

Restaurant review: It's an honour to be served at Moleskine



LESLEY CHESTERMAN, SPECIAL TO MONTREAL GAZETTE

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At Moleskine, the pasta vongole is a tangle of linguini chockfull of clams, garlic, parsley and a few slices of red pepper. Big thumbs up.
MARIE-FRANCE COALLIER / MONTREAL GAZETTE

Moleskine

Three stars out of four

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3412 Parc Ave. (near Sherbrooke St.)

Phone: 514-903-6939

Website: moleskine-mtl.com

(<http://moleskine-mtl.com>) Open: Tues.-Sat.: 11 a.m. to 11 p.m.

Licensed: Yes

Credit cards: All major

Wheelchair access: No

Parking: On the street, metered

Vegetarian friendly: Not especially

Reservations: Essential

Price range: Appetizers: \$10-\$16; main courses \$24-\$30; desserts \$6-\$10.

Fifteen years ago, I reviewed a 40-seat restaurant on the Little Italy stretch of The Main by the name of Tentation. The chef-owner, Giovanni Apollo, offered an upscale French menu with dishes like lobster strudel and parmentier of baby rabbit. I recall the food being far more impressive than the cramped seating arrangement. But what really impressed that night was a

young sommelier by the name of Véronique Dalle. To this day, I remember the Spanish wine she recommended with a deer loin served with blueberries. And she was just as sharp when she served me two years later at Apollo's next restaurant, The Lychee Supper Club. This was back when Montreal sommeliers weren't the rock stars they have become today. But Dalle sure was. In my review, I commended her superb wine recommendations and intelligent commentary — and ended by calling her a real pro.

There are thrills to be had when dining out at the hands of talented professionals, and Dalle is one of those people who makes a night of drinking wine not only pleasurable but fascinating. It's no surprise after leaving Lychee, she went on to teach at the Institut de tourisme et d'hôtellerie du Québec — the ITHQ — and trained dozens of young sommeliers who are on the scene today. Parallel to that, she became the head sommelier at one of the best — and first — wine bars in the city, Pullman. And at a time when sommeliers were starting to believe the hype, she remained humble.



Chef Frédéric St-Aubin speaks with sommelier Véronique Dalle at Moleskine on Parc Ave. with owner Catherine Bélanger, far right, and her daughter Ernestine. Moleskine is actually two restaurants: Downstairs, pictured, is a casual, 40-seat space built around an open kitchen with a wood-burning oven. Upstairs is the gastronomic, 30-seat dining room, the focus of this week's review. *MARIE-FRANCE COALLIER / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

While working at Tentation, Dalle had a few talented colleagues in the kitchen, including the likes of Mario Navarrete (chef-owner of Madre and Callao) as well as a certain Frédéric St-Aubin, who, for the past nine years, headed the kitchens at the tony private club Le 357C. Dalle and St-Aubin became fast friends during the Tentation days and always dreamed of working together. And at the new, coming-on-two-month-old restaurant Moleskine, they finally are, creating without a doubt one of the most exciting — and coolest — restaurants in the city.

St-Aubin and Dalle's partners in this project are Pullman's principals, Catherine Bélanger and Bruno Braën, who also happens to be the designer behind such restaurants as Bily Kun, Le Club Chasse et Pêche, Shinji, Pastaga, Pullman, of course, and now Moleskin. Named for fabric that covers notebooks, diaries, journals and some of the tables at the restaurant, Moleskin is pure Braën with an industrial glam look including a black and grey colour scheme, rough surfaces, chain metal curtains, and a choice of seating arrangements from bar stools to banquettes, to communal tables, to '70s-style wicker chairs set around a table for five. I spent a night staring at all the kooky details of Braën's design and only soaked up about half of it, though there was no missing the turntable where all the restaurant background tunes come via vintage vinyl, ranging from ABBA to The Eagles. In a word: wild!



Upstairs at Moleskine, offerings are more elaborate than on the ground floor. The designer of the space is none other than Bruno Braën, who designed Bily Kun, Le Club Chasse et Pêche, Shinji, Pastaga and Pullman, among others. *MARIE-FRANCE COALLIER / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

Before I go on, it's important to point out Moleskine is actually two restaurants — three, even, if you count the takeout window outside.



For walk-by traffic, there is Moleskine's takeout window. Pictured: owner Catherine Bélanger, left, designer Bruno Braën, chef Frédéric St-Aubin and sommelier Véronique Dalle. *MARIE-FRANCE COALLIER / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

Downstairs is a casual, 40-seat space built around an open kitchen with a wood-burning oven. Pizza, soups, salads, sandwiches, pastas and homemade charcuterie are on offer, and you can either gawk at the chefs in action or sit by the window and watch the world go by. But my focus this week is on the gastronomic, 30-seat dining room upstairs, where reservations are de rigueur and the menu and wine offerings are more elaborate.

St-Aubin's background includes stages at the restaurant Troisgros in France and the Albergo Del Sole in Italy. He's also a graduate of the Italian cooking course at the ITHQ, so his menu skews Italian.

After an amuse-bouche of trout bruschetta, dinner began with a panzanella salad, a grilled zucchini salad, and the most summery of ceviches. The panzanella was served in fancy form,

with multi-coloured tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers and croutons sliced small and garnished with herbs, parmesan shavings and a touch of minced anchovy. Beautiful.

The zucchini salad was more lush, as the ribbons of grilled green and yellow squash were strewn around dollops of fresh ricotta and dressed with a swirl of olive oil, basil leaves, and a sprinkling of chopped pistachios. Loved that.



The ceviche has slices of silky red snapper served with strawberries and whisper-thin shavings of fennel and radish. *MARIE-FRANCE COALLIER / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

But the best of the three appetizers was the ceviche, which featured a half-dozen slices of silky red snapper served with strawberries and whisper-thin shavings of fennel and radish. The dish was perfect, with such a winning mix of textures, colours and especially flavours. Add to that a glass of grenache gris from the Roussillon and a white Burgundy poured by Dalle (she served us two to compare with the various dishes) and you have a dish that's not only delicious but ideal for warm-weather dining.

The starters were great and the mains may even have been better. The first was a straightforward dish of pasta vongole, a tangle of linguini chockfull of clams, garlic, parsley and a few slices of red pepper. Big thumbs up.

Then there was the pork loin. Served in a shallow bowl surrounded by slices of Pacific-coast shrimp and fava beans, the tender slices of pork loin were then doused in lobster bisque. The caramelized slices of pork, cooked to the ideal light rosé, were great, and the accompaniments were bang-on. But that bisque was just tremendous. I lapped up every last bite and all but licked the bowl clean.



The pork loin is surrounded by slices of Pacific-coast shrimp and fava beans, all doused in lobster bisque.
MARIE-FRANCE COALLIER / MONTREAL GAZETTE

Next up was a duck magret, which, like the pork, was tender, caramelized and cooked to the ideal deep rosé. Here, the accompaniments included black olives, new potatoes, and a “sauce bigarade,” a citrus sauce with a sour edge. With a glass of cabernet franc, this dish was not only delectable, but technically faultless — as was everything served to me from this kitchen.

For dessert, we enjoyed an espresso cup filled with vanilla soft serve, chocolate sauce and caramelized marshmallow. Yum! Then there was the Nemesis cake: Made famous by London’s famed Italian restaurant The River Café, this flourless chocolate cake was moist, intensely chocolatey and served simply with a quenelle of coffee chantilly. Excellent.



For dessert, an espresso cup is filled with vanilla soft serve, chocolate sauce and caramelized marshmallow. *MARIE-FRANCE COALLIER / MONTREAL GAZETTE*



Moleskine's excellent version of the Nemesis cake, made famous by London's famed Italian restaurant The River Café. *MARIE-FRANCE COALLIER / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

Service provided by Dalle, as well as our friendly waiter, unfolded without a misstep. The wine list is short, about 20 selections, all Old World and primarily from France, with an emphasis on organic/natural wines. The selection pales next to the staggering wine list at Pullman next door, but Dalle's intention is to keep Moleskine's list concise, adapted to the menu, and ever-changing. You can opt for a bottle, but I say just let Dalle suggest pairings by the glass. Wine lovers should note sommelier and former wine agent Alain Bélanger works the floor alongside Dalle two days a week. To be served by either — easily two of the top wine experts in the city — is a real privilege.



Moleskine's chef, Frédéric St-Aubin, and talented sommelier, Véronique Dalle. *MARIE-FRANCE COALLIER / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

The only complaint I can drum up about my dinner at Moleskine was that the fumes rising to the second floor from the wood-burning oven could sometimes be a bit overpowering. Yet, otherwise, I cannot deny falling hard for this restaurant. The fresh and fabulous food, the stellar wine program, the laid-back ambiance and edgy decor seem to epitomize the best of what the Montreal restaurant scene has to offer these days. I can't wait to return.

Next time, perhaps pizza downstairs?