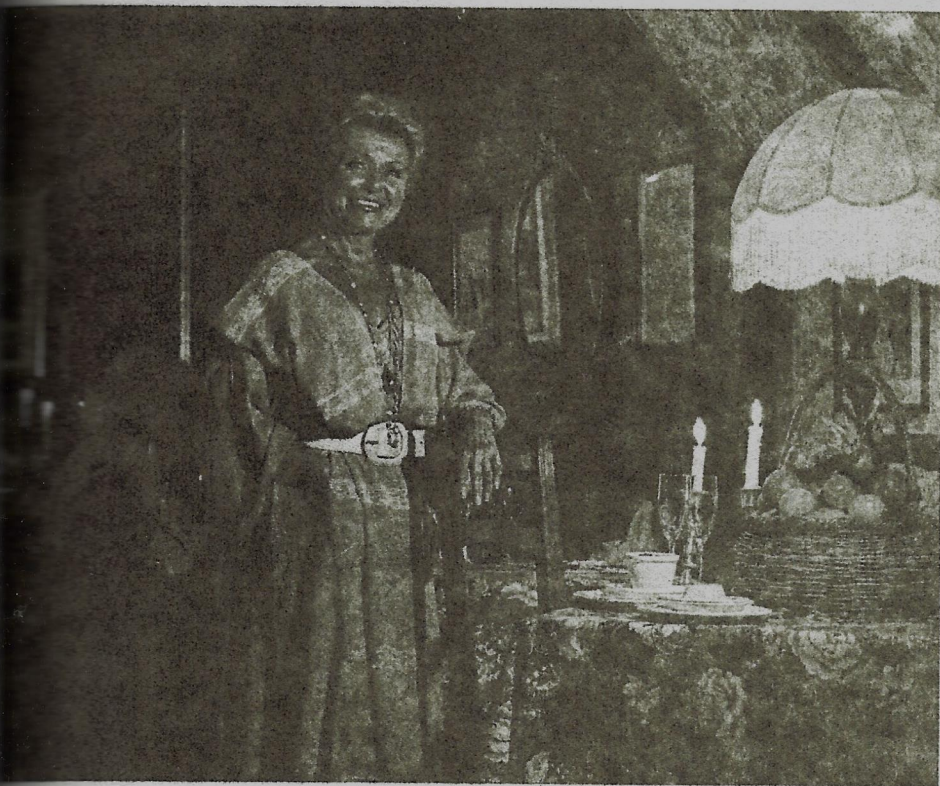


# The French Connection

*Discerning diners can get a taste of France  
in Philadelphia's new bistros.*

*By Barbara Ann Rosenberg*



*On Friday nights,  
Jeannine Mermet entertains  
diners with typical French  
songs at her cozy bistro.*

Fashions change," says Georges Perrier, owner of Philadelphia's Le Bec Fin, an internationally acclaimed French restaurant. Perrier isn't commenting on skirt lengths or shoulder pads, he's talking about trends in restaurants. Perrier predicts this season's stars will resemble French bistros. "There's no question that regional, family-style cooking is the coming thing," he says. "It's less expensive and doesn't require as sophisticated a staff."

Two restaurants, not far from Philadelphia's main business district, have caught onto the emerging popularity of bistros and have been making news on the local culinary scene since they opened late last year. La Coupole and Jeannine's Bistro serve such

dishes as snails bourguignonne and onion soup gratiné to customers eager to recapture memories of wonderful meals in Paris. Great meals, close to home, at prices that aren't too hard to take are proving to be an appealing combination.

Both restaurants deviate from Perrier's observations; however, when it comes to having a less than sophisticated staff—at least in the kitchen. The chef at La Coupole, Olivier de Saint Martin, worked in France with such Michelin-rated greats as Michel Guerard, Paul Bocuse, and Roger Vergé. He then became the chef at the famed Le Bernardin in New York City before coming to La Coupole in mid-1990.



## City Profile

### The French Connection

#### Bistro Bits

**B**istros in France allow patrons to relax and linger over country-style meals. Now you can do Paris in Philadelphia at a number of recently opened restaurants. **La Coupole** (The Bourse Building, 21 S. 5th St., 215-440-0700) opened in October 1990 with chef Olivier de Saint Martin at the helm. La Coupole is open for lunch Monday thru Friday from 11:30 A.M. to 2:30 P.M.; and dinner Monday thru Thursday 5:30 P.M. to 10:00 P.M., Friday and Saturday until 10:30 P.M. Entrée prices range from \$11.75 to \$20.

You don't have to sing for your supper at **Jeannine's Bistro** (10 S. Front St., 925-5062), but co-owner Jeannine Mermet will sing while you eat yours if you're there on Friday evenings. Jeannine's is above the French restaurant La Truffe. Lunch is served Tuesday thru Friday, 12:00 P.M. to 2:00 P.M. and dinner, Monday thru Saturday, 6:00 P.M. to 11:00 P.M. Entrées range from \$10 to \$15.

Not quite a bistro, but definitely a place to kick back and relax, is **Bar Lyonnais** at Le Bec Fin (1523 Walnut St., 567-1000). Bar Lyonnais is open noon to midnight, Tuesday thru Saturday. Bar entrées are priced from \$5 to \$12. —Anne Kyle

When setting up his own kitchen at La Coupole, Saint Martin relied on childhood memories. "I remembered how good my mother's food tasted when I was growing up [in Champagne] and the way her kitchen smelled," he says. "I wanted my kitchen to smell like that."

La Coupole's daily specials like cassoulet (a lusty casserole of beans seasoned and served with assorted savory meats), Muscovy duck parmentier (with potatoes), and a vivid bouillabaisse reflect Saint Martin's French-country influence.

The size of La Coupole—the restaurant seats about 140—however, is larger than traditional bistros. The restaurant has two rooms separated by a bar: one, a large mirrored space lined with dark red banquettes that surround a tiny dance floor and the other, a small, quiet room used when the main room is full. You may have to compromise on the surroundings, but the food makes La Coupole worthy of its designation as a true French bistro.

Jeannine's Bistro is at the other end of the ambiance spectrum. Small and cozy, with subdued lighting, and decorated with toile (fabric reproductions of eighteenth-century country scenes) and flowers, it looks very much as if it were imported intact from Paris. The bistro shares classically trained chef Claude AuCoin with La Truffe, its pricier parent restaurant located on the ground floor of the same Front Street building (Jeannine's Bistro is upstairs).

AuCoin hails from a small village in Nova Scotia, Canada, and before coming to La Truffe in 1987, he worked as a chef in France and Switzerland. His elegant dishes are magnets for special occasions at La Truffe, according to co-owners Les Smith and Jeannine Mermet. But AuCoin is equally gifted when preparing home-style meals for the more casual-

minded patrons of Jeannine's Bistro.

According to Mermet, the idea for the upstairs addition came about because "We had tried all the regional dishes we now have on the bistro menu during a series of monthly dinners we conducted last year. They were such a huge success we decided to create the second restaurant to serve great food like people cook in their homes in France." Some of the earthy fare served at the bistro includes such flavorful dishes as coq au vin, pork tenderloin with braised cabbage, and boeuf bourguignonne.

To intensify the French-bistro mood, Mermet performs on Friday nights. She sings typical French songs, accompanied by a guitar and accordion. "We want people to feel comfortable, to come for casual food, in casual clothes," says Mermet.

**W**hile Georges Perrier has identified the trend, he says he has no plans to open a bistro of his own at the moment. He has, however, recently remodeled Le Bec Fin to include the subterranean, exquisitely appointed Bar Lyonnais where he says "people can wander in anytime for a drink and a snack with friends—or even dessert." The bar's modestly-priced menu features lobster bisque, hearty snails in brioche with garlic butter, pristine oysters on the half-shell, "lollipop" lamp chops, and smoked salmon. And just so the Bar Lyonnais isn't considered too frugal to warrant attention from the upstairs clientele, caviar is served at \$40 an ounce.

It seems that Perrier is picking up on the fringes of the trend that he foresees. Tasty, reasonably priced, French bistro-style food in a casual atmosphere. □

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