



A REAL HUNK... OF FRENCH MEAT

***Boucherie René
Bellevue, Marigot
St. Martin***

By Louise Wollman
Lulu

Despite all my high-minded resolutions, I still get sucked into the "Le," "La" and "des" restaurants of St. Martin:

utterly felled by ingredient recitations and mellifluous menu descriptions en français.

In other Caribbean islands I know in my very marrow that the lambi will not be sweet and tender... and the steak will be grilled to the consistency of, say, the average stake. But on St. Martin's French side I still believe I have a fighting chance at cuisine. The sweet sibilance of the very word "croissant" whispers

permission to overeat, order licentiously. The crust promontory riding the crest of every baguette beckons, "Fill me with foie gras."

Every dashing slash over an *é* sends me into a *mélange* of gustatory fantasies. A menu reads "langouste et ses légumes" and I picture my lobster nestled in her trap on a bed of spinach, clutching fistfuls of haricots verts. When the veal dish translates to a "sweetbread and leg duet" I see two plump calves tap-dancing across a Viking stovetop.

Altogether forgetting that the rakish eyebrow over an "ô" has often ended in *ôverdône entrecôte*...and

**Sailing On Your Stomach:
In the wake of an insatiable food sleuth**

BLUE WATER DISPATCHES



Boucherie René regulars enjoying lunch. Perfectly prepared meat accompanied by the tasty potatoes and fresh salad, right

that cute little curl under “ç” has brought countless soupçons of disappointment.

Oui, St. Martin fine dining is too often tourist dining—a mixed feedbag. And since we, the euro-strangulated, are paying Prada prices, getting a sidewalk-pushcart knock-off is aggravating—one could say even Gauling.

All this is why the Boucherie was such a find.

DIVINELY DELICIOUS

“These new restaurants think the tourist wants only fancy—and the prices are crazy. No sane St. Martin person would pay them,” said one Gallic gourmet named Jacques. “People are rushing here, rushing there...too busy to take time to talk, to have a nice lunch. This kind of place doesn’t exist any more. This is real French, this is a real restaurant,” he finished, proud as if he owned the place.

The Boucherie (meaning “butcher”) is a divinely delicious neighborhood lunchroom, complete with floor-to-ceiling shelves bursting with Bourdeaux and Bourgognes, and a wall of old black and white rugby

photographs.

Owned by René Arné, who hails from the French Pyrenees, it is also a working butcher shop, featuring inviting, if esoteric, cuts of escalopes, entrecôtes and lapins, plus a separate charcuterie case stuffed with exotic cheeses, boudins, salamis and blood sausages.

Open weekdays only, lunch only, it’s peopled by an assortment of regulars who run the gamut from work-suited mechanics to local politicians to shirtsleeve Mafiosi types—all cheek-kissing, bear-hugging, back-slapping and hunching over each other’s shoulders whispering girlish secrets. And tipping Pastis or pouring great swigs of Armagnac into their espressos.

Take any available seat, but know that “regulars” have their customary spots at the six communal tables, plus “privileges”: watch them jump up to dabble in the charcuterie case—lopping off hunks of salami, hacking off wedges of cheese and



dipping their bread crusts into the foie gras crock.

René’s is a place where tout le monde knows tout le monde. Nonetheless, each entering “regular” greets the whole room with a “Messieurs, ‘Dames,” this salutation delivered side-of-mouth, Casablanca-style: miniature Bogarts with cigarettes firmly clamped between their lips.

Occasionally a duo of young lovers sits in the back corner alone or maybe a mother lunching with her bespectacled Harry Potter prep-school son. (I don’t know if I painted knee socks on his matchstick legs or if they were actually there.)

René in his apron and flip-flops, with his hooded eyes, slight stoop and merry, mostly toothless smile, personally delivers the chalkboard menu, which changes daily and features authentic French country

BLUE WATER DISPATCHES



House specialties: Seared duck breast, top, and Ragoût de Queue de Boeuf



fare: ducks, ragouts, lamb legs, stews and grilled meats or fish. Chances are you won't understand a word of it, but he will try valiantly—in his few words of English supplemented, maybe, by a shower of Spanish—to explain it. Nearby English-speakers often jump to his aid.

Should you become a cruiser-regular you will discover that the good-natured, shuffling, shambling René of today is, in fact, the muscular hunk of the photographs sporting the stripy jersey, with the shapely calves, dashing about a rugby field amid his champion 1961 Equipe de France teammates.

A HEART-RENDING DISH

You will discover that this second-

generation butcher is as fiercely determined that your meal be cooked perfectly.

You may also hear that on every third Thursday of November—the Beaujolais Nouveau's annual release date—René opens for a gala, sold-out dinner, wearing a red cape and a rakish black beret (with or without flip-flops I never learned, due, sadly, to my skeletal French).

Portions are ample: scooped more by spatulas than soup spoons. René delivers a meatloaf-sized tartare, the beef fresh as new rain. Seared duck breast slices are thick, tender and tastier than porterhouse: black, crusty and crunchy outside—as if zapped by a million-degree inferno—yet inside pink as a baby's

bottom. As sides, there's always a popping-fresh salad, gleaming like a *Bon Appetit* centerfold, and René's tantalizing Lyonnaise potatoes: crispy outside, mushy inside and spiked with blackened onion flecks.

The meat in Ragoût de Queue de Boeuf (oxtail stew) is the perfect consistency of shredded yet still wedged to the bones. Coq au Vin, Beef Bourguignon, Rabbit Stew (*Lapin au Moutarde*): all superb renditions. René will pluck any meat from the case and prepare it for you.

One caveat: food so consistently superb can produce overconfidence. One day I chose Ragoût de Pieds de Porc, cheekily ignoring the fact that “pied” means foot.

A plateful of odd-shaped lumps arrived, covered in a gelatinous sauce. Turns out pig's feet are 98 percent fat: truly a heart-rending dish.

Simultaneously my honey ordered Brandade de Morue—translation too formidable for me—plus those irresistible Lyonnaise potatoes. Out came a huge wedge of mashed swordfish and mashed potatoes, apparently France's answer to Shepherd's Pie. Spuds with spuds: a veritable potato medley.

Which is yet another of René's charms: he never takes the starch out of you.

DIRECTIONS

René's Boucherie, in Marigot's Bellevue neighborhood, is a short walk from Marina Royale. Dinghy there, exit from the east shore, turning left just past Chanticleer Restaurant. Walk several steps to the main road, Rue St. James. Turn right. Continue, passing Raymond's restaurant and around the bend. Turn right at the first opportunity: a no-name street. Boucherie is on your right. ☺