

FRENCH BLISS

CAFE ALSACE, JUST OFF THE COURTHOUSE SQUARE IN DECATUR, OFFERS A DELIGHTFUL JOURNEY.

BY CHRISTIANE LAUTERBACH



In an era when clamorous, big-box eateries and high-concept, high-end destinations get all the attention, there is something marvelously delicious about finding a little scrap of French real estate right off the main drag in Decatur.

Bénédicte Cooper wasn't a great chef when she showed up in Atlanta and started making a few salads and egg dishes at the gloriously eccentric—and now defunct—Saint Agnes Tea Garden. But she is a busy bee. In 1997, she took over a failed sandwich shop in a diminutive storefront, and with the help of yards and yards of sunny fabric (Provençal, but who's keeping track?), a big old bicycle, antiques and knickknacks, calendars casually dangling from nails, a poster of Catherine Deneuve in *Belle de Jour* and other paraphernalia, she created the kind of "petit bistro sympa" (friendly little bistro) that runs in her blood.

Ms. Cooper was indeed born in Alsace, but her chef is from the Loire Valley. While one would be hard-pressed to describe the cuisine as authentic anything, a few of the specialties do come from a province renowned for its cooking and where the Franco-German tug-of-war has produced a distinctive culinary style. The choucroute de poisson, a legitimate variant of the traditional pork sauerkraut, is cooked in Alsatian wine and uses salmon, cod, shrimp and a touch of shallot cream sauce. It is pretty delicious down to the equally heretical redskin potatoes. The tarte à l'oignon (a fluffy onion pie that is perfect with a glass of wine) and the homemade chicken liver pâté (the recipe includes bacon, shallots and port as well) have an endearing homemade quality. The rabbit in blueberry and red wine sauce and the quiche Lorraine (a lunch specialty) are definitely up to French standards. The Alsatian spaetzle (a form of homemade noodles, tossed and baked with ham, cheese, onions and cream) can vary considerably in texture and rich-

ness from visit to visit, but on a good day it is divine. The boeuf bourguignonne is simple but deeply satisfying, with thick, melt-in-your-mouth chunks of marinated beef and firm, hearty vegetables. The soups can be greasy, salty and just a little weird (asparagus and lavender!), and the desserts, with the exception of the dense, bittersweet mousse au chocolat, tend to be weak.

At its best, though, the food has the endearing quality of a dinner thrown together for a few friends by a French hostess who doesn't waste her time reading cookbooks but follows her heart made for entertaining. And in this cozy little setting, one wants to linger—as at a good friend's dining table—just a little longer, soaking up the ambience while sipping a last drop of wine or milky after-dinner coffee.

[121 East Ponce de Leon Ave., Decatur, 404-373-5622] ♦

REDISCOVERING CAFE ALSACE

WHAT MAKES IT SPECIAL

Don't you love all these French movies where thin people sit at tables barely bigger than a mouse pad and eat away without counting the calories? This is that kind of place.

WHAT TO ORDER

The seafood sauerkraut, the rabbit, the onion pie, a bottle of Alsatian wine. Stay away from the stuffed crêpes and most of the desserts.

WHEN TO GO

This is a teeny-tiny restaurant and you should get your act together early if you want to score a table on a weekend night, which is when you will find just the right crowded atmosphere.