

# DINING OUT

## The greatest restaurant in, uh, Boston



By Kathleen Fliegel

For some time now a roving band of Manhattan chauvinists has been brandishing dry martinis at me and asking, with nasty glints in their eyes, whether there is even *one* really great restaurant in Boston. And I've had to admit, until very recently, that I had never found one.

Of course, greatness in a restaurant, like beauty in a face, eludes objective definition. What looks like an unsightly blemish to one observer may well seem a beauty mark to another. But after years of patronizing less-than-great restaurants, and after a few sublime experiences of the genuine article, I've come to recognize the qualities that give greatness a fighting chance.

The first of these is service. Of course, in any good restaurant you are never rushed or crowded or ignored. But at a truly great restaurant you are greeted, seated and attended to as an honored guest whose well-being is of more than passing interest to the management.

The second requirement, of course, is great food. By this I don't mean merely excellent food. Any competent chef should be able to turn out fresh vegetables, good cuts of meat cooked to order and textbook sauces. Great food goes beyond this: it is high art, inspired and inspiring. Every bite reveals, to the attentive devotee, hitherto unforeseen possi-

**Modern Gourmet is the only truly great restaurant in Boston. Actually, it's in Newton Centre, but let's not cavil about a few kilometers.**

bilities in the subtle marrying of tastes and textures.

Which brings me to the third criterion: a great restaurant provides, in the largest sense, an educational experience. A meal in such an establishment is an event transcending comparison with other mere dinners—it enters into the realm of a highly memorable *occasion*. An evening in a great restaurant should, like any other intimate encounter with high art, enrich and stimulate you, renewing your sense of the possibilities of life. And you should enjoy every minute of the experience.

Finally, in a truly great restaurant this excellent service, inspired food and sense of significant occasion must blend into a harmonious whole. You enter into a happy coalition with your host, selecting your dinner secure in the knowledge that everything will be wonderful. This rare harmony and sense of confidence arises, I think, only from a single gifted personality, whose informing spirit permeates every aspect of the enterprise, from the seasoning of the sauces to the folding of the linen napkins.

Such a personality is Madeleine Kamman, and her restaurant, **The Modern Gourmet**, is the only truly great restaurant I have encountered in Boston. (Actually, it's at 81R Union St. in Newton Centre, but let's not cavil about a few kilometers.) Paul Bocuse has called it the best restaurant in the United States. He says so in a certificate that hangs, suitably framed, in Madeleine's schoolroom, where she conducts her cooking classes.

Despite her acquired American citizenship, Madeleine Kamman is unmistakably a Frenchwoman. There is the lovely Gallic lilt to her voice, the expressive hands, the inexhaustible energy and the genius for *haute cuisine*. As a hostess she is clearly in her element, and it is this aspect of her personality, the natural host's eagerness to create pleasure for others, that pervades The Modern Gourmet. Observe her among her guests, and you see a modern-day incarnation of the classic French chatelaine of the mid-1700s.

Her restaurant, in an understated way, reflects a little of the *chinoiserie* of that period. It is small, intimate and utterly feminine in décor. If you're especially lucky, you may be seated in the semi-separate dining alcove, which Madeleine has decorated after her grandmother's dining room in Paris. On weekends, when it isn't being used for classes, the schoolroom is also available for private parties or for



overflow from the restaurant. It's a less formal room, but a bright and cheerful one, with red brick walls on which are hung copper pots.

It's important to note the distinction between weekends and weeknights, because different policies prevail. For an outstanding experience in classic French cuisine, come on Friday or Saturday for the "Grand Menu." This is served by reservation only, and everything is à la carte, with prices around \$13 for main courses, \$4 for first courses and \$3 for desserts. We paid \$55 for two people, including tax and tip but no drinks. On Tuesday through Thursday you can choose a whole dinner from the "Petit Menu," including a first course, a main course with two vegetables, and a dessert, for as little as \$7.95 or as much as \$12.50, *prix fixe*. Reservations are recommended but not absolutely necessary, and the food, while a shade less elaborate, is equally extraordinary. Both menus change every six weeks.

On a recent Saturday night, after much wavering, I began my dinner with a good meaty galantine of chicken. It was served with a fresh, velvety chicken-liver pâté and a bright dab of shredded carrots in a tasty marinade. My friend's mousseline of salmon was a feather-light miracle of delicately flavored fresh fish with a lovely tarragon sauce. Our taste buds were still applauding when the *soupe aux escargots* arrived: plump tender snails in a beautiful, savory broth, rich with Madeleine's secret version of *crème fraîche*. We detected flecks of fresh fennel, scallions, chives and garlic. It was beyond a doubt the best soup we'd ever tasted. The asparagus vinaigrette, in a light orange-and-saffron dressing, was flawless but unexciting.

Service at The Modern Gourmet proceeds at a deliberate, leisurely pace. This is part of Madeleine's policy, based on her belief that dining should be a civilized procedure, with ample time for conversation and reflection. The highly skilled people who are in her kitchen and dining room—all are graduates of her cooking school—work hard toward this end. We sipped at the wine we had brought—Madeleine is still waiting for her liquor license—and nibbled at the delicious French bread and sweet butter, clearing our palates for the main courses.

My friend's *entrecôte Monbousquet* was a tender slab of beef, perfectly medium-



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rare, graced by a glossy dark-brown sauce rich in meat glazes and fine red wine. Like all the entrées that night, this arrived on a piping hot plate garnished with *riz panaches*—a nice mix of white rice, wild rice and slivered almonds—sweet crispy snow peas, grilled tomatoes and a festive arrangement of parsley, watercress, lemon slices and pitted black olives.

While my friend was blissfully devouring his *entrecôte*, I was ecstatic over my *boudin de volaille aux morelles*. I had always thought *boudin* meant the dark blood sausage sold in French *charcuteries*, but it turns out that it means any sort of pudding. Pudding, however, is far too thick and sticky a word—too proletarian a word—for the dish that bears the name *chez Madeleine*. Imagine pure white meat of chicken breast that is somehow made as light as a whisper and yet firm-textured, so that it slightly resists your fork but dissolves in your mouth. Then imagine that this miraculous invention is perfumed with an extraordinary nutty, smoky flavor, the flavor of not only *morelles* but also *mousserons-secs*, or *marasmius oreades*. I learned later that Madeleine imports these exotic dried mushrooms from France, where they are gathered by an old man she has known since she was eight years old. She pays \$125 per kilo for them, plus air freight, and a kilo lasts, she told me, about two weeks.

Ingredients like this are just one reason for the high weekend prices at The Modern Gourmet. Madeleine refuses to compromise, not only with her ingredients, but with her culinary processes. Meat stocks, for instance, must simmer for 16 hours. "It's very dangerous, that stock," says Madeleine. "You have to be on your toes all the time, especially if there is a thunderstorm." There is not a tablespoon of flour in any of her sauces. They're all based on butter and meat glazes and stocks. She won't accept substitutes for fine wines or heavy cream, and she refuses to serve more than 60 people in an evening. This is not money-making food, nor is it a money-making way to run a restaurant, but it's great cuisine.

After our entrées (we might also have chosen *noisettes d'agneau la Provencale* or *feuillete de ris de veau*), there was another restful interlude before we were served a simple green salad, just a little something to tide us over until the appearance of our desserts, which were absolutely sensational.

The apricot sherbert was pure, rich, heavy, smooth essence of apricot—it was apricot to the 10th degree. Until you have tasted Madeleine's apricot sherbet, you simply haven't tasted apricot. It came with a raspberry sauce that complemented it perfectly, and the whole thing was served in a long-stemmed glass.

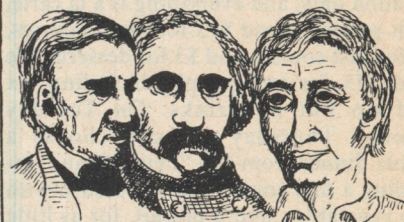
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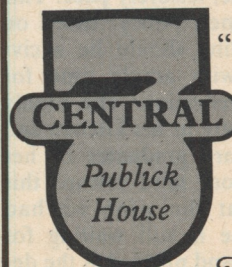
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An unparalleled dessert, except for my strawberry tart. This was a rectangle of pastry puff, fresh from the oven, covered with sweet whipped cream and heaped with large perfect strawberries that had been soaked in cassis and blackberry jam. It was the ideal after which all strawberry tarts should be patterned.

By this time my friend and I were suffering from sensory overload. Conversation languished. In silence we applied ourselves to the generous pot of *café filtre*. And yet we were not satiated or benumbed by the food itself, which was rich but light and served in reasonable portions.

Several days later, we returned to sample the midweek fare. The atmosphere on weeknights is slightly less formal. White linens replace the pink, and the serving people wear casual clothes. You feel that you are in the bosom of an extended French-American family. Madeleine describes the food as "French bistro food; good honest food, excellent for what it is, but less refined than weekend cuisine." There are some non-French dishes, too. My friend began his dinner with a light aromatic soup of minced zucchini, onion and crushed fresh herbs, suspended in a light buttery broth and topped with cheese. I had an exquisite mushroom tart, a hot crisp crust of unbelievable delicacy, heaped with sautéed mushrooms and laced with extraordinarily tasty mushroom juices and a dash of sherry, the whole capped with molten gruyère. The soup and the tart were so good that they rather eclipsed the *crudités*, a pleasant plate of shredded vegetables in a nice lemony dressing.

We were entirely happy with our entrées. I had *entrecôte marchand de vin*: a thin fork-tender steak in a rich dark-brown sauce, a first cousin of bearnaise but based on a reduction of red wine. My friend's *filletti di tacchino alla Milanese* consisted of delicate fillets of white turkey meat, passed in a very light breading and sautéed in butter. Both dishes were garnished with good dry rice, crunchy strips of sautéed sweet peppers and broiled cherry tomatoes.

Extraordinary fare, and yet the best was still to come. Of course, we could not pass up another chance at one of Madeleine's sherbets, and this time it was one of strawberries topped with heavy cream. People talk about various foods tasting like the nectar of the gods; personally, I believe the gods, if they feast, must feast exclusively on Madeleine's sherbet. Well, they might occasionally indulge themselves, just for variety, in her blueberry tart. Here, greatness lies in simplicity. Take a perfectly thin crisp crust, fill it with fresh fruit, pile whipped cream on it, and there you are.

"This is civilization here," says Madeleine. "This is the way we live in France, and this is the way we serve—and I won't have it any other way."

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