

Life in Northeast Florida & Coastal Georgia

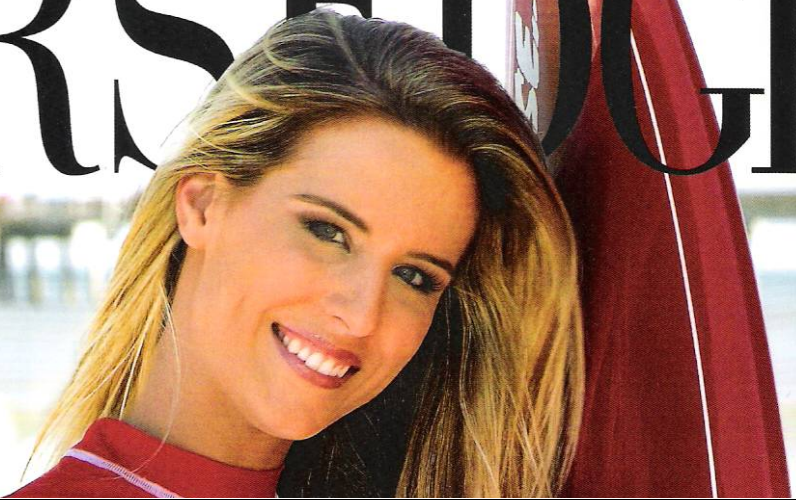
# WATER'S EDGE®

BACK TO THE  
BEACH  
SURF, SAND & SUN

EXPLORE  
ST. CATHERINES SOUND

KAYAK  
THE OKEEFENOKEE

PLUS!  
BISTRO AIX  
BLUE CRABS  
ARE BACK



FOOD & DINING [dining out]



## aix marks the spot

BISTRO AIX THRIVING AT 10 YEARS | CATHERINE ENNS GRIGAS | PHOTOGRAPHER ED HALL

**T**he day it opened 10 years ago, Bistro Aix marked the area's dining hot spot. Mediterranean-inspired California cuisine served up in a chic French-influenced atmosphere gave a big-city style boost to the local culinary scene. The San Marco restaurant was on everyone's radar as the place to dine in Jacksonville.

How has Bistro Aix fared over the years? Like many other area restaurants, it is weathering the economic downturn, but it is still bustling on weekend nights. You're bound to see local celebrities — along with some famous faces like Sharon Stone, Paula Deen, Billy Joel, Jessica Simpson, Derek Jeter and Samuel L. Jackson — dining there when they are in town. And, yes, Executive Chef Tom Gray still rules over the open kitchen with a megawatt smile and an unflinching quest for excellence

that recently got him a nomination in the category, "Best Chef of the South," for the prestigious James L. Beard Foundation Awards.

It's a big restaurant and it is unapologetically noisy, thanks to exposed brick walls and concrete floors. The high-backed booths may give you some respite from the techno music, but don't expect a place for quiet conversation. The contemporary Onyx room, the restaurant's newest addition, is quieter, although the action there focuses around an extensive menu of cocktails served at the handsome pink and pearl onyx bar. The outdoor garden, where you can dine al fresco under twinkling lights by a fountain, is more tranquil.

Regulars of Bistro Aix can still rely on ordering their favorite dishes, which have changed little since the restaurant opened. However, Chef Tom's creativity keeps

\$4.95

June 2009



## CHEF'S PROFILE

### Executive Chef Tom Gray, *Bistro Aix*

**On the James Beard nomination:** "The thought never crossed my mind that I would be nominated. It was a really amazing feeling. It's the ultimate reward for chefs. Simply to be on the list made me proud, and proud of my whole team." Chef Tom says he still doesn't know who nominated him, although he saw some of the past winners – chefs Rick Bayless, Ming Tsai and Bobby Flay – come in to eat.

**On his culinary career:** "When I started out, there wasn't a food network. Cooks were looked at as servants. But my family was very supportive because cooking was what I always wanted to do." Gray, 40, began working at Club Continental in Orange Park when he was barely a teen.

**Best food and wine pairing:** "Champagne and smoked salmon, or a California Pinot Noir with handmade gnocchi and wild-foraged mushrooms." Chef Tom developed his love for big Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignons while working at Helena View Johnston Vineyards in Calistoga, California, where he met his wife, Sarah Marie Johnston, now *Bistro Aix*'s marketing director. The two have a son, Quinn, age 3.

**Best things about a career as a chef:** "To see people enjoying the food you made is probably the best human interaction you can get. It's also rewarding to work with the team in the kitchen. You're a mentor, a little bit psychiatrist, and there are many success stories."

**On his cuisine:** "I am always looking for great, bold flavors. In California, I had fresh, local ingredients, which I try to have now. I have been experimenting lately with vacuum packing and *sous-vide*, along with slow cooking and braising. I like to concentrate flavors without the addition of butter and cream."

**Managing the pressure of cooking in an open-display kitchen:** "I have a look that I give [to the staff] that lets them know I'm not pleased. And I remind them that my guests can read lips."

diners on their toes with imaginative seasonal offerings. The menu maintains a balance between bistro fare and fine dining, and features top-notch artisanal ingredients.

The wood-burning oven continues to produce amazingly crisp pizzas topped with gourmet goodies and oak-fired fish, chicken and beef. It's the one place in town where you can order a hamburger made from a half pound of Kobe beef, served with rosemary-scented French fries and a salad of mixed greens (\$14) or opt for something more upscale, such as the melt-in-your-mouth ribeye served with wild mushroom ragout and organic broccoli over a pool of soft polenta (\$34). The bread is legendary – warm and crusty on the outside with a springy interior that will break down the will of the staunchest carbo-phobe. And that's not to mention that it offers one of the best wine lists around, with 50 wines available by the glass.

You can go there in your designer finery or wear a pair of jeans and feel comfortable. It's a great place to lunch with the ladies or meet friends after an Elton John concert. I even consider it my neighborhood take-out restaurant, often ordering pizza or the homemade pastas,

## BISTRO AIX

1440 San Marco Boulevard  
Jacksonville, Florida 32207  
(904) 398-1949

**Open:** 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday through Thursday; 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. Friday; 5 to 11 p.m. Saturday; and 5 to 9 p.m. Sunday

such as the whole wheat fettuccini, goat cheese and snap peas served in a spicy smoked pepper broth (\$19 for a full portion; \$12.50 for a half) when I want a great meal but don't want to cook it.

So when I was given the chance to return to *Bistro Aix*, notebook in hand, I happily obliged. It was a Wednesday night and my husband, two daughters, and I were seated immediately in a booth near the bakery case, perfect for eyeing the dessert possibilities. Our server, like many of the restaurant's wait staff, has been working at the restaurant for years, so we expected great service – and got it.

We decided to take the something old, something new tact, ordering a few familiar favorites and some that were new additions to the menu. We started with the Escargot in Puff Pastry (\$9.50), an old school classic. After a few bites,





### Tom Gray's Seared Halibut with Goat Cheese-Smashed Potatoes and Blood Orange Vinaigrette

SERVES 4

INGREDIENTS FOR SEARED FISH:

- 4 six-oz. filets of white fish  
(halibut, swordfish, mahi or cobia)
- 2 teaspoons fresh chives, sliced very fine
- 2 large handfuls of arugula leaves, washed and dried
- 4 tablespoons olive oil
- Sea salt to taste
- Freshly ground black pepper to taste

INGREDIENTS FOR SMASHED POTATOES:

- 12 Red Bliss potatoes, cleaned with skin on
- 4 ounces goat cheese
- Four ounces butter
- Two teaspoons fresh chives, sliced very fine

INGREDIENTS FOR

BLOOD ORANGE VINAIGRETTE:

- 6 ounces freshly squeezed blood orange juice\*
- 6 ounces extra virgin olive oil
- 2 tablespoons shallots, finely diced
- Teaspoon fresh chives, sliced very fine
- \*Any fresh, seasonal citrus fruit, such as oranges, tangerines, pomelos or clementines may be used.
- 1. Slice blood oranges in half and juice.
- 2. Strain out seeds and pulp, put juice in a small mixing bowl.

3. Whisk together orange juice and olive oil.
4. Add a pinch of chives, diced shallot, and freshly ground black pepper, and set aside.
5. In a pot of boiling salted water, cook potatoes until tender. Drain water.
6. In the same pot, smash potatoes with goat cheese until mixed.
7. Add butter, salt and pepper to taste, and fresh chives. Cover to keep warm and set aside.
8. Season fish on both sides with pinch of sea salt and freshly ground black pepper.
9. Preheat a non-stick pan with olive oil, and cook over moderate heat until desired doneness.
10. Add arugula to pan to wilt. Serve immediately.

SERVING DIRECTIONS:

1. Place a large spoonful of warm smashed potatoes on each plate.
2. Add wilted arugula to top of potatoes.
3. Place fish on top of arugula. Spoon blood orange vinaigrette around potatoes, and sprinkle with chives.

WINE SERVING SUGGESTION:

Steele Chardonnay

we decided this was a dish that was out of place on a menu that focuses on light, fresh items. The garlic cream sauce, flavored with bits of mushroom, was too rich, and the thin layers of puff pastry were soggy. The snails, unfortunately, were gritty.

We knew we adored the creamy French onion soup (\$7), nicely browned onion slices in a slightly-sweet creamy broth, so we opted for something untried, the clam chowder (\$10.) I loved the idea of this soup, a deconstructed version of clam chowder – a light, but still creamy broth flavored with some plump clams. The house-cured Berkshire pork bacon wasn't part of the broth, but was a thick, succulent square of smoky pork floating in the center of the soup bowl. The chowder's potatoes were three thick, fried wedges served outside the soup. I'm an adventurous diner, but I prefer having my potatoes as part of the soup, not as finger food.

When our daughters dine at Bistro Aix, there is no mystery as to what they will order, and they have been consistently good choices over the years. One loves the decadent Mushroom and Fontina pizza (\$14), its delicate thin crust laden with a checkerboard of melted cheese and earthy mushroom puree that is then drizzled with fragrant white truffle oil.

The other unfailingly orders the Baby Spinach and Mixed Greens salad (\$11 and \$7 for a half salad), that is given a crunchy and sweet twist with fresh pears and candied walnuts and lightly tossed with a piquant house-made blue cheese dressing. Her favorite entrée is the Mussels and Frites (\$19), a European-style version featuring a huge bowl of just-opened mussels flavored from their bath of garlic and white wine and then dribbled with a saffron aioli. A paper cone overflowing with the best French fries in Jacksonville, if not the planet, comes with it.

My husband raved about an entrée he hadn't tried before – slices of perfectly roasted duck breast served with a smoky mix of mushroom, diced Yukon potatoes, kernels of sweet corn and sugar snap peas, all brought together with



FROM LEFT Executive Chef/ Partner Tom Gray, Taster-in- Training Quinn Gray, and Marketing Director/Partner Sarah Marie Gray

a surprising and rare ingredient – wild huckleberries (\$26). The bits of fresh huckleberries, along with a huckleberry puree, made a nice contrasting sweetness to the earthy dish.

Another unique element came in the dish I ordered, the Seared Salmon (\$31). A moist filet, its exterior seared until golden, laid atop whipped potatoes brightened with goat cheese, all ladled with a vinaigrette that featured juice from the blood orange. The dish not only looked spectacular on the plate, with the pink salmon and the dark orange vinaigrette, but it was also a delicious play of flavors and textures.

We took home a to-go version of the restaurant's carrot cake, a richly spiced cake topped with cream cheese icing (\$8). Despite my family's protests that they were too full for dessert, the cupcake was gone before the evening was up.

Its many accolades aside, Bistro Aix has been the consistent winner in the category that counts – area diners who know where to find great food night after night. After all, Aix does mark the spot. □