

Brasserie Pascal Is the Restaurant Pascal Olhats Has Been Waiting to Do

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Jonathan Ho



Maestro at work

Blaze, Pascal Brasserie Pascal is the restaurant Pascal Olhats has been waiting to do, and it's worth the wait

As a friend of mine pointed out, Pascal Olhats could've made his mark in New York, LA or Chicago; but he shunned those big ponds and chose our little one to build a roster of restaurants to revere and respect. I once ate at Tradition, his flagship restaurant, and after he prepared my meal, the man himself came out to say hello and chat.

It was a particularly slow Friday night. His dining room was eerily quiet, as hushed as a monastery. For the remainder of the evening, most of the pressed table linens would remain unwrinkled, the wine glasses unsmudged, the silverware unused. But Olhats was more than chipper, an optimist who never seemed to lament Tradition's location on a one-way street, too far from the bustle of South Coast Plaza and Fashion Island.

Whether he knew it or not at the time, the latter was in his future. A few months later, I learned he was taking over French 75 in Fashion Island from its owners, a faltering Culinary Adventures. It was a bailout that made more sense to me than the Chrysler sale to Fiat. Here was a natural fit. Olhats would gain the prime cut of what was being sliced from David Wilhelm's once-mighty empire. And the restaurant, a gem of a place themed to look like a boisterous scene from Moulin Rouge, would get a stimulus package in the form of Olhats' cooking.

Since then, the transition from French 75 to Brasserie Pascal was so smooth it could've been lubed in French butter. And the location, between Macy's and Bloomingdale's, guaranteed a stream of deep-pocketed customers with limitless charge accounts. This is French cuisine, after all. Even before Olhats came into frame, it wasn't cheap.

But now, you get even more France for your money. Brasserie Pascal is presently the most classically Gallic of all French restaurants in OC, even counting Olhats' own eateries. In fact, his new menu seemed to be even more traditional than the one at . . . Tradition. Above all, it speaks of his trademark confidence and faith that his audience will bite. This, you can tell, is the restaurant he's been waiting to do.

In the appetizers, you'll see familiar Olhats hits such as the charcuterie plate stocked with slices of smoked duck, saucisson and a country pâté textured with crunchy bits, hammy bits and bits whose origins are better left unknown. But a new item sticks out: roasted beef-marrow bone, split lengthwise, its broiled blubbery center sparkling with a crust of sea salt. A spoonful of its clean-tasting, fatty jiggle sends shivers of glee at the discovery that there's even more to love about eating a cow.

The rest of the menu is voluminous: raw oysters, baked oysters with spinach and Champagne cream, steamed bulots, shrimp cassalette, escargots under puff-pastry caps wading in butter and garlic. What I've just rattled off is only a fraction of his appetizers. Steamed mussels? How do you want 'em? There's the Belgian way, with beer; Spanish, with saffron and chorizo; and Dijonaise, with mustard, brandy and bacon. But if you opt for the Sauvignon Blanc, the traditional preparation with white wine and herbs, you'll find it is lighter on the palate than the heavy-handed way French 75 did it.

Entrées are Parisian-bistro staples, but all are as overachieving as his apps. Coq au vin and filet au poivre are as popular as they should be. The bouillabaisse is culled from a sacrosanct recipe of lobster essence, saffron and fish chunks surgically cut into flawless cubes. But Pixar fans will need to order the ratatouille, the Provençal stew of tomato, zucchini, eggplant and bell peppers, kept fuming in its baking vessel. Anton Ego would relive the pivotal childhood-flashback scene upon the first bite.

Ego would have more praise for Olhats' most daring bet: a steak tartare dubbed the "house specialty." Raw, high-grade beef is chopped to bits, then mixed with a little onion and a touch of acid before being formed into a patty. In the mouth, it registers like Japanese sashimi or Hawaiian poke—a refreshingly cool, unfiltered, primal flavor of meat. But had it been offered at the old French 75, I never would've ordered it. Only in Olhats' hands do I trust it to be made properly.

This isn't to say that there aren't reminders of the old restaurant. Its best attributes stuck around—to Olhats' benefit. French 75's rustic bread still has a crackly crust that shatters in shards and a steamy, billowy crumb that goes especially well with a smear of the house mayonnaise tapenade. And for dessert, the chocolate soufflé is still presented with tableside theatrics. Even Olhats can't improve upon the perfection of the hot, oven-fresh, chocolate puffiness, drizzled with chocolate sauce, dolloped with whipped cream, and then drizzled with more chocolate sauce. This is one chef who knows the value of tradition.

Brasserie Pascal, 327 Newport Center Dr., Newport Beach, (949) 640-2700; pascalnpb.com. Open for lunch, Mon.-Sat., 11:30 a.m.-3 p.m.; happy hour, Mon.-Fri., 5-7 p.m.; dinner, Mon.-Wed. 5-9 p.m.; Thurs.-Sat., 5-10 p.m.; Sun., 5-8 p.m.; Sunday brunch, 11 a.m.-3 p.m. Entrées, \$10-\$30. Full bar.