

RESTAURANT REVIEW:

LE BISTRO

**on Norwegian Cruise Line's
Norwegian Gem**

by

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Despite its name, Le Bistro is not really a bistro. In France where the concept originated, a bistro is a casual, low-end dining venue serving simple dishes often without menus or even tablecloths. Le Bistro on Norwegian Gem is just the opposite - - it is the ship's fine dining venue, the place people go for that special evening.

While it may not be a bistro, it is immediately apparent from the moment that you walk in that this is a French restaurant. The décor recalls the sumptuous upscale restaurants of Paris in La Belle Epoch with red cloth covered walls, mirrors and brass lighting fixtures. Even the ceiling has been decorated so as to resemble a 19th Century embossed ceiling.

At one time, the Le Bistros on the various Norwegian Cruise Line ships featured original French

Impressionist masterpieces. You could dine beneath a Monet or a Renoir. These were from the collection of the owner of Star Cruises, which was then the parent company of Norwegian. Star no longer has a controlling interest in Norwegian and the masterpieces have been replaced by large, high quality reproductions. In the case of Norwegian Gem, these are predominately from Paul Gauguin's Tahitian period.

The atmosphere of Le Bistro is quiet and romantic. The lights are kept low and the French background music is kept at a volume that permits intimate conversation.

At the same time, in keeping with Norwegian's Freestyle approach to cruising, the restaurant is only as formal as you want it to be. Some dresses and jackets and ties were in evidence but there were also many



guests in more casual attire. (The restaurant does draw the line at baseball caps and jeans with holes or tears).

As often happens in fine dining venues, the meal begins with a gift from the chef - - a small delight to whet the appetite. In my case, it was a tasty sample of salmon mousse served with crispy slices of toasted baguette.

For the first course, I selected Les Quarte Cornets. This dish consisted of four small cones each packed with a different filling. The cone with the sweet pear contrasting with the pungency of the blue cheese was my favorite. However, there is something to be said for the duck confit with its moist dick marinate.

I believe there are several international treaties making it obligatory to have French onion soup in a French restaurant. Here, that obligation was a pleasure to fulfill. Served in a charming, plain white ceramic bowl with lion head handles, it emitted an aroma that promised good things to come. Inside were numerous strips of onion and a thick slice of bread embedded with cheese. The soup itself was flavorful and satisfying.

For the main course, I selected Filet de Boeuf Grille. The beef tenderloin was cooked so as to be melt-in-the-mouth tender - - you want to savor each bite. But in a fine-dining venue, the preparation of the meat is only half the battle. The sauce is equally, if not more important. Le Bistro's green peppercorn sauce did not

let the side down. It added a zest to the dish that complemented the beef by creating contrasting tastes and textures.

The apple tatin, a traditional French dessert, also offered a variety of experiences. With its caramelized walnut sauce, it was both sweet and tart and was nicely balanced by a scoop of vanilla ice cream.

Le Bistro is a very popular venue and you will need a reservation for the peak dining hours. There is a cover charge of \$20.