

Review: La Degustation

Naomi Boxall dines at Ambiente's Boheme Bourgeoise

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La Degustation

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for Expats.cz


If you have an aversion to superlatives or flowery adjectives: look away now, go straight to the star rating, but do collect your £200, you're gonna need it.

La Degustation Boheme Bourgeoise is one of the newest of the Ambiente chain, open for 10 months on Haštalská, in the Old Town. The name gives it away; it's a degustation restaurant. Meaning it serves 7 courses in one deliciously lingering meal, picked from the three possible menus of the day (menus that are printed that day, given to you as a souvenir or note-taking device and must be regularly referred to throughout the meal, as it's unlikely you'll

remember what you're due to be served next!)..


Go Boheme Traditionelle and taste old style Czech classics, refined by novel techniques. Or try the Continentale menu; European cuisine, dictated by today's fresh produce. Or the Boheme Bourgeoise menu, Czech-inspired fusion food, significantly jazzed. There's an element of playfulness throughout all 3 menus, so your taste-buds will be grateful whichever way you choose. Flexibility reigns, you can feel free to swap a disliked dish with the corresponding item from another menu. Every day, courses are changed, so although I can take you through my meal on Thursday night, you'll have a different one. Each food menu is paired with a wine menu. Seven courses, with seven wines, and a meal takes nigh on three hours to get to St. Ives. Though not itemised, the Chef promises to whip you up a vegetarian menu, if you'd rather not the meaty fare on offer. In fact, he promises to cater to any of your dietary foibles, just let him know. Which is easily said and done, since the chef du cuisine works front of house, checking everything that's on it's way out of the hatch/bench kitchen (at which there are two bench seats, akin to the 'chef's table' of some extremely fine dining establishments).

Expats.cz Rating

Atmosphere 

Food 

Service 

Overall 

From our plate

2450 CZK Degustation Boheme Bourgeoise

1262 CZK Wine Boheme Bourgeoise

1850 CZK Degustation Continentale

1153 CZK Wine Continentale

While deciding on which of the three menus we'd embark upon, we sampled eight of the 'other courses', the amuse bouches (our waiter called them "the little surprises", our sommelier: "mouth fun"). A caramel filled praline topped with foie gras (eye-wideningly enjoyable), a mushroom consommé served in straws (entertaining, but a bit too jelly-y), a foie gras mousse from a soda canister (not enough given...it was so delicious) and a steak tartare crisp bread oreo (extremely smooth with a gentle occasional crunch of onion). By the time our entrees arrived, my mouth was so amused, it thought it was at a comedy club.

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If you choose the appropriate wine menu, you have an early warning system for the arrival of your next course, as your glass is replaced by the sommelier, who returns, introduces the wine, answers any banal questions, and pours for you.

The Prague ham (with Maliner horseradish sauce) started the Bohemian Bourgeoise meal. It was warm, succulent, and flaky, with a sauce I've already written home about. Meanwhile, from the Continentale menu, I bravely tried the poached oyster (if I'm going to try it, it'll be here). I'm sorry to say, it was too bivalve-esque, and I could only eat half of it. The Rhine sauce was foamed to look like the crest of a wave - delicious.

He then had Cream of Celery Soup with Home Smoked Salmon, while I had Pumpkin Soup with Rucola. Presentation took centre stage for these dishes, as large white platters were brought to the table containing either a cube of smoked salmon or one leaf of rucola. Then the chef du cuisine brought a saucepan and ladle to us, and served us. My pumpkin soup, though thinner than I would make at home, was superb, but the sweet mouth explosion of pumpkin was truly expanded and enhanced by the matched wine, a Czech 2006 Ardea (Sauvignon) from "Nove Vinarstvi". The creamy celery soup was a bit too salty for me, but it wasn't 'my dish, so no harm no foul.

Green Pea Filled Ravioli next arrived for me, topped with recently picked roasted forest cepes, softened with Laudemio olive oil. I've never been a fan of peas, so this dish took me aback: the peas sweet, the cepes earthy and the pasta ideal in both thickness and texture. I remember this dish fondly. Across the table, the Veal Cheeks in a Truffle Veloute were creamy, tender and soft - as all good cheeks should be.

More oral humour, by way of a Smoked Fish Pannacotta with Merlot Salt and Rucola Oil. The taste/texture combination was a bit odd, so I concentrated on the 'making of the merlot salt'. Conclusion: they must saturate a cup of wine with salt, and then dehydrate the mixture, leaving vermillion crystals for sprinkling, but that's just 4th form Chemistry speaking; even Google wasn't much assistance.

Close on the fins of the panacotta came my smoked eel (caught recently by one of the chefs) alongside a cauliflower puree, garnished with julienned mangetout and slivers of roasted almonds. Oddly, the combination with a 2004 Benefizio Pomino Bianco DOC from Marchesi de Frescobaldi brought to mind the Elizabeth Arden perfume Red Door - there may have been a jasmine undertone in the cauliflower puree - odd, but not unappealing. Reaching across

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the table, I tried the smoked duck breast, which had the not unpleasant consistency of uncooked bacon, teamed up with the horseradish sauce and a pumpkin puree (more like the consistency of my homemade soup!) that was a small bite of paradise.

At this point, my manners dissolved. Apparently, one should not 'mop' ones food up, despite the always replenished black bread. I decreed that as long as cutlery (and therefore a modicum of decorum) was used, it would be fine. Not only that, but since it was such a fine establishment, with excellent front of house staff, no one would dare raise an eyebrow. Except, of course, my companion - who briefly considered disowning me.

Roasts followed, his: Lamb with Fried Garlic, Thyme Glace and an Aubergine Puree. The intensity of flavours in one mouthful was extreme: all flavour with melt-in-the-mouth consistency. My Slow-Roasted Chicken Breast bit more like smoked chicken, with the flavour of roast. Served with a potato mash, poached carrot and a plum glace, it was the best roast dinner I've had in two years. By now, we'd befriended the sommelier by asking pertinent (we thought) questions about the wines. To the point where he waited for a hiatus between courses, then went above and beyond the call of duty to bring us the well used wine encyclopaedia kept at the bar to further clarify different regions of Bourgogne for us.

Next, a garden variety 'surprise': described recently by the New York Times reviewer as 'a shockingly white tomato meringue, topped with honey and aged balsamic vinegar.' Even though I've been doing my research, I still cannot tell you why it isn't red. I then had dorada (sea-bream) with a red pepper essence and cubes of red beet. The most notable thing about this dish was, again, the pairing with the wine. I truly believe that you'll only be doing the dishes 80% of their due credit if you don't go the whole hog and take one of the three sommeliers wine choices alongside each dish. I don't know the science behind matching, but these three young Czechs, with their chef, create mouthwatering art. I tried the pigeon breast (we were assured it wasn't from Staroměstské náměstí) which had the consistency of raw, dense meat instead of poultry, especially with the port wine glace and a carrot puree.

Two amuse bouches followed the bulk of our meal: a creamy cube of not-too-salty sheeps cheese from a farm down south, topped with a piece of sun-dried tomato, served in a small jar - sublime. Then onto the sweets: a Lilliputian sized scoop of vanilla ice cream with a rich, dark chocolate sauce and crunchy bits of chocolate on the top - heavenly. And - to date - not a single piece of Ikea crockery or cutlery. All glassware was Reidel, and all cutlery was stolen from the WMF Hotel. Possibly not stolen, but stamped for them anyway.

I'll tell you about my dessert first, because it paled into comparison beside my friends. I had a chocolate cheesecake (70% Valrhona chocolate) served with strawberries. It was sumptuous. However, my dear heart across the table was served a glittering purple bauble, in between three halved blackberries. Very space-age. Until the waiter came along and poured hot chocolate on the top, at which point, the glittery jasmine-infused purple ball disintegrated, melting into the valrhona ivoire ganache inside. So astonished were we at this structural entity, that we congratulated the kitchen from where we sat, giving a big two thumbs up (each) to the sweets chef (recently returned from a stint at the Valrhona factory), who glowed in recognition and well-deserved pride of his outstanding achievement.

The kitchen is an open window, down one end of the sandstone coloured room. In it, you can see no fewer than four chefs, presided over by a chef de cuisine (who works front of house and checks each item before it leaves the kitchen) tirelessly preparing and decorating your courses. The attention to detail is amazing, with cutlery being provided by the staff wearing one white glove. The relationship between front of house and

kitchen is visible and tight, and everyone, though busy, appears to be having a good time. If food can convey mood - then this food does. Even though we'd managed to consume no fewer than 14 different dishes, ply ourselves with 7 different wines (each!), we weren't over full. Light and airy complements to the small centrepiece of each course kept our palates stimulated, and our belts comfortable.

The relaxed atmosphere means that you don't feel pressured when you've taken a cigarette break (outside until after 11pm, when smoking is permitted at the table), or visited the bathroom. Which you should do at least once, since the attention to detail goes as far to see fresh fresias, scented candles, 'feminine products', clinique hairspray, clinique (Happy) hand wash, cream and eau de toilette - and a nail file - all at your disposal. The boys have a similar selection (albeit a different fragrance) in their bathroom, and both have freshly laundered towels for drying hands.

The end of the meal arrived in two tiers. A selection of petit fours made by one of the chefs we planned to abduct: a marzipan truffle rolled in cocoa, an intriguing slice of white chocolate with lavender (which took us back to the chemistry laboratory again) and the tastiest apple pie I've ever had. Despite each item being tiny, they sat on their platter in the light. In fact, the lighting in the restaurant is excellent - each table is lit by a spotlight from above, so that at no time are you uncertain of what you're eating - the dishes are displayed to their full visual effect. When the dark wood table is empty, the soft light rebounding up into the faces of the diners gives everyone a candlelit glow without the risk of napkins (or hair - it's happened) catching aflame. For the pyro's amongst you, be satisfied with the oil lamps that burn against the walls, creating delicate flickering uplighting around the room. If you check the ceiling, you'll see flickers of the glassware reflecting light. My poor companion arrived late, thus had the wooden seat (which was still sufficiently comfortable for 3 hours!) while I gently reclined on a leather chaise short (i.e., not a longue). The service throughout our meal was excellent, we had a laugh with the chef de cuisine, and our sommelier brought a smile with him as well as glasses and wine bottles, and the chefs occasionally looked up and nodded at us. A dropped knife was replaced speedily, and when it was noticed we hadn't dived into our soups with appropriate gusto, we were immediately brought spoons - so that we could!

All in all, this was the most fantastic meal I've eaten in Prague, possibly ever. I enjoyed every moment, every morsel of the gastronomic extravaganza. It's somewhere I'd love to go again (if someone else pays), but would save it for a special occasion. So saying, get a babysitter and leave the kids at home and feed each other forkfuls of divinity instead. Or if someone you know has just defended their PhD thesis - book a table to celebrate. I imagine they'll see their fair share of proposals too. But if you're planning a special moment at Christmas, I'd book now (not by internet yet, there's still some teething problems with the system) to ensure you get a place. Carp'll be on the menu, but not as you know it.