

food

Fine China

Stepping up to the Plate in Ardmore.

by Maxine Keyser

The man said, "If you build it, they will come." And come they did, to La Parisienne, a bistro, and 'Za, a pizzeria, built smack in the center of the Ardmore Suburban Square shopping center, where there was a great need for a restaurant. They came in droves, for the onion soup and French atmosphere, and brought the kids for pizzas. It seemed infallible, but fail it did — to this day I don't know why — and stood idle for quite some time. Now, David Mantelmacher of Circa in Center City and Tom Harkins, his chef, have created their own restaurant in this high-profile spot.

Alain Ducasse may have his Spoon and Ellen Yin her Fork, and now we have Plate, a big, airy spot with an American menu and a casual attitude. They've taken down the walls that existed between La Parisienne and the pizzeria, and replaced them with frosted glass panels. They exposed the kitchen and the wood-burning oven, and placed flowery fabric banquettes back to back, down the center, so that there is a view from everywhere. They've hung modern, high-voltage lamps from the ceiling and given the entire room a streamlined, chic-but-not-too-chic look, although the banal, commercial salt and pepper shakers are a jarring note. The large, circular bar to the right of the entrance has been left intact, and it is as busy as the restaurant when we arrive. The whole

neighborhood seems to be there, seniors as well as the stroller set. Mantelmacher has brought some of the Circa group, including some stunning, black-clad young women and the dishwasher, with him to his new outpost, but even they cannot keep the service moving, a problem I'm sure they will eventually work out. Meanwhile, like everyone else, we sip our drinks and graze the menu. There are salads, sandwiches, entrées: nothing to shock the bourgeoisie. This is a different crowd from Center City and Mantelmacher knows it. They want homey food and lots of it, and a wine list with 20 wines under \$30 doesn't hurt either.

We skip the deviled eggs (an idea from Jones?), and try steamed mussels and onion soup (we forgot it wasn't still a bistro). The mussels, plumped in a white wine sauce full of garlic and parsley, get a punch from chorizo sausage, and are good for dunking with the bread that, unfortunately, takes a long time to come. The onion soup is robust with the flavor of caramelized onions, but is choked with melted cheese. The best appetizer, in fact the best dish of the meal, is the baked macaroni with barbecue shrimp. The macaroni is as creamy and cheesy as can be, the shrimp tender but charred and they are offered in a casserole that melds all the flavors, and has the added

Plate

Suburban Square,
 105 Coulter Ave., Ardmore,
 610-642-5900

Appetizers, \$5.50-\$11;
 sandwiches and entrees,
 \$9.50-\$23

Lunch: Mon.-Fri.,
 11:30 a.m.-3 p.m.;
 Sat., noon-3 p.m.

Dinner: Mon.-Tue., 5-9 p.m.;
 Wed.-Sat.: 5-10 p.m.;
 Sun., 2-9 p.m.

Wheelchair accessible. Smoking
 is permitted in the bar area.
 Reservations suggested for
 parties of six or more.
 All major credit cards.

attraction of flaky buttermilk biscuits.

The burger is big and juicy, and, though a bit too well-done, has a good beefy flavor and all the accoutrements of lettuce, tomatoes, pickle and some nice crunchy fries. There are a number of toppings available at a minimal extra charge. We get about as down-home as possible with the stone-fired smoked pork chop, which a companion pronounces delicious and tender. The sides of caramelized apples and braised red cabbage counter the smokiness with their sweetness,

and some coleslaw provides a cooling note. Around us, people are exclaiming over the turkey meat loaf with an onion and mushroom gravy that gives it the necessary flavor, and about the porcupine shrimp, crisped in panko crumbs and served with a choice of creamy remoulade or cocktail sauce. They handle the sauces very well at Plate—the remoulade is both tart and slightly sweet, while the spicy garlic aioli that accompanies the onion rings is just as spicy and sharp as it would be in Provence. The onion rings, by the way, are crisp and jolly good, as well attended as the fries.

The slow-cooked beef brisket produces lots of tender meat, smothered in a too-sweet barbecue sauce. I scrape some off, and enjoy it with the potato salad and coleslaw on the platter. The jalapeño cream cheese corn bread that comes on the side sounds great, but could use a bit more cream cheese to moisten it. The baby back ribs and the cedar plank salmon, straight out of the old American Place in New York, are other worthy considerations.

Dessert presents a number of options, like a berry cobbler and a selection of homemade ice creams, but when I'm faced with doughnuts, there is no contest. The waitress brings a paper bag, cuts it open and out spill warm doughnut holes, gilded with cinnamon and sugar, which I could probably eat every day of my life.

Mantelmacher seems to have cut himself a very nice little niche here at Plate, although with all his running back and forth to Circa, and his various other responsibilities, he says that at the moment, his life sucks. I'm sure it won't be this way forever: Things will smooth out and the people will keep on coming for honest, forthright food. It's a completely nonthreatening menu that changes with the seasons and has something for everyone. Right now, I lust for the crisp pizza that they only serve at lunch, and think that every neighborhood should have a Plate.



CHOIR OF ANGLES: Plate's octagonal dining room offers many views of Suburban Square.