

Dining Out

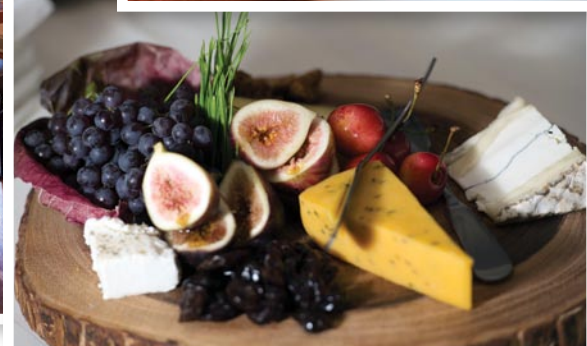
THE FARMHOUSE BISTRO
39 Conestoga Rd., Malvern
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PHOTO: ANDREA SHIVES



PHOTO: BETSY BARRON



CLAIR PRUETT PHOTOGRAPHY

Lise Monty

It was a splendid evening, beginning with the table where we were seated — right next to the homey, wood-burning fireplace where the flames were just bright enough and warm enough. It helped that our attentive server knew when to stoke the fire to keep our life-is-good glow alive and well.

The stage was set, and based on what we knew about the chef, we were primed for an excellent dinner. And we got it. The superb country-French cuisine kept us happy—from savory pâté to the delectable apple tart tatin.

Chef Joseph Maguire's culinary chops include Striped Bass and Borgia Café in Philly, and most recently, a ten-year stint with the Culinary Concepts catering firm. His extensive world travels have obviously influenced his skills and repertoire.

We dined in the smallest of three dining rooms carved out of the Chester-County-classic 226-year-old farmhouse, each with a fireplace. The minimalist décor, including contemporary furniture, blends well with its historic assets, notably gleaming hardwood floors, thick walls and period windows and doors. Pretty hand-blown glass pumpkins created by artisans at Wheaton Arts in Millville, New Jersey, graced the mantels and other surfaces. Holiday ornaments from Wheaton are on order, we were told.

Throughout the restaurant, framed black-and-white photos decorate the walls. They're portraits of actors and actresses from productions over the years by the popular People's Light & Theatre, a professional nonprofit operation in its 38th season. The theater company's large facility adjoins The Farmhouse Bistro, which it has owned and managed since 2011. Collaborations have been expanded and maximized far beyond the standard dinner-and-a-show idea.

From Kennett to Paris

The *Grilled Portobello* (\$8) appetizer showcased Kennett Square's signature industry with panache. The large cap coddled melting fresh mozzarella topped with roasted red peppers and sitting on local field greens, all of it drizzled with aged balsamic, and all of it a treat.

The ample slice of *Country Pâté* (\$12) blended ground organic chicken and pork studded with golden raisins and pistachios that added texture and a bit of sweetness as well as visual appeal. It was pure goodness, hearty yet not heavy. In supporting roles: tasty red onion marmalade, Major Grey's chutney, whole grain French mustard, and a bunch of red grapes.

Other appetizers include Belgian steam mussels "brewed" with Chimay blue ale, bacon-wrapped shrimp Lejeune, grilled baby octopus

and chicken quesadilla. Other charcuterie offerings: truffled chicken liver pâté, a platter with both pâtés, and a cheese board with domestic and imported artisanal cheeses.

The salad offerings enticed, especially the signature salad with its burgundy poached pears and gorgonzola with a caramelized shallot/balsamic vinaigrette, and the autumn salad featuring local honey-crisp apples and shaved fennel, dressed with a cider vinaigrette.

The Main Event

The promise of a seafood celebration sold us on one of the evening's specials: *Sauteed Shrimp and Scallops with Lobster Ravioli* (\$21). It was a total feast. Red-striped ravioli filled with a lobster blend were topped with tender shrimp and plump scallops. Tossed into the mix were yellow and red cherry tomato halves and slim asparagus spears, all of it bathed in a sassy pesto-based sauce. Slender strips of lemon zest added a bright note. It was a generous serving with lots to savor.

For all who crave that full-flavored, fall-off-the-bone beef that skillful braising produces and that never loses its appeal, Chef Maguire's *Slow-roasted Cabernet-braised Boneless Short Ribs* (\$24) is simply wonderful. It was a generous serving of the classy comfort food, rich and aromatic, with a killer wine sauce plus a heap of mashed potatoes and roasted/grilled carrots and parsnips. The latter, with their creamy-white sweetness, made me wonder once again why they're not more popular here, though they're standard fare in Europe.

Other entrée choices: pan-roasted sea bass, pan-roasted center-cut filet, chicken Marsala, wild mushroom penne, pan-seared veal chop, shrimp scampi, grilled Atlantic salmon, and pan-seared sea scallops.

We enjoyed a light Argentinian Malbec—*Callia Alta Malbec* (\$7.50/glass), selected from a diverse list of more than 20 by-the-glass offerings. Deep red and medium-bodied, with light fruity flavors, the Malbec paired well with our entrees. There's a full bar, including extensive martini menu.

Le Dessert

A perfect bistro dessert, the *Farmhouse Apple Tart Tatin* (\$8) was pleasantly homey with warm apple slices, just sweet enough, spread out over rich pastry with a big scoop of rich vanilla ice cream on one side and a big scoop of whipped cream on the other. And a fancy garnish, too: a caramelized sugar lattice that added crunch. We were wise to share, since it was more than enough for two. The evening's "cheesecake du jour" was

peanut butter cup. It tempted, but the tatin won out. Other desserts: flourless chocolate torte, brioche bread pudding, Farmhouse chocolate mousse, and raspberry sorbet.

Holiday Happenings & More

People's Light and Theatre and The Farmhouse Bistro are perfect partners, maximizing their respective assets, and never more than during the holidays, when the popular tradition of delightful "panto" productions, in their 8th year, light up the stage. The Sunday Brunch/Panto combos is just one example.

Check the website for details.

When warm weather arrives, plan to pull up a seat on the inviting garden terrace and take in the beautiful—and award-winning—

OWNER: People's Light & Theatre Company

Dinner: Wednesday & Thursday, 4 to 10 p.m.

Friday & Saturday, 4 to 11 p.m.

Sunday, 4 to 9:30 p.m.

Sunday Brunch: 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Private Dining: Varied private dining accommodations available and banquet facilities for up to 250-plus.