



# RETURN of an ARCHETYPE

## The **DISTRESSED** French Bistro by Terry Libby

In Hemingway's famous memoir of Paris, *A Moveable Feast*, there is a little story about an evening he spent at Café des Lilas with a young poet named Evan Shipman. Shipman, it turns out, was a personal friend to one of the waiters there, who, he explained to Hemingway, was in trouble with the management:

*The new owners want to have a different clientele that will spend some money and they are going to put in an American bar. The waiters are going to be in white jackets, Hem, and they have been ordered to be ready to shave off their mustaches.*

*They can't do that to Andre and Jean.  
They shouldn't be able to, but they will.*

And this is where my story begins.

In the new luxury mega-mall that is called Easton Town Center in Columbus, Ohio, there is a spanking new restaurant called *Bon Vie*. It sits in the center of the wholly manufactured townscape that Easton's developers have built from cornfield up. *Bon Vie* is the first rendition of a booming restaurant trend to hit town. Let's call it the distressed French bistro.

What makes a bistro a bistro? Big windows and mirrors, wood paneled walls, brass railings, tile floors, a zinc-topped cocktail bar, oysters, and onion soup. "Steak frites" has to be the lead item on the menu—a seared rib eye in a puddle of Béarnaise with fries on the side. Read your Hemingway, and it's all there.

*Bon Vie* sits center stage at the Easton complex, complete with a spewing fountain and sidewalk café out front, all on a mock boulevard called "La Strand." Gold painted letters on frosted glass

windows announce the house specialties—*"plats pour deux," "coq au vin."* Pass through a big pair of over-sized French doors to enter and there, to the right, is the zinc-topped bar. The brass railings have an artfully applied tarnish, and floors are covered in tiny mosaic tiles. Look closely and see that the random tile is cracked, or missing altogether. Suspended along the walls are massive mirrors with crackled effects in the mercury. The walls have a tawny golden wash. I wouldn't call this interior heavily distressed, but it certainly says "patina," at the very least. It looks ornate and utilitarian all at once.

"If it looks new, we failed," says *Bon Vie* owner Rick Doody, a phrase that's become a corporate mantra for Doody's company, which operates the high-end Brio, Bravo, and Lindey's Restaurant chains in nine states throughout the Midwest and the South. All of the antique elements for *Bon Vie*'s interior design are brand new, crafted in the corporate cabinet shop. Mirror crackle is achieved by "baking" the glass. The wicker café chairs—dead ringers for the ones that line the streets of Paris—custom-designed to Doody's own specs by an American furniture manufacturer, the Gar Company.

It may have just arrived in the Heartland, but the distressed French bistro concept has been a sensation in New York for at least three years. By now every major to mid-sized city in America has one, all spawn of Balthazar, the wildly successful invention of New York City chef Keith McNally.

Balthazar is a glitzy, belle époque variation on the bistro theme, with an attached *patisserie* so flawless that Martha Stewart brought her film crew here and did her TV show on location.

Opposite: Balthazar, New York City  
Above: Bon Vie, Columbus, Ohio





No-name clientele have to cajole the staff for a reservation or eat after 11 p.m., while celebrity diners turn up at will and snag all the good tables. The place is noisy by design, the clatter of china and animated talk rising from tables placed just inches apart.

According to Michael LaHara, Balthazar's General Manager, Chef McNally himself is the sole designer of his establishments. He goes to France for inspiration, then sketches his ideas and hands them over to his construction manager. A special workshop was created for developing the interior design components.

McNally has opened one place after another in New York, all different, with themes intriguing enough to disarm even Manhattanites. One of his first was Lucky Strike, a café with faux nicotine stains on the walls. *Pastis*, in the West Village meatpacking district, has a bit of the French workingman's feel. Whole pieces of the place were lifted from original sites in Paris, salvaged, and brought to New York, then resurrected as a time-warp set piece. Every thing in *Pastis* is genuinely old. The mirrors here have earned their cracks; the white tiled walls and floors are stained, battered, and abused. Critic Gael Greene of *New York Magazine* called the place a "slatternly old bar and hash house," but Parisian, of course, and the description is exactly right. Surly waiters pass on the small talk, bolt from the table if your order isn't on the tip of your tongue, and make a show of sawing up massive loaves of bread at a wooden sideboard. The dining room is pleasantly dim with tables packed in tight, but the glaring white light

in the bar feels deliberately artless. *Pastis*' urban roughness gets the adrenaline going. Every time the front door opens, all eyes are on the newcomers. "Who's that?"

One rainy winter night after dinner at *Pastis*, a fat rat ran across the pavement while I waited for a cab. Authentic with a capital "A."

Rick Doody is unabashed in acknowledging McNally and Balthazar as models for *Bon Vie*. "Follow the winners," he says. "It's not rocket science." Doody found Balthazar too formal, *Pastis* too "edgy." He aimed to fall somewhere in between with the *Bon Vie* concept which, he says, is still "incubating" as a business enterprise. The company may or may not build a string of them.

Today half of every food dollar is spent in restaurants. The industry has to keep re-inventing itself to keep the public seduced. Theme restaurants come in a thousand variations, and the distressed French bistro, something that takes us back to the turn of the twentieth century, has come full circle precisely one hundred years later. It is *the* restaurant concept of the moment across the country.

In Charleston, South Carolina, there is *39 Rue de Jean*. In terms of design, it could be *Bon Vie*'s twin. The owners here also acknowledge Balthazar as their inspiration. Charleston is, arguably, one of the top five restaurant towns in America, and, for now, *39 Rue de Jean* is Charleston's favorite restaurant. The clientele devours the house *brandade* by the crock full. It's a smelly spread of





salt cod, potatoes, and garlic, but in this venue, people adore it. One critic praised 39 Rue de Jean as having “several advantages” over real Parisian bistros: Smoking is banned, and no dogs are allowed. I have a friend who goes to Paris twice a year specifically *because* she loves the French for bringing their dogs to the bistros where she can smoke with abandon.

Critics can't say enough about the bistro revival. Bistro Zinc in Chicago was described as having “yummy” duck liver pate and “I'm-in-Strasbourg-I-swear” décor. Philadelphia's Blue Angel, a.k.a. *L'Ange Bleu*, was named by one critic as the city's best new restaurant in 1999. Teresa Capuzzo of *Philadelphia Magazine* “gasp[ed]” at the sight of her stunning plate of steak frites. *L'Ange Bleu* designer Owen Kamahira had his zinc bar made to order in Paris and installed in an old building with original tin plate ceiling and mosaic tile. *L'Ange Bleu* is vivid and beautiful, with all that is *de rigueur* for the bistro concept. “Gobs of atmosphere,” says another critic.

Balthazar allegedly grosses fourteen million dollars a year, but a new competitor, *Mon Ami Gabi* in Las Vegas, brings in twenty million. With four locations, including one in Chicago and one in Oak Brook, Illinois, *Mon Ami Gabi* is the latest venture of the restaurant conglomerate called Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises, Inc. (I'm not kidding.) The high-volume Las Vegas location features “towering French windows” that open onto the strip. *Mon Ami Gabi*'s tag line is “a return to simple French food.”

What accounts for the apparently universal, wretched-excess appeal of these restaurants? Rick Doody and his wife Tamara Durn, an art historian, have their theories.

“Like a lot of people, I dislike the contemporary,” says Doody. “Classical designs are subconsciously comforting. People lean toward what they relate to, what is familiar.” And that begs the question: Why does a distressed French bistro feel familiar to Americans?

Like thousands in my generation, mid-to-late era baby boomers, I once donned a backpack and went to Paris with a dog-eared copy of *Let's Go Europe*. Done with college at last and with *The Sun Also Rises* still fresh in my mind, I managed to find a few of the old haunts of the Lost Generation. But they were already too self-conscious of their camp appeal to tourists, Americans especially. The experience was rich, but my memories of it are pretty dim by now. Aging baby boomers with a little disposable income and faded memories of happy days spent kicking around Europe? There's your perfect market demographic for the neo-bistro.

Chef Richard Blondin, who grew up Lyon, is now Chef de Cuisine at Columbus' Refectory Restaurant. As a young man in Paris, Blondin rose through the ranks in the near-militaristic French culinary training tradition. Blondin's a purist. What does he think of *Bon Vie*?

“There's nothing French about it,” he says flatly. Very flatly.

And that starts with the name. It is, of course, completely wrong to say “*bon vie*,” which is supposed to translate roughly