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Miami restaurant review: Le Zoo in Bal Harbour is worth going wild over



BY EVAN S. BENN

A good French brasserie can be transportive, mimicking the sights, aromas and flavors of a meal in Paris' 8th Arrondissement. A mediocre one can be a sad parade of brown, sodden food.

I'm happy to report that [Le Zoo](#), new at Bal Harbour Shops from Philadelphia restaurateur Stephen Starr, is a good brasserie. A very good one.

Classics like onion soup, salad verte, steak frites, trout amandine and duck confit are executed with an eye to detail, each a textbook example of how the dish should look and taste.

Order a mushroom tart (\$16), sliced in four wedges for easy sharing, and a carafe of the house red Rhone blend (\$16/12 ounces) while considering the menu. Tiny pioppini mushrooms, with their dark brown caps and creamy white stems, pop when you bite their heads, releasing more of their foresty essence into flaky layers of buttery phyllo and truffled pecorino.

Chef Craig Wallen's menu showcases plenty of fresh seafood, fitting for its location a stone crab's throw from the ocean. His take on the increasingly popular pasta-crab-chile combination is a pleasing bowl of angel hair (\$25) spun with generous hunks of Alaskan king crab, the slow-building heat of Fresno chiles and a dollop of crème fraiche to keep it light and keep it French.

I rarely romanticize salads, but the fresh, crisp fingers of chicory leaves tossed with radish coins, green herbs and a tart lemon vinaigrette in Le Zoo's salad verte (\$11) is so elegant and satisfying, I can't stop thinking about it.

Starr — who also runs Makoto, Le Zoo's next-door neighbor, as well as Steak 954 in Fort Lauderdale and the recently opened Continental in Miami Beach — borrowed menu and design inspiration for this restaurant from his [Parc](#) in Philadelphia and [Le Diplomate](#) in Washington. In the Starr tradition, Le Zoo serves consistently high-quality food — not always flawless, and not especially cutting-edge — and excels in service, hospitality and atmosphere.

Steak tartare (\$17) tasted somewhat flat despite a subtle brine from chopped capers and a creaminess from quail egg. A few flakes of finishing salt could amplify the beefiness of the chopped filet. Escargots (\$15) eschew their usual garlic-parsley setup for a shell-less dunk in a crock of melted hazelnut butter. The meat is luxuriously tender, but, after having one or two, fishing for snails in a murky broth quickly loses its appeal.

Intelligent, hospitable servers in clean uniforms of white shirt, tie and folded apron weave effortlessly between rose-marble tables outside and on mosaic-tile floors inside. They give the kind of dotting-not-fawning service that's expected by a crowd carrying Chanel bags, wearing Hublot watches and having valeted their Teslas. Even the well-to-do don't deserve to be ripped off, however, and Le Zoo's \$5-a-bottle charge for house-filtered [Vero](#) water seems rather steep.

A French-dominant wine list reaches into California, South America, Australia, Italy and Germany, with plenty of good finds and values in the under \$80 range. From the cocktail bar, a Sazerac (\$13) is as potent as one you'd get on Bourbon Street.

In true brasserie style, this food is perhaps best consumed with a tall, cold glass of Kronenbourg 1664. The French lager's bubbles dance with every bite of well-seasoned steak frites — the meat a spot-on medium-rare and the fries extra hot and well-done, as requested. Dip the skinny fries into creamy lemony aioli, then have a sip of Kronenbourg to wash away the salt and fat, priming the palate for another go.

Starr and Wallen stick with classics through the end. Airy, eggy choux pastry forms four connected profiteroles that are stuffed with vanilla ice cream and topped with a bar of chocolate that melts under a tableside pour of warm bittersweet chocolate.

Le Zoo's profiteroles are nearly identical to a dessert that's been on Parc's menu since it opened in 2008 and exactly the same as the ones at Le Diplomate. If they work for Starr in Philly and D.C., who can fault him for bringing them to South Florida?

Le Zoo succeeds not by making diners feel like they're eating in the Northeast; it succeeds by making us feel like we're in Paris. This part of Miami needed a French brasserie as good as Le Zoo, and now I need more of its mushroom tarts and steak frites in my life.

Critics dine unannounced at the Miami Herald's expense.

Evan S. Benn is Miami Herald food editor: [305-376-4624](tel:305-376-4624), [@EvanBenn](https://twitter.com/EvanBenn)

IF YOU GO

Place: Le Zoo

☆☆☆ (Very Good)

Where: 9700 Collins Ave., Bal Harbour

Contact: 305-602-9663, lezoo.com, [@LeZooBalHarbour](https://twitter.com/LeZooBalHarbour)

Hours: Lunch 11:30 a.m.-4 p.m. Monday-Friday and brunch 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Saturday-Sunday, dinner 4-11 p.m. Monday-Saturday and 4-10 p.m. Sunday

Dinner Prices: Appetizers, cheese plates and raw bar \$10-\$39 (seafood platters \$75-\$300); salads and sides \$7-\$20; pastas and entrées \$15-\$39; desserts \$3-\$11

FYI: No reservations; full bar; corkage \$25; discounted self or valet parking with validation; all major credit cards; moderate to energetic noise level

Read more here: <http://www.miamiherald.com/living/food-drink/article54521230.html#storylink=cpy>