

Dining

Restaurant Review

Maison Martinique: For fine dining, still No. 1



BY TINA RONDEAU COLUMNIST

What would Maison Martinique be without the hands-on presence nightly of Chef Yannick and Valerie Martin, who have reigned so long as Vero Beach's leading restaurant couple?

Our answer, based on two recent visits, would be that Yannick's approach to food still reigns in the kitchen, and Maison Martinique is still the top fine-dining choice in Vero.

When Yannick and Valerie returned to Vero Beach from France in the late fall, a variety of health issues kept Yannick from resuming his old role in the kitchen. Yannick has not been preparing this year's dinners, and Valerie (alas) is not expected to ever reign over the dining room again.

But after more than a decade of serving as Yannick's sous chef, Posener Lorius, assisted by another long-time Yannick acolyte, new sous chef Alain Lartigau, seem more than up to the challenge of becoming keepers of the flame.

Night after night, Maison Martinique continues to provide the best of French cuisine - with some daytime input, we are told, from Yannick -- achieving a level not found anywhere else on the Treasure Coast.

Start with the appetizers. The special menu offers seared divers scallops (\$16) prepared -- depending on the night -- in a beurre blanc sauce (my favorite), or served in a very tasty onion, bacon, tomato paste reduction (my husband's vote). On both occasions, the scallops were just what they should be but often aren't: juicy and succulent. And the sauces were a perfect complement.

On another night, the special appetizers included shrimp prepared in a curry sauce and served with chutney (\$16). Delicious. And my husband's appetizer, the escargots (\$14), were a sumptuous variation on the classic French escargots, served with mushrooms, shallots, garlic and thyme, all whipped into a garlic crème sauce.

It is worth noting that of the four appetizers described here, only the escargots are to be found on the bound Maison Martinique menu. The other three are part of an almost bewildering list of nightly appetizer and entrée specials recited by the server.

With each of the nightly specials sounding more tempting than the one before, it is hard to keep them all in mind as one ponders a choice - and so many of them sound so good that one often doesn't get to the printed menu.

Following our appetizers, we enjoyed the *salade d'épinards aux champignons*, a delicious baby spinach salad with roasted shitake mushrooms, candied pecans, gorgonzola cheese, served in a lemon- garlic vinaigrette and drizzled with a red zinfandel reduction.

For entrées, on our most recent visit we went with seafood - and again had two of the evening's specials. I had pompano almandine (\$36), a delicate fish lightly battered and cooked with almonds, lemon and butter that melted in your mouth, and my husband had a beautiful piece of swordfish (\$36) served in a *beurre blanc* sauce.

On a previous visit, the Saturday night after Maison Martinique had hosted one of the Treasure Coast Wine Festival dinners, we opted for meat dishes and enjoyed a merlot which had been served the previous night as part of the Wine Festival.

That night, there were three of us - and we actually tried two of the dishes off the menu. I had the *carre d'agneau a la Dijonnaise* (\$40), a specialty going back to Yannicks Café du Soir days. This was as pretty a rack of lamb as I have ever seen, roasted with Dijon mustard and garlic-herbed bread crumbs, and served with a garlic-herb sauce. The lamb literally melted in your mouth.

My husband tried one of that night's specials, a rack of veal (\$36) with truffle sauce, also prepared perfectly, and again extremely tender. Our companion tried another dish from the menu, *crevettes a la Creole* (\$32), sautéed shrimp served with tiny pieces of andouille sausage in a very tasty Creole mustard rum sauce.

For dessert on our most recent visit, we sampled the *crème brulee*, a perfectly fine rendition of this dish - but we far preferred the first night's dessert sampler, a refreshing assortment of sorbets served in a cookie shell with berries and a raspberry coulis (\$10).

On both visits, the restaurant was fully booked. We were happy to be seated both times in the domed, octagonal main dining room, an elegant dining venue.

Maison Martinique also offers a smaller dining room, the "shell room," and an attractive outdoor area for dining alfresco on pleasant evenings.

The only thing inexpensive about this restaurant is the good espresso, a relative bargain at \$2.95. Wines are fairly priced, but the prices of selections on the wine list price soar into the stratosphere. Our dinner for three ran \$220 before tip, and dinner for two ran \$170 - both times with modestly priced (by Maison Martinique standards) wines.

This is not (and never has been) anything other than a pricey place to dine. But many beachside residents have long thought Yannick's offerings well worth the price.

We would now say that Maison Martinique has not only survived the inevitable transition from Chef Yannick to the next generation, but remains firmly planted at the top of the list of Vero Beach barrier island restaurants.

I welcome your comments, and encourage you to send feedback to me at tina@verobeach32963.com.

The reviewer is a beachside resident who dines anonymously at restaurants at the expense of Vero Beach 32963

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