

THE IMPROPER BOSTONIAN

REVIEW

The Total Package

Mistral's fine food and service make it more than just an "in" place to be

BY J. CHARLES MOKRISKI • PHOTOGRAPHS BY BERTA A. DANIELS



Mistral's dining room is flanked by a bar with two dozen seats. Opposite page: Chef Jamie Mammano; tuna tartar.

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When Mistral first opened its doors some four years ago, it vaulted to the front ranks of Boston restaurants. Immediately it became a hot spot, the place to see, be seen and be part of the scene. I admit that I refrained from visiting and reviewing Mistral because I perceived its instant fame with some skepticism. But the hype has now died down, and persistent reports of high-quality food and exemplary service make it senseless to spite my palate any longer. Two recent visits to Mistral have confirmed those reports: This is a superb restaurant, one of the best in the city, with handsome, even elegant appointments, polished service and exquisite food.

Ensnconed in an imposing building on Columbus Avenue between Berkeley and Clarendon, Mistral's long, stylish dining room features 20-foot-high ceilings, six massive white stucco columns, high arched windows dressed by taupe draperies and sheer panels, and black wrought-iron chandeliers with gracefully curved arms that resemble exotic flora, each terminating in slightly tapered eggshell-colored shades. A long bar runs along one wall, illuminated by hanging amber-shaded lamps that give its denizens a mellow glow.

Guests are seated at tweed banquettes and upholstered chairs. Crisp, white tablecloths adorn the tables, with mustard-colored napkins and striking setting plates. The only jarring note consisted of the clunky wine glasses in which our wine was served. Noticing the presence of Riedel crystal at other tables, we asked for the same, a request promptly obliged.

Mistral's wine list contains many selections with price and pedigree to merit automatically being served in the Riedel crystal, but the 1999 Domaine de la Gauthiere Provencal red (\$30) was apparently not one of them. Sipped from Riedel or not, however, it was delicious, fruity and full-bodied, with the signature peppery nuances of the southern Rhone. The Gauthiere was the second lowest-priced red on the list, which contained very few choices in the \$30s and no U.S. red for under \$40. Wines by the glass, however, included the reasonably priced 1998 Mas St. Berthe Coreaux d'Aix "les Baux" (\$7), a first-rate, dry rosé, the perfect accompaniment for robustly flavored seafood dishes.

Mistral's bread, crunchy mild sourdough boules served with butter and a dollop of mellow, flavorful chickpea and garlic spread, comes from Hi-Rise Bakery in Cambridge. Among the starters, the grilled portobello mushroom "Carpaccio" (\$9) was imaginatively conceived and deftly prepared. Four thin slices of portobello mushrooms shared a sizable plate with roasted red and yellow peppers, yellow raisins, Parmesan shavings and gossamer slices of toast. The confit of duck and



foie gras in brioche with tart dried cherries, a signature Mistral dish, bore a hefty price (\$19), but the cost was fully merited by its substantial content and lovely presentation. A hollowed-out brioche was brimming with tender, moist duck confit laced with dried cherries, along with a generous *tranche* of sautéed foie gras. The tartness of the cherries complemented the luscious, sweet succulence of the foie gras and the salty richness of the confit.

A special appetizer ordered as a main course one evening, *soupe de poissons* (\$16), was exceptional. Firm-fleshed halibut, Chilean sea bass, tender, silky ringlets of squid, resilient prawns and tiny mussels graced an intensely flavorful broth thick with meaty tomatoes, onions, garlic and the heady perfume of saffron. Two grilled croutons of peasant bread lathered with saffron aioli protruded from the top of the tall, narrow bowl. The savors of the South of France almost leapt from the bowl, as if to ask why I was in dreary, drizzly Boston instead of sunny Marseilles.

Among Mistral's main courses, the boneless short ribs of beef with red wine and roasted garlic mashed potatoes (\$28), was a standout. Almost as if taking its cue from a recent *New York Times* "Dining" article about short ribs (which are currently in vogue in Big Apple restaurants), Mistral has seized the medium and conquered it. The coarse-textured, robustly flavorful beef, enhanced with the sweet, earthy warmth of carrots, reminded us of *daube*, a Provencal specialty. The garlic-laced potatoes were excellent, but why must even Mistral, presumably immune from silly fads, serve the potatoes under the meat?

Roasted Cornish game hen (\$22) was one of the less expensive main courses on Mistral's menu, where higher priced offerings soar to \$42. This small bird, with crisp, golden brown skin, was served spread-eagled alongside an onion and watercress salad (watercress pleasantly tender; onions a tad assertive) and toothsome fingerling roast potatoes. The chicken was served with a delicate reduction of its cooking juices, enriched with applewood bacon and accented with lemon.

Mistral's desserts kept up the high standards of what preceded them. The warm chocolate torte (\$8) was a shallow cylinder

of cake with warm, viscous chocolate inside, accompanied by a delicious vanilla sauce. The apple tart (\$8), a small, round pastry with buttery crust, featured tangy, perfectly textured apples, topped by a scoop of butterfat-laden ice cream. Luscious caramel sauce swirls completed the picture.

In addition to world-class cuisine and beautiful surroundings, Mistral is supported by a major-league waitstaff. A couple of things stood out. First, upon entering the restaurant early one evening, we were immediately shown to an excellent table, a corner banquette where we could sit side-by-side for easy conversation. Too many restaurants seat early arrivals at the less desirable tables. Second, our young waiter suggested that he bring the two appetizers we had ordered one after the other rather than simultaneously, since we had remarked that we were looking forward to sharing both of them. A crew smartly attired in black attended to filling water glasses and replenishing and clearing plates efficiently and unobtrusively. Eschewing the all-too-common service gaffe of removing a plate from one diner before others in the party have finished the course—which says, in effect that one of you is eating too fast and the others too slowly—Mistral's waitstaff cleared dishes simultaneously. Good service is, after all, just good, common sense to make patrons comfortable and enhancing their enjoyment of the food.

Mistral is the total package: ambiance, food and service—all at a very high level. Our entire experience has caused me to reassess my perennial skepticism about the "in" scene. Mistral offers the substance to live up to its first-class billing. ■

Mistral

223 Columbus Ave., 617-867-9300

HOURS Sun.-Wed., 5:30-10:30pm; Thu.-Sat., 5:30-10:30pm (late-night menu 11-11:30pm)

RESERVATIONS recommended

CREDIT CARDS all major

HANDICAPPED ACCESSIBLE yes

PARKING valet

LIQUOR LICENSE full bar