



“E.L. James may well get some ideas for a sequel from this setting”



COMPTOIR + CUISINE

This new venture from the team behind London's Champagne + Fromage combines a concept store with a bistro, to bring the best of French style and ingredients to the city

By Lisa Evans

I need to start this review with a spot of advice: arrive early for your dinner at Comptoir + Cuisine, or be prepared to stay a while after you've feasted. You see, these are not simply four walls in which to scoff your dinner before dashing away, it's an emporium of delights and surprises (often of the risqué variety) that demand from you as much attention as the food on your plate.

It's one of those places in which you won't find a bare wall or corner – quite refreshing amidst the modern minimalism that often seems to engulf us. In a word, it's cluttered. But it's good, titillating, intriguing clutter, all of which, by the way, is available to purchase – from the bistro's light fixtures, made of bicycle wheels and feathers, and the underpants hanging on a line above your table, to

the cutlery and crockery you use when you're there, or the bar stool you sit on.

There's an actual shop, too, at the front of the building, which will welcome you with its treats and trinkets, such as homeware, cookware, skincare, fabrics, furnishings and furniture. Getting through it – on your way to the restaurant or bar areas – without coveting something, will be difficult. It's filled with French flea market finds that the business's owners – four French expat pals, Maud, Stefano, Yann and Frank – source themselves, as well as other retro goodies.

Before we even get to talking about the restaurant, I should mention the other areas of the building: there are deli counters and café areas and, probably most importantly, a basement champagne bar. The softly

lit, moody subterranean hideaway is bedecked with decoupage walls, jewel-coloured armchairs and clusters of low-hanging lamps. There are 36 varieties of champagne served down in these depths; the owners have had a lot of experience in choosing the perfect selection because they have been delighting customers for nearly 10 years at their four London-based Champagne + Fromage locations.

At the very back of the bar is a cave – complete with actual stalactites – in which the bottles are stored; we asked to be shown around inside, and we ducked our way through the vaults – my 6ft 4" husband struggled to fit inside – and even in here, a stoney cavity directly underneath the traffic flow of the cars on George Street, there is decoration. In this case, it's two mannequins – one waving through the window to customers, and the other one, just a torso, hanging from a chain suspended from the ceiling. E.L. James may well get some ideas for a sequel from this setting.

Speaking of risqué, if you're easily offended, you'll probably want to avoid the bathrooms, as semi-pornographic photographs litter the walls. This seems like as good a segue as any into talking about the food so, here we go. There are two bistro areas; the cosy one we were seated in is the simplest (by comparison) of all the rooms in the building, complete with fashionably weathered floorboards, Persian-style rugs, rustic wooden tables and framed posters.

The owner encouraged us to firstly try the champagne and cheese – ideal companions. We went for the fresh, creamy, Colin Blanche de Castille along with a whole, oozy baked camembert, with figs and thyme, which we dredged up with French bread.

Then it was onto the tapas menu. On mismatched, chintzy crockery came fall-apart pan-fried beef onglet with chimichurri; a not-at-all-tapas-sized burger with comté, our star dish; gratin of crozet (pasta) with Tomme de Savoie; toast piled high with mixed mushrooms; goats' cheese and aubergine wrapped in spring roll-like crunchy parcels, which were eyes-roll-back-in-your-head kind of tasty; and chubby sweet potato chips.

Too full for a sticky toffee pud or a homemade brownie, we went dessertless; although, when we saw an enormous cheese and charcuterie board delivered to the table next to us, we were salivating all over again.

So if you're a lover of champagne, cheese and tapas, and you enjoy a saucy side of curious and bizarre, then make time for Comptoir + Cuisine, which brings all that is bon about French food and style to Bath. ■

DINING DETAILS

Comptoir + cuisine, 5 George Street, Bath, BA1 2EJ; 01225 684733; www.comptoirpluscuisine.com

In a nutshell A concept store, bistro and champagne bar, bringing French style and ingredients to the city

We ate Baked camembert with figs and thyme; beef onglet with chimichurri; a burger with comté; gratin of crozet; mushrooms on toast; goats' cheese and aubergine parcels; sweet potato chips

Prices Sharing boards £8 – £35; nibbles £3 – £6.50; tapas £3 – £9; dessert £4 – £8

Drinks It's all about versatile, artisanal, grower-made champagne here – though there are wines, cocktails and beers if you prefer

Service/atmosphere Laid-back, ultra-cool, well-styled staff and a chilled-out atmosphere

The look Surprising, curious and, at times, risqué

Open for Breakfast, lunch, afternoon tea and dinner