

PIAZZA SAN MARCO

Cultural Inspirations in World-Class Dining

By Robbi Burgi and Brad Simkulet Photography by laird

Marco Polo left Venice in 1272, launching his fleet of ships from the famed Piazza San Marco (St. Mark's square) on a voyage to China and other foreign lands. More than two decades later, in 1294, Polo returned to Venice bearing cargo-holds full of exotic commercial goods. Chief among these foreign imports were spices such as cinnamon and cumin. As a result, Venice, and, by extension, the rest of the modern world, owes a measure of gratitude to Polo's seasoned wanderings and culinary conquests.

Jacksonville's San Marco historic district has undergone a not-so-different transformation of culturally inspired cuisine. The recent infusion of cosmopolitan eateries—including Matthew's, Bistro Aix, bb's, and L'Orient Chez Guy—has elevated the sleepy, picturesque shopping district from a low key historic area to the River City's prime dining arena. Indeed, Jacksonville's "Piazza San Marco" is fast becoming the contemporary embodiment of Marco Polo's legacy.

No less adventurous is San Marco's Bistro Aix, owned by Mike and Terry Schneider [The Loop Restaurants], in conjunction with Ann and Scott Riley [Stellers Gallery]. Named after Aix en Provence in the South of France, Aix's



large, open kitchen draws hungry visitors in with tantalizing aromas and a steady stream of activity.

Interior designer Terry Schneider has given Aix the relaxed feeling of a home away from home, reminiscent of the Parisian bistros frequented by Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Gertrude Stein in the 1920s. Many of the less-expensive French flats in the 1920s didn't come with kitchen facilities, so the young ex-patriots took their meals in the neighborhood bistros.

Similarly, Schneider has succeeded in creating a new place for a diverse crowd to socialize as well as eat and drink. Aix's interior is warm, inviting, and timeless, and soft lighting and expansive mirrors complement natural materials such as wood, iron, marble, and zinc. Artwork, fresh flowers and beautiful food coming from the kitchen all work together to create an atmosphere that embodies the flavor of Aix en Provence itself; no one detail overpowers the senses.

Executive chef and Aix partner Tom Gray has opened five restaurants and worked with some of America's most famous chefs. Trained by Paul Sartory at The Wine Spectator Greystone Restaurant and a regular at the prestigious Napa Valley Wine Auction each year, Gray's training shows. Bistro Aix's wine list is one of best in Jacksonville, with a cellar containing 3,000 bottles and a selection of over 160 wines. In addition, Gray's penchant for cooking with wood has resulted in the big, wood-fired oven at the heart of Bistro Aix. "I love cooking with wood," says Gray. "It takes more skill but you get great flavor." Pizzas with scampi-shrimp, garlic, and goat cheese as well as house-smoked salmon pizza are testimonials to the value of Gray's approach.

During the restaurant's first year, Gray changed the menu five times. But the creamy onion soup and mussels *frites* are there to stay. "I make everything a few times, and if I like the flavor and the texture, it will go into the menu." Currently, main courses range from steak *frites* with red wine shallot sauce to crispy calamari salad with shaved cheese in a lemon herb vinaigrette. Risotto with asparagus, prosciutto, sweet pea shoots and parmigiano broth or braised lamb shank with Israeli cous cous, roasted vegetables and cardamom scented fruits are also good selections. Desserts at Aix are European classics. They include walnut brandy apple pie, classic *profiterole* with vanilla *crème* and warm chocolate sauce, and lemon raspberry tarts.



Bistro Aix: Partner Ann Riley, Chef Tom Gray, Designer/Owner Terry Schneider.



Arbus
Jacksonville's Arts and Business Magazine