

Oil on *the lake*

He's a Belgian native with roots in France who bought an olive grove in Baux de Provence in the early 1990s. Now Luc Bohyn has opened a stylish French eatery on the shores of Lake Wanaka. **SUE FEA** pays a visit.



"French cuisine is the way we present and do things - mixing less and not complicating the flavours," says Bohyn.



A producer and selector of quality olive oils, Bohyn launched fine foods brand Bois Gentil in Europe before moving to the Central Otago lakeside resort three years ago for a “quieter life” but he just couldn’t help himself, and landed in the restaurant business instead.

He established the successful, unpretentious Bistro Gentil, which offers a unique twist on modern French cuisine. “It all started with recipes Michelin-starred chefs developed with our BG Grand Cru olive oils,” Bohyn says.

“We wanted to share these recipes with customers, but they required complicated techniques and rare ingredients. You’d be shopping around for a week.” So the idea grew to launch their own restaurant to showcase their olive oils, specialty spreads and balsamic fruit vinegars and how they could be used to enhance flavours in a simple way: “We were living here in Wanaka so it made sense.”

Europe’s top chefs, including three Michelin star chef Peter Goossens, continue to use Bohyn’s products, while the Wanaka eatery provides a more convivial experience. Award-winning olive oils and artisan balsamic fruit vinegars can be freely sampled from Enomatic self-dispensing machines, which also keep their organoleptic qualities intact.

“The taste of our oils results from a blend of olive varieties from the South of France: Grossane, Verdale, Salonenque, Picholine and Aglandau. Mild, intense, fresh or with ripe fruit flavours, each of our oils has its own distinctive taste depending on when the olives were harvested, if they were left to ferment, the composition of the blend and the talent of the master miller,” says Bohyn.

It wouldn’t be French hospitality without bread. Nut bread and brioche are made at Bistro Gentil and offered on arrival for dipping into the oils. And Bistro Gentil’s young talented Kiwi head chef Phil Watkins is part of the recipe for success. Regularly experimenting with new taste combinations, he’s fast developing a reputation for his creativity and innovative style.

“French cuisine is not spectacularly different from New Zealand cooking, but there are typical techniques and flavour combinations needed to create a French touch,” says Bohyn. Pan-fried catch of the day is often combined with traditional BG French tapenade. Duck and rabbit torchon (pâté) is one of their most popular starters and a rich slow-cooked cassoulet is a popular hearty main.

“We’ve had to adapt as well. The French wouldn’t serve chutneys on their cheese boards, but people expect it here. When they put ‘Olive Oil Sponge’ on the dessert menu, Kiwi customers were put off. Now it’s called ‘Bistro Gentil Special’ and we can tell them

about the olive oil in it afterwards,” he grins.

The special sponge has the distinct flavour of fermented fruity black olive oil, beautifully balanced by the freshness of the fruit topping and the ice cream side, which is also made with fruity black olive oil.

Steak tartare is another French favourite – a minced beef patty mixed with capers, onions, mayo and egg and served raw. Bohyn thought slightly more conservative Kiwi diners wouldn’t wear it, but they have.

Master chocolatier Mike Dulin supplies Petit Gâteaux and handmade chocolates to serve with afternoon teas or as dessert. Formerly of Sweet Kitchen in Christchurch’s Merivale, Dulin is now making a name for himself further south. Proceeds from chocolate sales go to the Bois Gentil Crêche for great spotted kiwis on the West Coast.

Watkins is interested in growing unusual varieties of herbs and vegetables and experimenting with edible flowers as ingredients and garnishes. “At the moment, I’m using chrysanthemums - the flower petals, tossing them in with my braised cabbage,” he says. “I also garnish my dishes with them. The gardener gave them to me to try after having researched them – they’re quite sweet and a little bitter.”

Edible flowers are often used as a garnish in French cuisine and nasturtiums are another favourite. He also uses borage flowers – small blue flowers that grow wild locally – in his desserts, for garnishing and as stock syrups. Wild watercress, wild sheep’s sorrel and wood sorrel are also found on the menu. Bohyn employs a gardener, almost full-time, to manage the garden.

Herbs and most vegetables are grown on the property in a hot-house where oyster mushrooms are also flourishing in bags of wood chips. Rows of rocket, mustard and mizuna; root vegetables, heirloom carrot varieties including purple, dragon, dwarf and Pakistani red; and radish, beetroot and tomato varieties are served up fresh to the delight of customers. “The kitchen garden is part of our restaurant ‘story,’” says Watkins. “It’s quite cool. You get better quality produce and the customers love it. They always ask all about it.”

Bohyn’s restaurant is the first in the South Island to feature state-of-the-art Enomatic self-dispensing wine machines and provides the ideal showcase for his other passion – art. And when the food, alpine scenery, paintings, sculptures and carvings have been savoured, there’s always pétanque in the garden to top off the ultimate French experience. **11**