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Montagne at the Fairfield RSL is the latest "gastronomic destination of the west". Pictures: John Fotiadis



Cheese soufflé.



Duck à l'orange.



Chocolate tart.

From Paris with love

MONTAGNE

Fairfield RSL, 14 Anzac Ave, Fairfield
Phone 9727 5000

Web fairfieldrsl.com.au

Food French

Service Professional and well trained

Open Wednesday-Saturday from 6pm

Highlight The well-priced all-French wine list, with wines by the glass poured at the table

Lowlight The faintly stilted atmosphere



ELIZABETH MERYMENT
CHIEF FOOD CRITIC

SYDNEY is a big city that often surprises and delights in strange ways. I often feel as though our restaurants have reached the outer limits of their coolness — and then some clever, creative person invents and builds a new place to awe and inspire. As diners we are more privileged than we often realise.

You may have, for that matter, some preconceived notions of what RSL clubs in an outer western suburb like Fairfield might be like.

Such places may bring to mind lurid carpets and poker machines ding-ding away incessantly, maddeningly, and counter service bistros offering rubbery roasts and mash with packet mix gravy.

But if you haven't visited any clubs lately, you would have missed a change that has stealthily taken place over the past year or two: that is, their slow but steady gentrification. Don't just take my word for it — surprise yourself.

I have been to many clubs

lately — some very up-market and luxe — but none comes close to the Fairfield RSL in terms of vision or ambition.

The man behind this venue and its three up-market restaurants — La Tratt, a posh Italian ristorante, Pho@Fairfield, a Red Lantern-like Vietnamese, and now Montagne, a French brasserie — is Fairfield RSL chief executive officer Anthony Sobb (pictured, left).

Sobb has taken an almost evangelical approach to instituting quality restaurants at the club he has run for 13 years, insisting the people of the far west are as deserving of having high-end venues in their neighbourhood as anyone else. Indeed, he describes the Fairfield RSL as a "gastronomic destination of the west".

He has put his money where his mouth is, constantly renovating the club so it is abreast of fashionable trends — there are rooftop beehives and a hidden kitchen garden that supplies herbs to the multiple kitchens below — and quality finishes at every turn.

To enter the Fairfield RSL is like entering an up-market resort in Fiji or Tahiti. Walk up the driveway lined with lush tropical plants and Survivor-like torches that fill the night air with warmth and light and

be met at the door by staff who slip your driver's licence into a machine that swiftly produces an entry ticket to the club. No more signing little slips of paper to get in.

Montagne is the latest of the restaurants to open, launching quietly just before Christmas. It cost \$1.4 million to build and is fitted out entirely in the style of a Parisian brasserie — only cleaner and more shiny. Sobb says he wanted to replicate the concept of New York's Balthazar and has gone all out to do so.

There are well-spaced bistro tables, a beautifully appointed bar, gilt-edged mirrors and French tunes playing. Sitting here you can almost forget you're in an RSL.

The menu is short and full of French classics. There's no big-name chef, rather Sobb has instructed the kitchen to use recipes taken from classic French recipe books including Larousse Gastronomique.

The result is perhaps an almost too standard — almost, if you were being harsh, clichéd — collection of dishes that starts with entrees such as cheese soufflé (\$14), French onion soup (\$12) and chicken liver pate with cornichons and cherry jam (\$14) and moves on to old favourites like coq au vin

(\$28), steak frites (\$32), lamb pie (\$28) and bouillabaisse (\$32). It reads almost like an introductory menu of French food for people who haven't had much French food before.

Perhaps because of that, the cooking and presentation of the food is rather more classical, almost stiff, compared to what experienced diners may expect in Sydney these days.

That's not a criticism necessarily, just an observation, for the cooking is solid and the flavours true in dishes such as the cheese soufflé, which arrives sizzling and puffy, fresh from the oven. Its parmesan and gruyere cheeses give it good flavour, and texture is light.

The goat's cheese tart, too,

is nicely, well, tart, and has a quality salad of micro-greens, pear and walnuts to give it zing.

Perhaps more formal are mains like duck à l'orange (\$32) — a well-cooked maryland of duck in a sweet orange sauce that stays just on this side of too sweet. There are turned potatoes on the plate — I haven't seen those for years.

Bouillabaisse is rich and generously filled with seafood. Is it missing some oomph? Well, perhaps it's slightly industrial, but you often get that with bouillabaisse.

A chocolate tart (\$12) to finish is appropriately bittersweet.

There are some very nice touches, including an all-French wine list that doesn't speak down to customers. The prices, mostly under \$50 a bottle, are extremely good.

What's missing from Montagne so far is a little bit of flair. The fitout is there and the food is on its way but it would be nice to feel some excitement as you dine. The atmosphere is rather more sedate than sizzling. The experience lacks some big city lights sensation.

But for all that, it's brilliant that the people of the west no longer have to travel to town for quality dining. Why would you bother if you had this excellent RSL on your doorstep?

There are bistro tables, a beautifully appointed bar, gilt-edged mirrors and French tunes



6.5
OUT OF
TEN