

Los Angeles Times

CALENDAR

weekend

RESTAURANTS



ON THE STRIP: Bar Marmont has undergone a few changes, including hiring a new chef,Carolynn Spence, formerly of New York's Spotted Pig. The bar isn't a restaurant per se, but Spence's eclectic menu includes gougères for snacks, and salmon for hungrier appetites.

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

ANNE CUSACK *Los Angeles Times*

Out of castle's shadow

BY S. IRENE VIRBILA,
Times Staff Writer, March 15, 2007

CHATEAU MARMONT, the glam 1920s hotel on a hill above the Sunset Strip, has always owned the walls of Bar Marmont down below, but until recently the space was leased out. Now this sexy spot is run by the hotel, and changes are afoot. The biggest: a new chef, and not just a line cook, but the former chef de cuisine of the New York gastropub the Spotted Pig. Her name is Carolynn Spence, and her new menu looked good enough to warrant a visit.

The bar's look is an enchanting mix of slightly shabby and bohemian, and the scene is a wild brew of A-listers, poseurs and tourists who've passed muster with the muscle at the door.

Drifts of real or fake (it's too dark to tell) Monarch butterflies are pinned to the ceiling. Ornate lamps with red silk shades and marbled glass light fixtures from some antiquarian's stash dangle from the ceiling. A party of rock 'n' rollers may be tucked away in the small room at the end of the bar. And in the long, yellowed ivory dining room animated lovers and friends are seated within inches of one another along banquettes.

Bar Marmont is not strictly a restaurant, but it does offer a short, succinct menu of bar snacks, small plates and a handful of dishes substantial enough to fuel a long night of partying.

In its previous incarnation the food was never the draw, but that could change. As I looked over the new menu, the word "goug-res" leapt out

from the bar snacks category. Cheese is supposed to smooth out any rough edges in a wine, and goug-res are a favorite with winemakers in Burgundy. Bar Marmont's are delicious, like miniature popovers, served wrapped in a cloth napkin to keep them warm. Other bar snacks include the usual olives and mixed nuts, but also tarragon lupine beans and "boozy" bacon prunes.

You can get half a dozen oysters on the half shell with Bloody Mary mignonette for seasoning, or a selection of three cheeses with fig toast and buckwheat honey. More interesting is the spicy lamb and pea crepinette with a minty salsa verde or crispy rosemary artichokes with a lemon-drenched aioli. Tomato soup comes with asparagus and a Parmesan crisp. And tomato

salad gets a lift from lovely opal basil and ricotta salata.

More substantial appetites can tuck into a "damn good burger" with homemade ketchup and fixings. Spence makes her gnocchi with sheep's milk ricotta — a nice touch. Grilled Porterhouse, though well-priced at \$29 (versus the \$40-something charged at some steakhouses), wasn't top quality. A hangar steak might fit the concept and the place better.

The menu offers something for everyone: vegetarians (tagliatelle with wild mushrooms and artichokes), fish-lovers (crispy skinned salmon), even French fry connoisseurs (here they come with three different dips). For those with a sweet tooth, there's salty pistachio crumble with pistachio gelato and affogato (ice cream

drowned in espresso), which seem pricey at \$11 each.

But then, nobody expects a bar like this to be inexpensive. And guaranteed, there's nothing else on the Strip with Bar Marmont's sort of low-key glamour. Tant pis.

Bar Marmont

Where: 8171 W. Sunset Blvd., West Hollywood

When: 6 p.m. to 2 a.m. daily. Kitchen closes at 1 a.m.

Price: Bar snacks, \$5 to \$7; appetizers, \$8 to \$18; salads, \$9 to \$12; entrees, \$19 to \$29; sides, \$7; desserts, \$11. Full bar. Valet parking, \$18.

Info: (323) 650-0575