

# French DRESSING

Classic French cooking becomes new again in the hands of The Blanchard's Jason Paskewitz.

By Lisa Shames // Photography by Anthony Tablier



**EGG-CELLENT** From left: The main dining room at The Blanchard features watercolor paintings by local artist Danielle Klinenberg; Oeuf Outhier appetizer topped with caviar and vodka-spiked creme fraiche.

If you've dined out in Chicago for any length of time, odds are you've eaten Jason Paskewitz's food—even if you didn't know it at the time. The Queens, New York, native has lent his classically trained culinary skills to restaurant kitchens all over town, including Spruce, Pump Room, Signature Room, Nine, Wave, Gabriel's in Highland Park, JP Chicago, Gemini Bistro and Rustic House.

In less capable hands, this résumé might not add up to much beyond a vast collection of chef coats. But that's not the case with Paskewitz. At The Blanchard, the first restaurant where he is both chef and owner, he combines the cooking knowledge he's gathered over the years with his passion for French food. "It's what I love," says Paskewitz of his cuisine choice. (It's fitting that the restaurant opened on Bastille Day.) "My goal is to be considered the best French chef in the city."

He's well on his way. Located on a quiet cul-de-sac in Lincoln Park, The Blanchard is a beautiful restaurant. Wraparound windows provide great views of the neighboring park. Walls in the long room are painted a soft shade of gray, while the white ceiling offers a perfect backdrop for the chic gold-hued light fixtures attached to it. Green banquettes add to the tranquil ambience. Scattered throughout are breathtaking abstract watercolor paintings from local artist Danielle Klinenberg, who wandered into The Blanchard looking for an event space and ended up coming back the next day to outfit the restaurant. (Spend a few minutes chatting with the wisecracking chef, and it's easy to see how that happened.) And how's this for a sophisticated throwback? Tables are decked out in white linens.

The room's mix of elegance and simplicity, where each item makes sense and blends perfectly together, is a terrific setting—and perhaps even a metaphor—for Paskewitz's food, which pays respect to the traditional





FLOWER POWER From top: *Blanquette de veau* entree with truffled velouté; The Blanchard's La Vie en Rose cocktail.



Not every starter here is a study in richness. There are two salads: a refreshing Maine lobster version with a carrot-ponzu dressing and a wonderful rendition of *frisée aux lardons* with a vibrant pommery-mustard vinaigrette.

The nine entrees (*Plats Principaux*) on my visits ranged from a classic French-style roasted chicken and rabbit *moutard* served over pappardelle to a burger topped with bacon, butterkäse cheese and shallot confit, and served with crispy fries and, according to the menu, love. From my vantage point at the eight-seat, no-reservations chef's counter, which provides a front-row seat to the action in the open kitchen, the duck à l'orange seems to be the favorite. It's on my list for my next visit.

That is, if I can resist ordering the divine dover sole meunière, at \$42 the most expensive menu item. (Fear not, diners: At The Blanchard, haute cuisine's high prices are not in effect.) The delicate filets of fish are topped with capers and sit in a luscious brown-butter sauce.

Then there's the equally wonderful *blanquette de veau*. Traditionally more of a "mountain dish," says Paskewitz, this iteration gets "gussied up" with the addition of crispy sweetbreads and trumpet mushrooms. To get its supertender texture, the veal breast is braised, then pressed and finally finished sous vide. "It's all the classic components," says Paskewitz, "but with a little bit of fun."

Desserts from Pastry Chef Marjorie Easley, a vet of Gemini Bistro, offer a seamless segue from the savory portion of the menu. You can't go wrong with any of her five French-inspired sweets, but I'm partial to the Pistachio Bombe

French dishes he's made over the years, but he isn't afraid to take some liberties too.

Take, for instance, the Oeuf Outhier, an appetizer from the menu's *Pour Commencer* section, in which Paskewitz starts with the famed French chef's idea for the decadent egg-based dish and then runs with it. Eggs are cooked slowly in a double boiler until they become akin to custard. The creamy mixture is then spooned into an eggshell and topped with Grey Goose-spiked creme fraiche and a dollop of American sturgeon caviar. Two tips: Use the tiny spoon it comes with to get every bite, and don't even think about sharing.

Sharing also goes out the window with the foie gras torchon: a two-bite wonder of cassis- and citron-flavored macarons filled with a swipe of berry preserves and a generous portion of the prized delicacy. But Paskewitz doesn't stop at just one foie dish; he has three others available, including a ganache preparation served with brioche toast points.

with its filling of creamy pistachio mousse and raspberry pate de fruit plate partners.

The predominantly French wine list offers a range of options in both the by-the-glass selections and bottles. In keeping with The Blanchard's elegant setting, start with a glass of Cremant D'Alsace Rosé Brut NV (\$15), or, on the cocktail side, I'd recommend the herbacious Negroni de Savoie (\$12) served up in a coupe.

If you're one to keep score on Chicago's restaurant scene, then you're aware it's been some time since a French-focused spot opened. And that's something that didn't go unnoticed by Paskewitz. "If you look around the city now, it's hard not to ask, 'Where are all the great French restaurants?'" he says. "The Blanchard was an opportunity to do something that needed to be done." And we, for one, are very glad he did. ■

#### THE BLANCHARD

1935 N. Lincoln Park West  
872.829.3971  
theblanchardchicago.com

Open for dinner Tue.-Sun.  
Starters, \$12-\$17; foie gras,  
\$8-\$22; entrees, \$16-\$42; desserts, \$9

NUT CASE  
Pistachio Bombe  
dessert from  
Pastry Chef  
Marjorie Easley

