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Bistro Bounty: A new addition to the Carmel restaurant scene fills a void with a relaxed but pleasing interior and specials like macadamia nut-crusted halibut with Napa cabbage (above). Nic Coury

## Bistro Beaujolais

### Bold New Bistro: Bistro Beaujolais brings bon appétit to Carmel Plaza.

By [Michael Whalen](#)

Thursday, January 15, 2009

Open a new restaurant in this economy? In Carmel, where restaurants are going on sale like holiday wrapping paper? You must be joking.

Well that's exactly what the owner of Carmel anchors da Giovanni and Bistro Giovanni did, hoping their reputation will carry over to the newly opened Bistro Beaujolais, located downstairs in the Carmel Plaza.

Carmel Plaza itself has been undergoing a renovation of sorts, with the addition of several high-end stores offering the best (or at least most expensive) brands to accessorize Carmel's finer tastes. What was missing was a corresponding dining establishment to fill the void of expelled Lenny's.

To that end, Bistro Beaujolais is made to order. Its relaxed yet pleasing interior design is casual enough for its shopping center location yet sufficiently elegant to support its international menu and pricing structure. Unassuming tables with cushioned bench seating along the walls, hand-painted murals depicting fictionalized French street scenes (note the name on the art supply storefront), a thin row of voyeuristic mirrors around the periphery, and a partially open kitchen design support the bistro approach. A handful of outdoor tables situated

around a fire pit in the courtyard— something to remember when the annual Jazz at the Plaza resumes— put diners in the middle of the action, typical of a Parisian sidewalk café.

Without a reservation, we arrived at 6:15pm on a Sunday evening to find only two other parties in house, both wrapping up an early meal. Erik, our host, server and bartender, was extremely welcoming and suitably attentive, even as we remained the only guests.

Initially, the menu lacks cohesiveness, jumping around the globe and never quite losing its Italian undertones. Slowly, expectations of France give way to the notion of eclectic French Colonial cuisine with entrées like Tahitian tilapia, Marrakesh Express pizzetta, Moroccan vegetable cous cous, and Parisian style meatballs in an Algerian sauce. French standards like onion soup, escargots, steak frites, and coq au vin appear, but items like salade grecque, dolmas, spinach gnocchi, tomates et mozzarella “Napoleon” (read: caprese salad) go beyond French bistro.

The wine list covers a wide array of price points and leans toward Napa and Sonoma domestically, while the international offerings are Italian heavy, with only a smattering of Champagnes, Burgundies and Bordeaux. Wines by the glass are solely da Giovanni labels, agreeable if a bit incestuous. Bistro Beaujolais also has a full bar, and my bride was impressed with Erik’s quiet confidence in creating a cocktail upon request for something warm, perhaps with rum.

We started with the French onion soup (\$7.95), which was dark, flavorful, rich with caramelized onions, and topped with house-made croutons and a decent amount of melted Gruyère. Tasty, but aficionados won’t be wowed by this gratinée.

For my entrée, I chose a French classic— boeuf bourguignon (\$22.95). Its delightful aroma arrived just ahead of the bountiful bowlful of braised beef chunks, cippolini onions, mushrooms, carrots, fingerling potatoes, and today’s version of lardons (strips of smoky bacon) in the traditional red wine sauce. I found the nicely browned meat flavorful yet not tender enough for what should be a slow-cooked stew. It also lacked some of the characteristic red wine punch. My uncle Bill, who spends an entire day adding wine (to the pan and his glass) while patiently coaxing the meat to its fork-tender best, wouldn’t be impressed, but the dish was sufficiently delicious and I thoroughly enjoyed its warm, saucy goodness on such a chilly evening. Out of curiosity, I complemented the dish with a recommended glass of house zinfandel (\$14.50), although the obvious pairing of a red Burgundy (or California pinot noir) would have been a better choice.

My bride went for the crab ravioli with chanterelle mushrooms and chervil black truffle cream sauce (\$18.95). She was pleased with the delectably firm pasta and particularly enjoyed the cream sauce. Unfortunately, neither of us detected the delicate aroma and flavor of black truffle.

We ended the meal with a shared order of crème brûlée (\$7.95), opting to stay French (though some claim British origins) rather than diverge with the flan or tiramisu.

All in all, we were very happy with our meal, and frankly, it exceeded my expectations. The prices are undeniably Carmel (entrées \$14-\$35), but given its upscale neighbors, Bistro Beaujolais is a reasonable option in a plaza aimed at serving the well-heeled.

The roster of tapas is certainly inviting— country-style pate, lentils with smoked bacon and caramelized fennel, warm spiced olives with citrus and rosemary, chickpea crepes, smoked salmon, wild Burgundy escargot— and Erik says the roasted turkey panini, saffron bouillabaisse and a white truffle mac and cheese rank among the lunch favorites.

Although we found it rather quiet, perhaps due to the season, Bistro Beaujolais also serves lunch, which is a popular option given its location. If the sun is shining and the plaza bustling, I can envision a leisurely afternoon meal with wine and a few friends.

The French derive much comfort from their food, and with Bistro Beaujolais bravely opening in the face of

economic crisis, Carmelites now have a new place with a familiar feel to find shelter from the storm.

BISTRO BEAUJOLAIS Carmel Plaza, Ocean and Mission, Carmel • 11am-close daily. • 624-5600.

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