Mini Palais

Restaurants - **Contemporary**

Written by Heidi Ellison

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The renovation of the MINIPALAIS is a grand success in every way.

Pros: Wonderful food, service, location. Low noise levels. Big outdoor terrace.

Cons: Can't think of any

I was disappointed by my first glance at the menu at the Mini Palais, whose "consulting chef" is Eric Frechon, one of the first French cooks to offer a gourmet menu at reasonable prices, many years ago, in an unassuming little bistro on the fringes of Paris. His eponymous restaurant was the best of the bunch, offering incredibly high-quality cooking for the price, but he was soon snatched away by the Hôtel Bristol's restaurant, where he now has three Michelin stars. So it was great news that he was the new titular chef at the Mini Palais, a restaurant that takes up one corner of the Grand Palais. Formerly run by Gilles Choukroun, it had closed down for a year's worth of renovation and only recently reopened.

My high expectations for what Frechon would serve at the Mini Palais were dashed when I scanned the dishes on offer, many of them currently trendy Spanish, Basque and Italian specialties that don't even require a recipe: sardines in the tin served with seaweed butter, platters of Belota ham, entrecote a la plancha and so on. How can a chef show off his talents with such dishes?

Well, he can if he is Eric Frechon, because he uses the most sublime products available. The crusty, flavorful bread, for example, was so delicious, especially when eaten with the Bordier butter, that I was tempted to cancel my food order and dine on bread alone.

Luckily I didn't, because my generous starter of burrata with Parma ham, topped with olive oil, a few pine nuts and Espelette peppers, was a divine, comforting combination of that cool, creamy form of mozzarella and the salty (not too) ham, with the pine nuts and mild peppers adding just the right extra touch of flavor and texture.

I wanted to eat every bit of the generous portion, but I had promised to share half and half with my dining companion. No problem: he had ordered the baby squid – cut into thin strips that looked like tagliatelle and were just as tender – cooked in a Pilpil sauce (olive oil, garlic and Espelette chilis). It was light and delicious.

My friend refused outright to share his main course – a duck breast burger topped with foie gras, moistened with truffle juice and served with garlicky sautéed potatoes – because he was enjoying it

so much. He did let me have a taste, however, and he was right. It was luscious and meaty and delicious.

I tried the sweetbreads (ris de veau), which were rich and delicately flavored, and had the melting texture of foie gras. Topped with a crust of Comté cheese, they came with creamy mashed potatoes and a swirl of meat juices.

For dessert I couldn't resist the "crazy pot," a sort of ice-cream sundae gone mad, with a base of vanilla ice cream and whipped cream studded with all manner of sweet things: tongue-shaped pieces of meringue, red sticks that turned out to white chocolate, spirals of dark chocolate, chocolate-chip cookie pieces and Smarties. Over the top, but fun. My much more prudent dining partner went to the opposite extreme and ordered the sliced green apples and raspberries with coriander, basil and mint – light, lovely and refreshing.

We accompanied our meal with a very nice bottle of 2009 Les Launes Crozes Hermitage from Delas for €34.

The service was the height of professionalism, the kind you'd expect (but don't always get) in a three-star restaurant: friendly, prompt and extremely well informed. The waiter was not only able to explain what was in each dish but also exactly how it was made. When a question was raised about the high price of the sweetbreads (it is offal, after all), he went to get the menu and patiently explained the many complicated steps involved in preparing it. Impressive.

The Mini Palais's renovation was also a great success. In place of the former all-black decor, the interior is now done up in neutral shades of gray, with a handsome parquet floor, wall hangings and some kind of paneling, all of which helped to keep the noise levels amazingly low in this high-ceilinged, warehouse-like space. It felt warm and almost cozy in spite of its huge size, in part thanks to low lighting and candles on the tables. The only splashy decorative touches are shelves bearing plaster casts of broken statuary, as in an archaeological museum.

The prices vary wildly: a risotto with zucchini, Parma ham, olives and pistou goes for a reasonable €17, while the sweetbreads cost a hefty €35. You can eat extremely well here for a fairly modest price if you choose carefully.

The Mini Palais is a godsend in this area and a marvelous addition to Paris's restaurant scene, for the quality of the food, the value for money, the fantastic service, the lively yet not deafening ambiance and, in fine weather, the big outdoor terrace. Not only that, but it is open all day and evening, and you can eat from the menu of *en-cas,* or snacks (available from noon to midnight) during off-hours – these were the dishes my eye had fallen upon when I first glanced at the menu and too-hastily judged it; in fact, the menu offers many more complex dishes. And bravo to in-house chef Stéphane d'Aboville for his execution of them. For the first time in my life, I couldn't find anyting to complain about.

Forgive me for doubting you, Eric. I take it all back.

Heidi Ellison

Mini Palais: Grand Palais (entrance on the Pont Alexandre III side), Avenue Winston-Churchill, 75008 Paris. Métro: Champs-Elysées Clemenceau. Tel.: 01 42 56 42 42. Open daily, 10am-2am (meal service ends at 11:30pm). A la carte: €30-€62. **www.minipalais.com**

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