

## **Maison Blanche serves uncompromising French cuisine in Longboat Key**

By Laura Reiley, Times Food Critic

In Print: Wednesday, December 9, 2009

★★★ 1/2

Servers slide silently across the hardwood floors, popping up tableside to deposit a tiny amuse bouche of chilled carrot bisque topped with a glimmer of fruity olive oil and miniature shards of buttery crouton. Positioning it just so with a quiet, "S'il vous plait," the server glides off. This time of year, with house guests visiting and the season's souped-up sociability, Maison Blanche is an exceptional reason to head south and beachward. It's an evening's theater, a reason to dress up and order a bottle of something nice (300 labels, many unusual and with a steep markup). Sink into dark leather club chairs and marvel at the soaring flower arrangement at room's center.

Then get to work on the menu, deciding between a la carte or the strictly splurgy prix fixe options. (Mesdames, here's something to get your attention: Only the men get menus with prices. Charmingly retro or infuriating, you be the judge.)



Music can be a jarring stew of classical and French show tunes, but otherwise Maison Blanche is seamlessly serene. Jewel-colored crystals clustered at each table's center refract votives' glow, adding shimmer to the room's flattering lighting. A meal's pacing is perfect, diners neither rushed nor ignored, many needs anticipated before the diner has quite formulated the thought.

Meals begin with individual housemade baguettes, like bonsai versions of the long French loaf, served warm with perfectly spreadable sweet butter. The plates that follow are pretty without being fussy.

An asparagus soup (\$14) comes as a bowl full of tender tips, the luscious, creamy green liquid poured over it from a small kettle. A tomato tart (\$14) brings a gossamer bit of pastry on top of which sweet, warm red grape tomatoes perch, just ready to explode in the mouth, a drizzle of basil oil a lively herbal counterpoint.

The single best deal at Maison Blanche is an entree you don't see often in these parts: suckling pig (\$24), its crispy skin like the most delicate of brittles, giving way to a plush layer of fat and the velvety pale meat below. Sumptuous.

A roasted ribeye was nearly as good (\$39), served rare, as ordered, with a subtle black peppercorn sauce that proved only to showcase the deep flavor of the beef, the accompanying roasted fingerlings simply seasoned and deliciously crunchy.

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The amuse-bouche is often a tip-off in a French restaurant that there may be some little free dessert nibbles, a tray of petite truffles or cookies or fruit gelees. Maison Blanche doesn't disappoint (a chewy chocolate caramel cube and diminutive bubblegum-flavored marshmallows — crazy, but tasty). That doesn't, however, mean you shouldn't get dessert.

The house apple tart is really the signature sweet, but it must be ordered early because it's baked to order. For an on-the-fly confection, the chocolate lava cake (\$12), with its molten, oozing center and counterpoint, a quenelle of tangy yogurt sorbet, were lovely.

A common reaction upon an initial visit to Maison Blanche is, "What is this doing here?!" It seems far too posh and Parisian for these parts. But that was Martinez's idea. Sure, he could have plopped his "white house" down in Miami or New York, but then his culinary vision might not have seemed nearly as remarkable.

*Laura Reiley can be reached at [lreiley@sptimes.com](mailto:lreiley@sptimes.com) or (727) 892-2293. Reiley dines anonymously and unannounced. The Times pays all expenses. Advertising has nothing to do with selection for review or the assessment.*

#### REVIEW

Maison Blanche

2605 Gulf of Mexico Drive, Longboat Key

(941) 383-8088

Cuisine: French

Hours: 6 to 10 p.m. Tuesday to Sunday

Details: V, MC, Amex; reservations recommended; beer and wine

Prices: Entrees \$24 to \$40, prix fixe tasting menus \$55 to \$95 per person

#### Rating out of four stars:

Food: ★★★★★

Service: ★★★

Atmosphere: ★★★

Overall: ★★★ 1/2

#### Review key:

Extraordinary ★★★★★

Excellent ★★★

Good ★★

Fair ★