

## KITCHEN CONTENDERS MOULES MARINIÈRE

## Show us your mussels

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Belgium and France have long been culinary rivals. Both claim to have invented French fries and both point to historical documentation to support their case. The origins of the dish moules frites (mussels and fries) is also a contentious issue between the countries, intensifying in towns close to the border.

Food historians support Belgium as the first to marry the two ingredients, and it is considered a national dish. Nonetheless, the rivalry for the best moules frites continues.

On a friendly level it is present in Hong Kong with European restaurant, Frites, and northern French eatery, Brasserie de L'île, both specialising in the dish.

Situated in a corner spot of Brim 28, the Wan Chai outlet of Frites affords plenty of people-watching from inside and outdoor seating. Inside, the ambience is part sports bar (a large screen dominates the room), part bustling restaurant, with a similar look to the other branches, including a long wooden bar and high ceilings. Green leather banquette-style seating and long wooden tables fill the room.

Boston Bay blue mussels are on offer in two sizes (500 grams and 1kg) with six choices, including Frites house mussels (diced tomato, garlic, onion, light cream and fresh chives) and the popular Hoegaarden (coriander, fennel, lemon zest, and Hoegaarden beer), all of which are served with fries and mayonnaise.

The pot of moules marinière (white wine, celery, garlic and mixed herbs) arrived within five minutes. The largish mussels looked appealing and smelled of wine, garlic, parsley and the sea. The predominant taste came from the delicious mussels, supported by fruity wine notes, with the small pieces of celery providing contrast.

The fries were excellent to start: hot and salty, with a crunchy



**Moules marinière at Brasserie de L'île in Central (above) and Frites (below).** Photos: Warton Li, Felix Wong

exterior and soft centre. But they cooled quickly, becoming less appealing. However, dunking the fries in the mayonnaise and then in the flavour-layered broth was a highly recommended culinary discovery and something that has since been repeated with equal success. The recommended pairing was Hoegaarden beer. In terms of a match it was less than perfect.

Brasserie de L'île does a good job of trying to create the ambience of a typical French brasserie, from the black and white tiled floor and wicker furniture in the front section (which is open to the street), to the large mirrors, ornate metal light fixtures and the Belle Epoque posters on the walls. The music selection of modern tunes by famous American and Irish artists detracts from the French feel. Red



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velvet banquets line two walls. Mussels are definitely a feature, with a prominent box of mussel choices taking up centre position on the menu. The restaurant uses moules de Bouchot Mont Saint Michel AOC, the only mussels with an AOC ("controlled designation of origin") distinction.

There are eight styles to select from, including Provencal (garlic, tomato, parsley, herbs and white wine); Iberique (chorizo, saffron, garlic, onion, white wine); Thai (green curry, eggplant, onion, coconut milk); and the option put to the taste test – the signature marinière (onion, celery, thyme, bay leaf, white wine). There is a choice of two sizes (350 grams and 700 grams) and with an all-you-can-eat order of hand-cut French fries.

Arriving at the table in an earthenware pot, the dish gave off a fantastic aroma of mussels and thyme when the top was removed. The mussels were smaller than those served at Frites, which may explain why they were a tad overcooked. It may have been just a fraction but the overcooking

was enough to detract from the delicate taste. The broth was not as complex in flavour as the Frites version, and while the large pieces of celery were a welcome textural contrast, the big pieces of bay leaf and onion were less so. Towards the end, thyme became the most pronounced flavour.

We tried both the skinny fries from the sides menu and the hand-cut fat fries, with the latter far superior, even if the lack of a crunchy exterior made them a slight disappointment. The house-made mayonnaise, on the other hand, was outstanding and two servings were quickly devoured. The friendly staff recommended a glass of Italian pinot grigio, which worked well.

#### Verdict

The mussels at both restaurants were enjoyable and all were eaten, but those at Frites were better cooked and the fries were also superior. If the mussels at Brasserie de L'île had not been overdone then the verdict would have been different – in terms of a complete experience that includes ambience and service the French brasserie was a clear winner.

#### Frites

Shop 6, 1/F Causeway Centre, 28 Harbour Road, Wan Chai Tel: 2877 2422 conceptcreations.hk

#### Brasserie de L'île

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## TURNING THE TABLES

Apocalypse menus not to our taste

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Did *Food & Wine* plan to run any stories on the Mayan end of the world predictions, a normally sensible PR flack asked me a couple of weeks ago. Inexplicably, we didn't. The catch was that her restaurant client was promoting a HK\$2012.12 menu to mark the apocalypse.

It's not the only weak sales gimmick we've heard this year. Earlier on, another restaurant cashed in on the 100th anniversary of 1,502 deaths, with a Titanic-themed menu promotion.

Sometimes there is a fine line between creativity and gimmickry. If you've eaten at View 62 you may, like me, feel that the olive oil butter that comes in a small toothpaste tube is redeemed from silliness by its delicious taste. The gazpacho that comes frozen in the shape of a crab shell and is placed over a crab tartare leaves you wondering how the chef did it. The ramen-style broth that comes with a syringe of paste to squirt into it to form noodles leaves you wondering why the chef did it.

The broth was deeply flavoured but we were puzzled by the connotations of the syringe. Were we supposed to feel like nurses ministering to the sick or edgy junkies banging up smack?



There is a fine line between creativity and gimmickry ... sometimes the gimmick isn't the food but the spin on it

While I would happily return to this restaurant, I won't be revisiting the heroin chic dish.

Sometimes the gimmick isn't the food but the spin that's put on it.

Churros are special doughnuts dipped in hot chocolate. It almost sounds like a dessert but it isn't. In Spain it's a breakfast – a hangover cure, even. Why is it on the dessert menu at newish restaurant Boqueria? Only a cynic would suggest that the proprietors thought that Hongkongers wouldn't know the difference.

I'm willing to bet that some of the best meals you had this year were relatively simple but nicely cooked and eaten in good company. Here's to more like that in 2013.