

WOMEN RUN RESTAURANTS

By CLAUDIA ALARCON



LAV, PHOTO BY JODY HORTON

Women have not always had the recognition they deserve in the restaurant business. When you think about it, you'll realize the majority of famous chefs and celebrated sommeliers have traditionally been men. But that stronghold has slowly been loosening. Today, talented female chefs and sommeliers are stepping out of the shadows, expressing their ideas and bringing their personalities forward while running successful restaurants. From a tiny, playful bistro in Southtown to a gorgeous, no-expense-spared restaurant in East Austin, ladies are leaving their mark in their local cuisine scene.

BITE RESTAURANT

210.532.2551 / Biterestaurantsa.com

Photography by Bohke Photography and Cinema

Occupying the corner spot of a commercial block on S. Presa, Bite is a tiny, hip and happening bistro owned and operated by Lisa Astorga-Watel. A native of Santiago, Chile, Astorga-Watel found her calling in Houston, where she attended The Culinary Art Institute and launched a successful business as a private chef catering to celebrities, but ended up in San Antonio after marrying Chef Damian Watel. While she was involved in all of his endeavors, she hoped to branch out and head her own project. And it all came to happen when the couple found the little spot in Southtown.



The cuisine at Bite is definitely international, blending French technique with Latin American flavors that reflect Astorga-Watel's Chilean upbringing. The menu is compact, but it includes something for everyone — from traditional escargots, to modern dishes like octopus carpaccio and grilled romaine salad. On a recent evening, we enjoyed an outstanding appetizer special of rabbit rilletes, paired with a glass of rosé from Provence. We followed with the spectacular Pato olivo, a plump duck leg, braised to fork-tenderness with olives and tomatoes, served over a bed of creamy Parmesan risotto. Portions are big enough to share, but small enough to allow diners to try more than one thing. The wine list is equally



PHOTO BY ANGELA JOHNSON



small, but with selections that complement the playful cuisine. Astorga-Watel strives to maintain the casual atmosphere by keeping prices on both food and wine accessible.

A lot of her personality is reflected in the space. Although small, the interior is lively, colorful and vibrant, with decor and furnishings that showcase the couple's love for 1960s pop art, and 70's era music and disco dancing. "I figure if I have to spend a lot of time working, I might as well be working in a fun environment," says Astorga-Watel. "So I wanted the place to be fun, comfortable, 70's modern sexy chic. I love the fact it is small enough to have contact with every table. And the food ties in because the menu is diverse, creative in content and presentation," she adds. "Even the place mats are sure to challenge some thoughts!"

LAV

512.391.1888 / lavaustin.com

Photography by Buff Strickland

On the other end of the spectrum is East Austin's newcomer, laV. When the Eads family decided they wanted to take their love of French wine and food to the next level by opening a restaurant, they recruited architects Bobby McAlpine and David Baker to design the ample space. The idea was to make it look like a warehouse, which they would "refurbish" into a series of "rooms," each with a distinct but intimate ambiance. Designer Susan Ferrier created a stunning interior that combines a modern-industrial aesthetic with classic warm touches. Crystal chandeliers, textured gold curtains and antique sconces enhance the solid steel bar, sleek furniture and concrete floors. The entrance welcomes with a patio for dining, where a fountain adds the soothing sound of running water.

To match this high-end atmosphere the family brought on a dream team to run it: sommelier Vilma Mazaite, Executive Chef Allison Jenkins and Pastry Chef Janina O'Leary. After working individually at a number of prestigious places across the country, Mazaite and Jenkins ended up as a team at The Little Nell, Aspen's only five-star, five-diamond hotel. O'Leary's credentials include stints with the Thomas Keller Restaurant Group, and most recently, as the Executive Pastry Chef at TRACE at the W Hotel in Austin. At laV, they team up to create food that is as sophisticated as the atmosphere, with an impressive wine list with over 1,500 selections.

"I definitely scaled the presentations up after I saw the

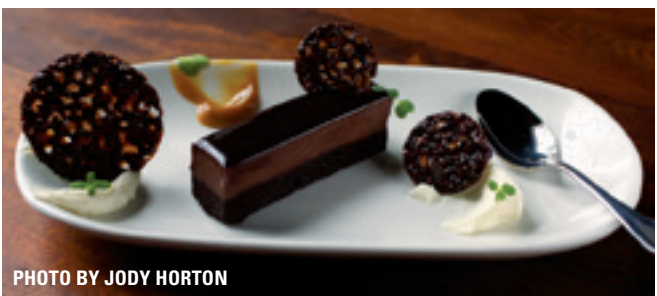


PHOTO BY JODY HORTON

space," says Jenkins, whose seasonal driven menu of simple French recipes includes staples like escargot and roast chicken, as well as delicacies like caviar service. "Originally I wrote the menu as traditional, home-style bistro, but after seeing the finished building I went a more upscale, creative route. The menu is always in motion, depending on what's coming out to market. I like change," she adds. A steaming bowl of bouchot mussels swimming in fragrant vaudivan curry, complemented by red chile julienne, tiny cauliflower florets and a warm slice of garlic toast is a perfect example. Likewise, Mazaite calls her wine list a work in progress. "It's a living thing, constantly evolving," says the elegant Lithuanian, who chooses her wines not just based on her personal preference, but keeping in mind customers' taste while sticking to the theme. "It's true that the wine list leans to Old World selections, but I'm always open to finding unique, cool things that will complement the food." The two have built a tight partnership over the years, which is evident in the attention to detail and care that go into food and wine pairing. And O'Leary's divine concoctions round out the laV experience.

"Dessert should complement the entire meal experience," says O'Leary. "I create the desserts based on the season, things that I have been experimenting with, and most importantly, what I think will make people walk away happy, but not overly full." A remarkable example is her Stilton cheese ice cream with roasted pistachios. "We get big beautiful wheels in of Stilton blue cheese for our cheese plate, and I had the idea for this dessert hoping to utilize the whole wheel we receive. Truthfully, I like the idea of enjoying this cheese in a way people wouldn't expect, but without over thinking."

The passion that these women display in their craft ensures that any visit to laV will be a memorable one. ❖