



COURTESY OF L'AUBERGE CHEZ FRANÇOIS

The French Connection

Alsatian cuisine draws Francophiles and foodies to L'Auberge Chez François in Great Falls, Virginia.

In 1954, Alsatian chef François Haeringer opened an eponymous restaurant in the heart of Washington, D.C. While it was located on Connecticut Avenue, just down the road from the White House, and catered to political paragons, it was not pretentious or exclusive. Instead, François' goal was to operate a restaurant with "a nice ambience and good, honest food at affordable prices." Chez François quickly became a District favorite.

By the early 1970s, however, that status was in danger when the building in which the eatery was housed was scheduled to be torn down. Instead of retiring, as

would so many others after a successful 20-year run—a great accomplishment for any chef—François chose to fulfill his longtime dream of opening an *auberge*, a type of country inn common in his native Alsace, which is located on the easternmost edge of France, bordering Germany and Switzerland. So in 1972, he purchased a country store and antique shop in nearby Great Falls, Virginia, and in 1976, he relocated Chez François to the countryside, renaming it L'Auberge Chez François.

The customers followed—François often said that he served every U.S. president since Harry S. Truman—and L'Auberge Chez François became the top-rated restaurant in the greater D.C. area. In 1992, the restaurant was honored with the AAA Four Diamond award, a designation it has continued to hold for 22 years. And earlier this year, it was voted Best Ambience, Best French Food and Best Overall for Washington, D.C., restaurants by users of OpenTable.org.

When François passed away in 2010, his son Jacques took over as executive chef, and this September, François' dream celebrates six decades as a

Mid-Atlantic landmark.

"I remember when we bought [the current restaurant building]. People said that we were crazy, that Great Falls was too far away [from Washington, D.C.], but Dad said that he was doing it anyway," says Jacques. "As it turned out, we were busy from day one."

Today, the restaurant remains very similar to when François first opened its doors. From the décor, which features family heirlooms and artifacts purchased in France by François for the original D.C. location, to the traditional Alsatian cuisine, L'Auberge Chez François is, as noted in *Virginia Living* magazine, classically, *unapologetically*, French.

"We're traditional, but that's what people come out for. And I don't apologize for that. Not at all," says Jacques.

So what is Alsatian cuisine? Most diners are familiar with such French dishes as escargot, quiche and coq au vin, but Alsatian food takes as much from central and southern France as it does from neighboring Germany.

"The food is the best of both sides," says Jacques. "Alsace is a major

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breadbasket of France. There's a lot of fruit. For instance, on the Vosges Mountains that separate Alsace from Lorraine, you get a lot of vineyards on the lower elevations, and on the higher elevations, you get orchards. On the plains, you get a lot of crops, like potatoes and cabbage. *Choucroute* (sauerkraut) is big in Alsace. There's *la route de la choucroute*, where all these little villages have their own version of sauerkraut. Pâté, charcuteries and all kinds of sausages are also big. And, of course, foie gras.

"There's a lot of fish because the Rhine and the Ill rivers run through the region. There's a lot of pike, salmon and smelt," he adds. "And there's a rich game history, including rabbit and pheasant, which makes for a real culinary diversity."

That diversity can be seen in the L'Auberge's menu, which has changed very little since François first developed it 60 years ago. Throughout the years, diners have flocked to the restaurant to feast on such hearty classic dishes as *La Gratinée des Halles* (onion soup) and *Les Ris de Veau* (grilled sweetbreads), *Sole de la Manche* (sautéed Dover sole), *Les Aiguillettes de Canard* (grilled breast of duckling), and, of course, *La Choucroute Royale Garnie à l'Alsacienne* (an Alsatian feast of sauerkraut, sausages, port, duck confit and foie gras).

And that whole farm-to-table buzzword that's so popular in the restaurant industry today? Well, L'Auberge has been serving the freshest local ingredients since the beginning. It's just the way things are done in Alsace. But what many of L'Auberge's diners might not realize is that Jacques has a large garden behind the restaurant that has been the source of much of his produce for the past few years. And what he can't grow, he gets from the Tuscarora Organic Growers Cooperative, a cooperative of about 50 organic farms throughout the Mid-Atlantic.

Being traditional, however, doesn't mean never moving forward. To balance

the fine dining of the main dining room, in 2011 Jacques opened the garden-level Jacques' Brasserie, a *weinstube* (an Alsatian-style bistro that translates into "a room in which you drink wine"). Here, guests can dine on meals made from handwritten recipes François brought with him when he first came to America in 1947, including *tartes flambées* (Alsatian-style pizzas), *boeuf Bourguignon*, sauerkrauts and seafood dishes like those typically found in Strasbourg, the capital of Alsace. And it can all be washed down with a craft beer or specialty cocktail (*Crémant au Lillet*, anyone?) from Jacques' Bar Rouge.

For those who can't make it out to Great Falls, Jacques has published two cookbooks (*The Chez François Cookbook* and *Two for Tonight*) that feature many of the same recipes that are served at L'Auberge Chez François.

French restaurants may be making a big comeback, with new brasseries and bistros opening every day, but not many establishments can claim that they've been feeding the Mid-Atlantic's Francophiles as well as everyday gourmards for 60 years. L'Auberge Chez François can. And according to Jacques, the reason why is obvious.

"Dad wanted to keep it simple," he says. "We just focus on good ambience, good service and good food at a good value."

If you'd like to check out L'Auberge Chez François, September is the perfect time to do so. In celebration of its 60th anniversary, the restaurant will be featuring a variety of special events during the week beginning Monday, September 15. Up first will be a special Garden-to-Table dinner in which diners will feast on a five-course meal incorporating produce from the L'Auberge's gardens while seated at communal tables in the outdoor garden terrace. Wine dinners, cooking demonstrations by Jacques, special tastings and more will follow every night of the week. For a complete schedule, visit laubergechezfrancois.com.

—Rebecca L. Rhoades



L'AUBERGE CHEZ FRANÇOIS' WARM ROQUEFORT TART

INGREDIENTS

- 1 Golden Delicious apple
- 2 tablespoons butter
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 4 tablespoons Roquefort cheese
- 2 4- or 5-inch circles puff pastry

INSTRUCTIONS

Sandwich puff pastry circles between two baking sheets. Bake at 350 degrees for 8–10 minutes. Remove top sheet pan, and allow dough to brown. Remove from oven, and allow to cool on the sheet pan.

Peel, core and quarter apple. Cut each quarter in half. Place a small sauté pan over high heat, and sprinkle sugar in the pan. When the sugar begins to caramelize, add butter and apple wedges, and toss to coat with the sugar. Cook for approximately 2 minutes until wedges are *al dente* and slightly caramelized. Transfer to a dish to cool.

To prepare the tart: Place 4 apple wedges in a spiral around each pre-cooked pastry disk. Crumble Roquefort cheese on top of each tart. This may be prepared several hours ahead and refrigerated.

TO SERVE

Bake tarts in 425-degree oven for 4–5 minutes until cheese and apples are thoroughly heated. Do not completely melt the cheese. Transfer to warm plates.

SERVES 2