

Belltown's Mistral Shines

by Ronald Holden

Just past six in the evening, the earliest guests have already arrived at Mistral, the elegant eatery on Blanchard's slope between First and Second. They are a trio of Japanese visitors drinking champagne, the first of several international VIPs on tonight's books. They are associated with one of cable TV's top cooking shows, and they've come to pay homage to the one chef in Seattle who has turned down their requests for a guest appearance.

But the sun is still shining high over Elliott Bay, and Mistral's owner and chef, 35-year-old William Belickis, is playing stickball in the parking lot.

William never strays far from Belltown on his occasional days off. He likes Marjorie, La Vita è Bella ["real Italian food that reminds me of my Italian heritage"] and Saito's, his favorite. "A genius," he declares. His fondness for sushi is apparent in the raw tuna he serves as part of Mistral's *amuse-bouche*.

Game over, William and his executive chef Charles Walpole—a stocky, stoic gent in a bandana who has been there from the beginning—will spend the next four hours preparing a series of five-, six- and seven-course dinners for around two dozen lucky palates. Tasting menus, if you will—in the classical grand tradition of French *haute cuisine*. No dumbing-down, no concessions, no casual-Friday lowering of standards, no democratization of tastes. This is as pure as pure can be. With an idealism that is almost blinding, never filled with doubts or second thoughts about his goal, William forges ahead. And it seems he's finally getting traction.

Three feet away, behind the blazing stove, Charles is preparing *foie gras*. The goose liver arrives in a vacuum-sealed pouch from Artisan Farmers in Sonoma. It's cut into 1-inch-thick medallions and sautéed in butter, plated atop a dollop of rhubarb puree and garnished with two crisp-dried slices of Granny Smith apple. The result is a flavor explosion—simultaneously sweet and tart, soft and crunchy, rich and austere.

Another of tonight's courses is pea soup. Yeah, right, pea soup. But it's made from freshly-shelled peas, my friend, shelled by William himself not 15 minutes beforehand,

poached in homemade poultry stock, herbally enriched, puréed and seasoned with fresh herbs. While the soup is being prepared, Charles sautéés giant scallops, which he centers at the bottom of the dish, surrounds with the luscious cream of green peas, crowns with mandarin foam and garnishes with lavender and thyme blossoms.

The waiter confirms "two scallops on table three," crosses off a line on the order ticket, scoops up the dishes and sails smoothly into the dining room. The plates come back empty, virtually scraped clean. Dishwasher Miguel Soltero busies himself carving an apple into a swan. He's clearly destined for bigger things.

Tonight, a photographer is on hand, gathering images for Mistral's new website. Wielding a monster Contax 645 camera outfitted with a Kodak 16-megapixel digital back, Jim Garner shoots close-ups of pots, pans, vegetables, fish, chops, and plates; he poses William in a halo of light diffused by gauze curtains, snaps Mignel destemming thyme, catches Charles in a blur at the stove, captures the waiter pouring an apéritif.

The Mistral's upgraded website (www.mistralSeattle.com) is scheduled to go live by press time. It is William's one concession to what he otherwise disdains as "marketing." He is proud of Mistral's rating in the Zagat guide, where his reputation for quality has put him at the forefront of Seattle's dining scene two years in a row. The best of the best.

He knows that the "cultural tourists" who travel for enrichment rather than beaches will seek him out, but he's not particularly keen on cozying up to people like hotel con-

cierges who might be able to send a few diners his way. Or cruise ship pursers recommending a shore excursion.

Mistral is a demanding restaurant; you can't just stroll in off the street for a salad. There are plenty of "upscale casual" restaurants around Belltown—the Tom Douglas empire, Zoë, Axis, Flying Fish—but far fewer "fine dining" establishments. Cascadia has a 3-course \$25 menu, whereas Mistral's 5-course "Market Menu" is priced at \$65. The other options are a 7-course "Tasting Menu" for \$75 and the full-bore "Mistral Tasting Experience" at \$90.

So plan on spending some money, and spending a few hours enjoying the experience. That's precisely the European tradition of *haute cuisine*, gastronomy at its highest. In Seattle, the only other practitioner is Thierry Rautureau from Rover's in Madison Park, and he has just taken the first step down the slippery slope of compromise, offering a *la carte* choices in addition to the *prix fixe* tasting menus (\$125 for eight courses).

Mistral's is clearly not for every night, nor for everyone. William wants his staff to communicate clearly when taking reservations, so that there are no misunderstandings at tableside. The result: newcomers are welcomed as special guests, and return visitors greeted as old friends.

William's patience has earned him Zagat's endorsement rating from Triple-A. "I'm here if they want to come see me," he says, with the certainty of a true believer, confident artist and accomplished craftsman.

Ronald Holden



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Jim Garner



FOOD CRITIC Ronald Holden with Mistral's William Belickis

THE FINEST WINES TO ACCOMPANY THE FINEST DINING

Mistral's wine list is just as ambitious as its menu, without concessions to low taste. Ten Champagnes, including the fabled 1990 Clos du Menil from Krug, in case you are celebrating an occasion calling for \$650 worth of bubbles. The heart of the list is Bordeaux, with great vintages and top-ranked estates. You really can't ask for better wines than 1990 Chateau Latour (\$800) or 1982 Haut Brion (\$700).

Should this be a splash more than your wallet holds, the tasting menus can be ordered with moderately-priced wines from a wide selection. And if you'd like to go further afield, there are plenty of terrific values on the list: among them, less famous names like Potensac from Bordeaux and Vieux-Télégraphe from the Rhone.

In some of the world's greatest restaurants,

Jim Garner



the wine cellar may hold thousands of bottles, purchased from friends at famous estates and held for decades. Not in Belltown, not at Mistral, where there is barely room for forty cases of wine. The answer: Bordeaux Wine Locators (BWL), a wine importer located by a railroad siding in Rainier, WA. BWL has one of the best "backlistis" in the country, and owner Andy Lench is a fan of William's.

The newest addition to Mistral's dining room is a temperature-controlled cabinet for the bottles of red wine, which ensures they will taste their best—just like the food.

— *Messenger* food critic **Ronald Holden** hosts www.cornichon.org and travels the world from his base in Belltown.