



Petit Margeaux in the Waldorf Astoria Hotel serves a fresh quiche du jour, such as this spinach and feta version.

ANNIE GROSSINGER/TRIBUNE FILE

Dine like a Parisian

PETIT MARGEAUX PUTS LOCAL, MODERN SPIN ON CLASSIC FRENCH CAFÉ FARE

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

Through eating, we sometimes remember places of comfort where we once experienced profound happiness—maybe your mom’s kitchen or the European city that changed your life.

But being transported in this way is sometimes easier said than done. Ice cream at Berthillon, macarons from Pierre Hermes and almost every pain au chocolat served on every corner in Paris changed my life years ago. No bite has compared, until a recent visit to Petit Margeaux.

What makes Petit Margeaux particularly evocative of France is its location—the cobblestone courtyard of the Waldorf Astoria (larger sister restaurant Margeaux Brasserie is on the third floor). If you were

dropped in here blindly, you would swear you were in a real chateau. There is an unreal hush and a reprieve from the bustling Gold Coast just outside. In rainstorms, doormen ply you with umbrellas and scramble to open the front door with the seriousness of emergency room docs attending a coded patient. If you sit in the right spot in the café, you can gaze at the magnificent lobby chandelier, what looks like a crystalline reproduction of a dandelion seed puff.

The background: I was a little snarky when I heard Michael Mina, the San Francisco chef who now has a culinary empire spanning 11 states and Dubai, was opening two French spots in Chicago. Chicago maybe once needed star out-of-towners to lend legitimacy to our sleepy meat-and-potatoes town. But those days are over. And

while I respect and admire Mina, I’ve had a couple of middling meals at his outposts in Las Vegas and felt he might be overextending himself.

But this is not the case at Petit Margeaux, where Mina collaborates with folks who have the skills to translate classic French food but also who understand what Chicagoans want. Executive chef Brent Balika spent time in Chicago interning under Matthias Merges at Charlie Trotter’s and working at The Dawson. Ashley Torto, who worked at MK, the Sofitel Chicago Water Tower, The Bristol and The Boarding House, oversees pastry.

The food: If the fare were an exact facsimile of classic French café food, it would probably be boring. What’s exciting here is

that while the technique is spot on, there’s also a local or modern spin on the dishes that makes what seems old, quite new.

“We wanted to do something very, very French that honored the classics, but we didn’t want it to be straight 1920s France, but a balance of old and new school,” said Torto.

Laminated pastries, including the croissant, are made in-house. They are buttery, flaky and they ooze with nutty gruyere and

salty ham (\$11). The éclair (\$5) is made with custard-perfumed pate a choux (dough), which has a salty and savory quality, a complexity that balances the sweet chocolate glaze and the cream inside.

But, the new school too, is in abundance. A strawberry chevre cheesecake

REVIEW

Petit Margeaux
11 E. Walton St. 415-359-0791
★★½ (out of four)



ANNIE GROSSINGER/TRIBUNE FILE PHOTOS

Parisian ham, farm egg royale and Gruyere cheese croissant sandwich with chives.

(\$5) encased in a pale pink glaze featuring sleek white pinstriping and fancy pearlescent sprinkles looks less like a pastry, and more like an oval couture clutch purse. It's as tasty as it is pretty, a delightful swirl of sweet strawberry jam and funky velvety goat cheese.

The macarons (\$7) are the size of Olympic medals and stuffed with tart jam made from Klug Farm (St. Joseph, Mich.) cherries. They have a shattering crust that wafts a lilt of roasted almond in each bite.

Balika's French dip (\$14) features a cracklin' baguette that swaddles luscious ribbons of Midwestern top round that has been massaged with salt, brown sugar and coriander, then slow roasted. The whole thing is topped with caramelized onion confit and served with a side of gravy so rich I kind of wanted to shoot it straight once I finished the sandwich. The sandwich eats like the very best Italian beef mixed with a soul-soothing French onion soup. My only quibble is that the jus was served in a plastic cup. The café is so elegant, a porcelain ramekin or a silver finger bowl seemed more appropriate. (Balika said the serveware they'd chosen was on back-order.)

Caprese and beet salads have become ubiquitous and sorry, usually made from out-of-season produce and rubbery cheeses. But, Balika's beet salad (\$12), tossed with curly, buttery Lolla Rossa lettuce and sprinkled with winey toasted pistachios, redeems the form. The beets glisten with lavender vinaigrette.

The magnificence of the salad and the dip, however, make it hard to understand a ratatouille tartine (\$12), which is heavy, soggy with overcooked squash and tomatoes, and garnished with bruised basil.



Pain au chocolat.

The drinks: Petit Margeaux's café menu features masala chai (\$5.25) bursting with cardamom, and iced chocolate milk (\$5) thick with a fruity and bright Valrhona chocolate infusion. The all-day menu includes wine by the glass and bottle (\$8-\$88) and beer (\$6-\$8).

The bottom line: Petit Margeaux is a destination for fabulous French-inspired pastry and maybe the greatest French dip sandwich in America. Though it's a hotel café, it is anything but drab or pedestrian. It is a respite, a sort of time machine that can conjure Parisian boulevards and reacquaint you with the wonders of a past trip to France.

Michael Nagrant is a RedEye freelancer. Reporters visit restaurants unannounced and meals are paid for by RedEye.

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