

## SOMETHING FRENCH IS COOKING IN DECATUR

by Doc Lawrence

**B**enedicte Ulras Cooper's lovely little restaurant could be from the first few pages of Ernest Hemingway's book, *A Moveable Feast*. There are the fragrances of the French kitchen in Cooper's cozy Decatur dining quarters, where the wine is French and martini perfectly with real French cooking, reminiscent of some moments in this literary classic. During the years that her Café Alsace has been operating, word-of-mouth raves have kept the chairs and tables full.

Diners naturally first flock to Café Alsace for food and wine. But, there is an added treat—some special ambience. French is the dominant language, even in the kitchen. Chef Sylvain Lefort hails from Orleans, where Joan of Arc tossed the English army. The charming server Joan also speaks French. No need to worry though, I know little French but do love the food and wine of France, and that's all you need to enjoy every delicious minute here.

Restaurant choices can get a little muddled in Atlanta, particularly when so much is marketed as Mediterranean, Caribbean and Southwest-themed, which often means almost anything. Cuisine can be regional but, like wine, it is usually tied to community. And this is where Café Alsace, with its connections to place, works magic. To the core, it is both French and Alsatian, a delightful combination that stands alone in the Southeast.

#### Appetizer For The Ages

It was comments from her regular diners about the pâté served that first brought me to Café Alsace. "It's our most-requested menu item," Cooper, a native of Colmar, Alsace, near the Swiss-German border, revealed during a long conversation over lunch. "It is served just the way it is in my village in Alsace, and all the ingredients are fresh." For the uninitiated, pâté is one of the essentials of the French dinner table. Too often, it is ignored by the few restaurants that even pay lip service to French cooking, but when you taste this outstanding creation with a chilled glass of an Alsatian white wine such as pinot gris, there is some indescribable synergy you will not soon forget.

#### Alsatian Wines

The late Jim Sanders, the "father of fine wines" in Atlanta, taught thousands of students in his Buckhead wine classes about the glories of French wine, and when he got to Alsace, he was enthusiastic. There are some crossovers between the wines of Alsace and nearby Germany. Both have their own style of riesling, Alsatian white wines are from the foothill vineyards of the Vosges Mountains and are renowned for their delicate flavor and dryness. They appear in the same narrow-shaped bottles as those of Germany and share some common grapes. But, Alsatian wines such as Pinot Blanc, Pinot Gris and Gewürztraminer are never sweet. As Sanders loved to demonstrate during lunch, the pinot blanc is a pretty good choice for roast pork.

Café Alsace keeps these fine wines in stock, and you don't need to waste time agonizing over an unnecessarily complicated wine list to make a good decision. Under Cooper's guidance, pairing is very easy.

#### The Land Of Crepes And Quiches

At Café Alsace, the French leisurely lunch tradition is firmly in place. For those who sojourn occasionally down to New Orleans, you know that lunch is gently



The Café Alsace dream team. Chef Sylvain Lefort, a native of Orleans, France, and owner/manager Benedicte Ulras Cooper, who is from Alsace, offer authentic Alsatian cuisine and a selection of wines from Alsace and other regions for lunch and dinner. If you desire, French will be spoken in this romantic gourmet downtown Decatur restaurant where everything is friendly, intimate and delicious. The *pâté du chef* has won fans throughout the region. Photo by Doc Lawrence

paced. Rushing lunch isn't the norm there as it too often is in Atlanta. Cooper has designed a mid-day menu that promotes a relaxed lunch that fosters conversation and somehow makes possible some precious moments. French comfort food, a key to the lunch experience, here, includes crepes, homemade soups, omelets and appropriate desserts. The favorite salad might be the *Salade Solier*, a tasty tabbouleh over leaf lettuce garnished with orange slices. And no lunch here is complete without the legendary *pâté du chef* made from fresh chicken livers and served with baguettes and pickles.

A more exhaustive selection of crepes, quiches and omelettes is on the Sunday brunch menu, one of the best bargains around.

Wine for lunch? Thanks to Café Alsace, this has become a Decatur tradition that hopefully is spreading to other area restaurants.

#### Dinner With Benedicte

The evening dinner served at Café Alsace is a true Old World wonder, something rare in Atlanta. Begin with escargots or Cooper's own recipe onion pie. Both mirror Alsatian fine dining. Cassoulet, the classic dish from France's Languedoc region, is notable for the harmonious blending of the flavors of sausage and vegetables. Chef Sylvain's exceptional duck leg confit, a classic French dish, with sautéed apples begs for more than one glass of red wine. There are outstanding reds on the Café Alsace wine menu, ranging from Bordeaux to Burgundy with a few surprises in between.

Because it is the antithesis of the overindulgent restaurants with hordes of diners served by a wait staff army, Café Alsace fills quickly. With no rooms to rush through dinner, it stays sufficiently full. I suggest dining to lunch early. This is one restaurant where hurrying is not expected or necessary.

Café Alsace makes a very credible case for the importance of smaller restaurants owned and operated by a talented hands-on manager. A place where each course is served according to schedule and placed on the table as it comes from the kitchen. Where intimacy reigns and a little romance is enhanced by the seductive French dining mystique. In the Atlanta of yesterday, these were not uncommon, but with the advent of the corporate mega restaurants, such dreamy places disappeared.

Café Alsace has been operating now for nearly a decade, and it grows more popular by the day. When you arrive, Benedicte Cooper will be there to greet you with a smile. The menu will excite you, but it is only a prelude to the upcoming gourmet journey: The epicurean adventure begins with a glass of Alsatian wine and the omnipresent *pâté*. Then, you are on the way to a remarkable experience.

It's the way the French dine in downtown Decatur.

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