

Culinary Corner

Santé Restaurant

★★★★★ out of 5

165 N. Trade St., Matthews

Phone 704-845-1899

Hours: Lunch, Tuesday-Friday, 11 a.m.-2 p.m. Dinner, Tuesday-Thursday, 5-9 p.m., Friday and Saturday, 5-10 p.m.

Price range: \$5.95-\$27.95

Details: Dinner reservations recommended, full bar, private dining, year-round patio dining, smoke free, catering

Visit www.santeofmatthews.com for more information.

A salute to Santé

Exquisite cuisine, elegant French bistro atmosphere

by Charles Jenkin
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In the heart of Matthews sits a stately building steeped in history. The property, now on the National Register of Historic Places, has housed several businesses, and at one time was a barber-shop offering Saturday-night baths to gentlemen.

Fast-forward to 2001, when Executive Chef Adam Reed and his wife, Veronica, bought the building and opened what's become a mainstay of Matthews fine dining, Santé Restaurant. Named in honor of Adam's French heritage, the restaurant recalls a *votre santé*, a French toast meaning "to your health," used when friends and family gather.

Before opening Santé, Adam worked at several fine-dining establishments, beginning with an apprenticeship at René Pujols in New York City. He went on to become the sous chef at the famed Russian Tea Room. Moving to Matthews, he began working as a chef in the building that would become Santé. But eight years ago, the owners told him they wanted out of the restaurant business – so Adam and Veronica bought the place. They've never looked back, and theirs is a tremendous success story.

When you cross the threshold at Santé, you step back in time to an elegant French bistro. Exposed-brick walls, adorned with original paintings by local artists, climb to the pressed-tin ceiling. The dining room is bathed in candlelight, creating an intimate, romantic atmosphere. In the back is a small bar; an extensive wine list offers several fine selections by the glass, and an array of spirits is available. Beyond the dining room is an enclosed patio that's heated when it's cold – a fantastic option for a private party of up to 25.

From the moment you're seated until you leave, you'll receive an excellent and appropriate level of service. Professional and personable, the waitstaff anticipates requests and gives you all the time you want to luxuriate.

Changing menu, consistent quality

The menu changes with the seasons and the availability of fresh, locally produced foods, though

there are some items regulars have demanded be kept on the menu – that's completely understandable.

The meal begins with the presentation. Each dish that comes out of the kitchen is a work of art, including a splendid appetizer currently being offered – an avocado egg roll with roasted corn relish, a scrumptious mixture of avocado and just the right blend of seasoning, lightly fried to golden brown. It's crispy on the outside, and creamy and warm on the inside. Pair it with a glass of white wine and you're living the good life.

The bruschetta is a successful marriage of olive tapenade and tomato brochette on crisp toast. Another delectable offering is the roasted onion tart with blue cheese crumbles and smoked bacon with an herb-tomato sauce. The warm Mediterranean hummus is homemade and very tasty, and the French cheese plate also is a treat for the palate.

With the cooler months upon us, Chef Reed prepares amazing savory winter soups. During my most recent visit, I was dazzled by the roasted butternut squash soup with a dollop of sour cream and a little balsamic reduction. It was velvety smooth with balanced flavors – just exquisite. Equally enjoyable is the truffle-potato-leek soup, made with black truffles and topped with a drizzle of truffle oil and chives.

How about a nice, warm salad? The braised red cabbage salad with goat cheese, toasted pecans, smoked bacon crisps and balsamic vinaigrette is luscious – all the ingredients are in perfect harmony. Just as tantalizing is the French country salad with mixed greens, hearts of palm, artichoke hearts, olives, tomato, cucumber and fresh herb vinaigrette – the cool, refreshing hearts of palm really make it.

A difficult decision

And now for the real challenge: selecting an entrée from the mouthwatering options. The pan-seared veal cutlets with wild mushroom risotto and roasted-shallot burgundy sauce is good – the veal is tender, the risotto ideal, the sauce amazing. The lump crab cakes with roasted-garlic whipped potatoes and dijonaise sauce feature fresh premium lump crab and again, a fantastic sauce. The slow-roasted duck breast with wild rice and duck confit terrine and an orange hoisin sauce is a savory, sweet delight.

And here are four that really rock! The first two are on the menu: honey mustard-glazed salmon with coconut basmati rice and Asian mango salsa – the fish is cooked perfectly, and the glaze makes it poetry on a plate – and New York strip steak au poivre with roasted potatoes – the steak, served with a velvety peppercorn sauce, melts in your mouth.

The other two are oft-demanded specials. The rack of lamb is as good as it gets. The meat is tender as can be, and the sauce dances across the taste buds. Also out of this world is the trigger fish, a very clean tasting, white-meat fish that was cooked just right, moist and tender.

All entrées are served with the chef's selection of freshly prepared vegetables. (Organic produce from the Matthews Farmers Market is used when possible.) Chef Reed also makes all of his own natural stocks, meaning lamb bones are used to make lamb stock.

"That's how you get the true essence of the natural flavors," he said. He's right – you absolutely can taste the nuances of each flavor.

Delicious desserts

Fresh desserts are prepared daily on the premises. If it's offered, get the tiramisu. It's a splendid example of how tiramisu should taste, and the textures and layers are divine. Another option might be the chocolate lava cake served with vanilla ice cream and chocolate sauce with a raspberry couli – wow! And you can't go wrong with the profiteroles – tiny éclairs stuffed with ice cream – the pumpkin cheesecake or the apple-cranberry cobbler.

Chef Reed also takes special orders for cakes year-round. During the holiday season, that means *bûche de Noël* – Yule log. The cake, which requires time-consuming, complex preparation, is a traditional Christmas dessert served in France. As the name implies, the cake looks like a log ready for the fireplace. The traditional *bûche* is made of *génoise* or another sponge cake baked in a shallow jelly roll pan, frosted, rolled and frosted again. The ones Chef Reed creates are to die for.

And here's your chance to really get into the season. Santé will present its eighth annual Christmas show on Sunday, Dec. 14, and Sunday, Dec. 21, at 5 and 7 p.m. Make reservations early as the event usually sells out quickly. The show features Carolina Voices carolers. □



Bobby Cochran/UCW photo