

Eating out with Liz Breslin



Much to like: Relaxing and comfortable with music that stays in the background.

Photo: LIZ BRESLIN

Blooming amazing and simply divine

The sculpture by Zadok Ben-David next to the front door is cleverly lit to loom large. In daylight you can see across the golf course to Lake Wanaka. By night, not even the petanque course outside.

We sit by the fire, in the company of contemporary art. Also dining, other couples and a family group. It's an intimate restaurant, without being intimidating. Comfy chairs. Background music staying back. Aaand relax!

We choose our starters (list of five) while we enjoy complimentary olive oil, pear balsamic vinegar and crusty bread. Onto a winner already. An award winner, the waitress explains. The oil. From Provence. The restaurant's own product. We can help ourselves to more from the machine. Please. She's new and in a cutlery fluster (unlike the subtle service seen in her colleague). But the food buys her easy forgiveness.

My salmon comes half cured, half cooked. How do they DO that? Soft, salty, sweet, a swirl of avocado, a taste of tomatoes. My partner starts with Salade Estivale – beetroot, pear, goats cheese, hazelnuts, more. (The fruit vinegar must've im-peared him, because he bypasses the steak tartare and gosh that's good). The colours are vibrant, he digs the flavours but he

Bistro Gentil

Where: Golf Course Rd Wanaka. 03 443 2299
When: 11.30am - late. Wednesday-Sunday
Cost: Starters \$19-\$24, Mains \$25-42, Desserts \$18
Upside: Surrounded by good taste(s)
Downside: Can't eat there every day

might have liked more goats cheese in the mix.

In between courses, we amuse ourselves with drinks. Easy to do when the wine is self-service from a machine. Love them or rage against them, those Enomatic sommeliers offer a well-kept wine and a precise pour. Twenty-four wines by the glass, half-glass or taster, with short descriptors, like "crisp, raspberry" or my favourite "flora, sap, liniment". We enjoy watching other customers getting to grips with the dispensers and notice this trend: first visits spark confusion, the second, understanding. Third time around and onward, entertainment. The waiters seem happy to step in to help, or to offer a bottle instead.

And so on to our mains, which come in good time. Again, a choice of five on a menu I am told changes with what is freshly, locally

available. Lamb, beef, duck, fish or a vege cassoulet. I guess you could theme it "contemporary French" or just "all sounds blooming amazing". My partner gets Cardrona lamb with maple heirloom carrots. Pronounces it divine. It comes with two humble side bowls that belie their contents: crispy roast potatoes (twice cooked) and broccoli with pecorino and yet more Bois Gentil olive oil. And enough goats cheese and lickably rich sauce this time. He's plenty satisfied. Enough to insist on his compliments to the chef.

I go, scandalously, for another starter for my main. Seafood Maree. It's so good. Proper pipis and microgreens garnish slightly cheesy, musselled chowder. Incongruous shallots, receptacles for a startling green olive oil, somehow fit exceptionally well. Delicious.

For dessert we devour a classic French Amandine tart (pears from the kitchen garden, I'm told) and a pear and custard icecream, which almost occasions a spoon fight for the best bits.

We also choose locally made chocolates from a cabinet which also boasts petits gateaux. Oh, and a pot of cinnamon tea.

How very civilised. Which just about sums up Bistro Gentil. Very civilised indeed. Tasty and tasteful. I liked this place. A lot.