

Restaurants elevate fries to appetizer status

Eric Akis, Times Colonist

Published: Wednesday, March 07, 2007

With so many different establishments serving up some pretty decent French fries around the Island, it took a while to decide where my tasting panel would go to unearth some premium ones. In the end, I decided to visit three busy Victoria restaurants that are following a trend of serving french fries not just as a side dish but also as an appetizer they hope you'll find hard to resist.

When I mentioned the task at hand, my wife, Cheryl Warwick, research and development chef for Victoria Epicure, and my teenage son, Tyler, who has developed a rich appreciation for fine food thanks to his parents' occupations, told me not to call anyone else -- I wasn't going to be sampling fine fries without them.

Our first destination was a Thursday night dinner at Brasserie l'ecole, a bustling French-style bistro with West Coast influences located on Government Street near the impressive gates to Chinatown. After reviewing the menu, the one we could hold in our hands, and the chalkboard menu listing daily specials and regular features, we learned that there are three ways to enjoy this restaurant's pomme frites (fries). One dish was an appetizer consisting of frites tossed with shavings of Parmesan cheese, truffle oil and chopped parsley, which we ordered to share. (How could we not? It sounded so decadent!) The other two options were main courses -- frites topped with richly sauced local mussels, and steak and frites, which Tyler chose so we could also try Brasserie l'ecole's unadorned frites.



The pomme frites at Brasserie l'ecole are seasoned with parmesan, truffle oil and chopped parsley.

Photograph by : Darren Stone,
Times Colonist

"Yummmm!" said Tyler as a mound of appetizing and aromatic frites were set before us. No kidding, it was quite the combination -- crisp, not-greasy, thin-cut potatoes accented with fine cheese, which added a touch saltiness; the truffle oil provided a hint of rich-earthiness; and the parsley seemed to refresh the palate before the next bite.

"I like that they are thin and you can put a few in your mouth at once," said Tyler, noting it enabled to him enjoy all the different tastes at once.

When Tyler's steak arrived, the bounty of frites alongside was beautifully golden and he, almost reluctantly, agreed to let us sample them if he got to try some of the frite-free

entrees Cheryl and I were having. We all agreed they were the perfect foil for the tender steak with its topping of rich, blue cheese butter.

The next stop on our journey to find the finest fries was Sunday lunch at 5th Street Bar & Wood Fired Grill on Hillside Ave. The fries here were glowingly recommended by a couple of readers, and 5th Street always seems busy, which means they must be doing a lot of things right. I wanted to see if fries were one of them.

What pulls many people into this restaurant is the heavenly, aromatic wood smoke you can smell outside and within the restaurant. It's used to infuse some of this eatery's entrees, such as beef brisket, pork and chicken. The restaurant's fresh-cut "house fries" are served as an appetizer and are tossed with parmesan cheese and served with chipotle mayonnaise for dipping. We ordered some to share. The fries, without the cheese and dip, are also served as an optional side dish with many of 5th Street's main-courses, such as the hot beef brisket sandwich that Tyler ordered.

The appetizer fries came in a wide, shallow bowl and the mayonnaise came in a smaller bowl and was plunked right on top the fries, not the greatest of presentations for two reasons. When I lifted the mayonnaise off to get at the fries, some were squished from the weight of the bowl, and when I set that bowl on the table, the bottom was coated with cheese, making it a bit messy.

We started by nibbling on the fries at the edge of the bowl that were a little less coated with the powdery, pre-grated variety of parmesan cheese used at 5th Street. "These taste almost like you would get from a chip truck," said Cheryl, reflecting upon the journeys we used to take years ago in Southern Ontario in search of the perfect french fry.

Disappointingly, though, there were only a few fries that tasted like that, because rather than the fries being tossed with a light dusting of parmesan cheese, an incredible quarter cup or even more of fairly salty cheese was simply dumped in the middle of the bowl, which totally overwhelmed the fries.

"Their spiced mayo was really good and there was plenty of it -- just not sure how to enjoy it with that mountain of powdered cheese," said Cheryl.

To bad, I thought, because the unadorned fries surrounding Tyler's sandwich were quite good, although not that hot, which made me think the appetizer house fries have promise, but the kitchen needs to lower the quantity and increase the quality of the cheese used.

Stop 3 in our fryfest was a Monday dinner at Spinnakers Gastro Brew Pub, which made it on to my list of places to try because I wanted to sample the unique type of potatoes they use to make their fries.

Kennebec potatoes, according to the potato farming section of the Government of Prince Edward Island's website, are a very pure potato that cook up plump, juicy and very tasty.

At Spinnakers you could have their kennebec fries alongside several of their delicious-sounding entrees, such as brewery grain-fed highland beef burger, or, as we did, as an appetizer.

"They taste homemade; they're crunchy; they're fluffy in the middle; and they're hot," said Tyler.

Cheryl and I agreed that they were crisp, hot and delicious, and she added that the made-in-house Scottish ale vinegar made them taste even better, as did the jerked mayonnaise served alongside as a dip.

Deciding whose fries were best came down to a battle between Spinnakers and Brasserie l'ecole. Despite our admiration for the fries at Spinnakers, we could not let go of the memory of those divine frites served as an appetizer at the Brasserie, and thus chose them as our favourite. When I called the co-owner, Marc Morrison, to tell him the news, he jokingly asked me if I knew the difference between a french fry and a frite. I paused, and then he told me: "Six bucks!"

Not quite true: the Brasserie's appetizer frites, accented with truffle oil, were \$7, while Spinnakers' and 5th Street's fries are \$5.

- - -

TASTING PANEL RESULTS

1. Brasserie l'ecole, 1715 Government St., Victoria; tel. 475 6260
2. Spinnakers Gastro Brew Pub, 308 Catherine St., Victoria; tel. 386-2739
3. 5th Street Bar & Wood Fired Grill, 1028 Hillside Ave, Victoria; tel. 380-4600

© Times Colonist (Victoria) 2007