



# BESS BISTRO:

## Tasteful Transformation

By MAURI ELBEL | Photography by JODY HORTON

In the heart of downtown Austin but tucked away from its bustle, diners sink into plush leather booths and silently absorb the speakeasy surroundings that define Bess Bistro.

An Old World charm plays throughout the intimate underground space of the Sandra Bullock-owned basement restaurant housed in the historic 1918 Stratford Arms Building. Original exposed brick walls and beam-and-rafter ceilings hint at the building's storied past while a new line-up of inspirational dishes foreshadow its bright future.

Semolina-crust artichokes tossed with crispy fried spinach served with lemon wheels and garlic aioli and a steaming bowl of sautéed PEI mussels swimming in a spicy tomato broth are placed before us — a palatable preview to what lies ahead. The dimly-lit dining room serves as a romantic backdrop as we receive our mains: pan seared diver scallops with sunchoke puree, carrot risotto, heirloom carrots and meunière sauce, and duck breast with sweet potato puree, brown butter roasted salsify, Brussels sprouts and huckleberry demi. Before dessert comes — a triangular puff pastry wrapped around chocolate and coffee mousse balanced with hazelnut mascarpone ice cream — it's obvious Bess Bistro's refined look and revamped menu looks good on her.

It's been a few years since I've dined at Bess Bistro which opened its doors on the corner of West Sixth and San Antonio Streets eight years ago. But revisiting this locally-loved spot reveals an established restaurant that's not shying away from Austin's evolving culinary scene. Roman Murphy, Bess Bistro's new executive chef, is taking Bess in a new direction with his fresh approach to New American cuisine and emphasis on farm-to-table cooking with a modern yet playful approach. Murphy, a pre-med major before attending Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts, has spent the past couple of years working in some of Austin's high-profile restaurants including Jeffrey's, Congress and Peché and witnessing the city's palate mature.

On his fall menu, Asian, French and Spanish elements combine to yield sophisticated, well-balanced plates like the chili-crust hamachi appetizer and savory Berkshire pork chop with caramelized root vegetables and rosemary jus entree. Murphy's dishes are created with local and seasonal ingredients from area purveyors as well as the restaurant's Morsels Farm, a one-acre spread just outside of Austin.

The building, much like the menu, has also tastefully evolved. Over its nearly 100-year lifespan, the Stratford Arms Building has served roles as varied as a hostel, an apartment, and even a bank with a vault where the kitchen now exists and a drive-up window near the bistro's entry area. But in the past year, the ambience at Bess Bistro has undergone a transformation with a host of stylish updates and renovations including everything from European artwork and Belgium-imported linens to Bevolo gas lanterns handmade in New Orleans and leathers sourced from Italy and Germany.

"Bess still has the sexy speakeasy feel," says Justin "Raif" Raiford, director of operations. "It is just a refined version."

Bullock, who also owns Bess Bistro's sister restaurant, Walton's Fancy and Staple, has been highly-involved throughout the design since the restaurant's inception.

"From the time when Bess was being developed up until now,



Sandra has literally had her hands in every single decision," says Raiford. "She has hand-picked everything from the leather to the brass elements to the artwork. She has great taste and knows what she wants and how to make it work."

Bullock hand-picked the Belgium linens and modern lace found between the booths sitting along the restaurant's West Sixth Street side, the crushed black velvet draperies hanging in front of the two kitchen entrances, and the curtains that can conceal diners seated in the private "rockstar" booth toward the back of the dining area. Raiford has worked to execute her vision, creating the distinguished, luxurious ambience diners now experience at Bess.

"I know what Sandra is going for and what she is looking for," says Raiford, who has witnessed Bess Bistro come into its own in the past year. "Bess has been around for eight years. When it started out, it was more casual, a little more bright and lively."

Once Bess Bistro moved its lunch business over to Walton's, the restaurant had a chance to fine-tune its dinner experience.

"We wanted Bess to be more refined — to still have a nice luxurious feel but without being stuffy," says Raiford. "About a year ago, we really began focusing on where we should go and what we should do."

Although the ambience at Bess has grown and matured, the new updates further enhance the building's historical charm. Descending down the stairs into Bess Bistro, visitors are still greeted with the unmistakable feeling that they've entered one of Austin's hidden gems.

"It was a pretty easy transition that came just by making some minor adjustments," says Raiford of the recent transformation. "We were already in a basement so there is still this dark, sexy, speakeasy feel."

Despite the dim ambience of Bess Bistro, the restaurant remains aglow thanks to the Bevolo gas lanterns handmade in New Orleans seen on the east and west walls of the dining room as well as the entrance and terrace.

"Sandra loved these Bevolo lanterns which are everywhere in New Orleans — it was one of the design elements she wanted to bring to Austin," says Raiford of the custom-made lanterns.



Custom-made hand-blown Simon Pearce deconstructed chandeliers float above the booths lining the Sixth Street wall.

"We thought Bess needed to grow up and define herself," says Raiford. "We found these special light bulbs that give that orange, warm glow and help achieve the dark, sexy feel we were going for."

Removing the black and white photography that previously hung on the columns now exposes more of the original interior brick, and artwork imported from London, Paris and New York is currently dispersed throughout the restaurant. Other updates include deep lacquered blacks balanced by soft beiges on the interior walls; a Binswanger foxed mirror over the fireplace; diamond tufted leather covering the booths and

barstools that were imported from Italy and Germany; and new tableware ranging from hand blown crystal wine glasses and Schott Zwiesel bar glasses to the La Tavola flatware and white porcelain china.

"Since the space is dark, we wanted to lighten it up with the bright white china to make the food really stand out," says Raiford. "The china also has a subtle swirl to it which reflects the warm glow of the lights."

Bess Bistro's updated rooftop patio bar has been given a fresh look with lush landscaping, a large L-shaped piece of furniture and custom-designed pillows and cushions from Shabby Slips Interiors. Architect Michael Hsu is currently redesigning the building's facade which will provide a facelift to the front of the building and restaurant. From the decorative tin ceiling down to the rich materials and romantic glow now experienced throughout the restaurant, it's the design details that have made Bess Bistro blossom into her own.

"The design is all about the details," says Raiford. "Everything from the specific leather that we chose down to the flowers in the front of the restaurant to hand soaps and lotions in the bathrooms to the plateware on the tables. It's just something you don't see everywhere in Austin." ♦

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