

RESTAURANTS

MICHAEL BAUER *Update*

Angèle's menu simply excellent

Visitors planning excursions to Napa often overlook Angèle. At times I even forget, but each time I return I wonder why I waited so long.

Few restaurants have the rich character of this 12-year-old French bistro in downtown Napa. Sitting in the dining room, which was a boathouse when it was built a century ago, and looking onto the lighted promenade and the bend of the Napa River, you can almost imagine you're sitting on the banks of the Seine.

Of course it's Napa, and Angèle holds its own charms, with towering flower arrangements at the entrance, wood beam ceiling and pots of olive saplings on the white-clothed tables. The restaurant also boasts a patio across the walkway that offers another view of the river.

Part of the reason the restaurant flies under the radar is that owner Bettina Rouas, who is a front-of-the-house master, hasn't been all that successful in retaining chefs. The past few years has seen three chefs, each slightly changing what comes out of the kitchen. These last three have all been excellent, including current chef Rogelio Garcia, who started last summer.

The menu feels as if it's been simplified while maintaining a Napa-meets-Provence attitude. Boeuf bourguignon (\$28), for example, is deconstructed, with wine-braised beef cheeks arranged round a knob of cabbage, along with piles of braised turnips, carrots and marble potatoes.

As in France, the season's first and best is always well represented. At this time of

year, that means early spring artichokes (\$12), where meaty chunks of hearts are interspersed with golden fried balls of creamy goat cheese, Castelvetro olives, a lacy blanket of purple and green mizuna, and puddles of verdant green goddess dressing.

I also appreciate Garcia's take on crisp veal sweetbreads (\$18), spooned over a tart shell filled with truffled parsnip puree and accompanied by a quenelle of mushroom duxelles and sauteed black trumpet mushrooms. He had me in his spell until I saw the profusion of huckleberries. A few scattered around would have been fine, but too much of the deep purple sauce diminished the savory aspects of the combination. However, those who like lots of fruity elements in their food will be satisfied.

Classics have always been done well too, including steak tartare (\$14/\$28) and onion soup gratinee (\$12). I particularly like Garcia's approach to *pâte de campagne* (\$14), where the prosciutto-wrapped slice has an alternating creamy and rough texture. It's arranged on an oblong cutting board with cornichons and

Angèle

540 Main St. (near Fifth Street), Napa
(707) 252-8115. www.angele-restaurant.com

Lunch and dinner 11:30 a.m.-10 p.m. Monday-Friday; brunch and dinner 10:30 a.m.-10 p.m. Saturday-Sunday. Full bar. Reservations and credit cards accepted. Free lot.

Overall	★★★	Atmosphere	★★★
Food	★★★	Prices	\$\$\$\$
Service	★★★	Noise Rating	▲▲▲▲

pickled radishes, white asparagus and carrots, and served with slices of warm, toasted country bread.

Main courses include *canard roti* (\$30) with a roast duck breast and confit legs, served with lentils and stewed spring onions; and *Coquilles St. Jacques* (\$28) on braised celery root and charred baby leeks.

Mustard-crusting pork loin (\$28) with two thick chunks of meat, braised cabbage that tastes like sweet sauerkraut, and lollipop kale is accented

with tiny roasted apples, adding a pleasant surprise to the plate. I'm not sure I've ever seen a restaurant use these apples, which are only a little bigger than a quarter.

I also can't resist the fries (\$8) — which go with everything on the menu and are served in a paper-lined clay pot with aioli and ketchup — and the desserts.

It's nice — and these days, novel — to have a dessert that looks the way it's described on the menu, whether it's a classic rich tart with pears and almonds (\$10) crowned with a dollop of slightly sour *crème fraîche*, or a rich *pot de crème* (\$10) with crunchy caramel in the center. It shows that classic doesn't have to be boring.

Angèle adds up to a quintessential Napa Valley dining experience, one that should be near the top of the list for any visitor — or local.

Michael Bauer is The San Francisco Chronicle's restaurant critic. Find his blog daily at <http://insidescoopsf.sfgate.com> and his past reviews on www.sfgate.com. E-mail: mbauer@sfgate.com Twitter: @michaelbauer1