



Back to basics

FOR A GENERATION OF HALIGONIANS, LE BISTRO WAS THE RESTAURANT IN DOWNTOWN HALIFAX. THE CLASSIC RETURNS

BY JANICE LANDRY
PHOTOS BY RACHAEL SHRUM

Haligonians love comfort food but we don't necessarily want to dress to the nines to get it. That blissful feeling of being home, dressed down and getting away from it all, is exactly the ambience that restaurateur Liz Ingram-Chambers is hoping to recreate in her new take on an old and popular Halifax haunt, Le Bistro. Which is, once again, occupying the same bottom corner of the Park Victoria, on the corner of South Park and Clyde streets.

Le Bistro served its last crisp potato skin to an eager public almost a decade ago, closing for good in 2002. Patrons were chagrined at the thought of never again being able to dive into a piquant piece of the restaurant's signature dessert: Yummy Lemon Parfait Pie.

Loyalists mourned, until a flicker of hope three years ago. At the urging of her husband, Ingram-Chambers (who had been at the helm at the former Le Bistro as manager for years) searched

the province's Registry of Deeds and found the name was available. She scooped it up and Le Bistro by Liz began to take shape.

The rebirth plan started out slow, but boiled over in 2011, when the owner of the Park Victoria building approached Ingram-Chambers about setting up in the spot. She started her lease on the space, with its famous glass atrium, September 15, 2011.

Interviewing staff and patrons, it's apparent that Ingram-Chambers is as much Le Bistro herself, as its signature red and white tablecloths, cast-iron table bases and Parisian-influenced menu. The reborn restaurant served its first meals in December and had its official grand opening, with a packed house, on March 4.

"I have great respect for Lizzy," says devoted customer Hugh Creighton. On this day, ensconced in the atrium, Creighton is sharing a bottle of wine with a friend. He has done this same thing, once a week, every week, since the early days.

Creighton has tried every entrée and eagerly awaits his haddock. He leaves his seat to speak with me at my table, where I'm interviewing, overlooking the bustling open kitchen/prep area. As we chat, out of the corner of my eye I see Sous Chef (former Le Bistro Chef) Parker Oliver; line cook, Mike Bruce; and salad and dessert prep staffer, Stella Niatsika, working at a frenzied pace.

It's 12:15pm when Ingram-Chambers announces, "We're totally booked with reservations!" She scurries by to hug a nearby patron when I hear her say, "It's great to be back!"

Ingram-Chambers never stops the entire two hours *Halifax*



Magazine visits. She says she puts in, on average, 70 hours per week. She is a stickler for detail. She had gone out the night before to buy dozens of fresh flowers, yellow tulips, to freshen the decor. Despite her staggering schedule, Ingram-Chambers looks fresh herself, wearing a knee-length, black and white striped dress with black jacket and black, bootie-style shoes.

Work ethic is not an issue for Ingram-Chambers. Mix that drive with a sense of humour and you've got what it takes to be successful, according to Creighton, "Lizzy is really funny," he says. "She will listen to suggestions and take action. She has a great business mind and offers great value for the dollar."

In fact, prices on the menu are, once again, listed in both Canadian dollars and French currency. For example, an original staple called "Crêpe Marocaine" or Moroccan Chicken, which is described as "chicken with sultans, water chestnuts, mushrooms, Mandarin oranges, topped with a delicate curry sauce" sells for \$12.95 or 9,5€.

The menu strategically offers a mix of traditional Le Bistro offerings combined with a smattering of new fare. Gone are deep-fried chicken fingers; Ingram-Chambers wants healthier fare. She also offers gluten-free items and is allergy conscious.

Former Le Bistro bartender and current senior staffer Catherine MacDonald says the best part about the whole rebirth are the stories from passionate patrons who are thrilled it's back. Liz and Catherine tell me about one woman who, after a double mastectomy, explained the only thing that got her through the ordeal was dining weekly at Le Bistro.

"One couple who met here and used to have date nights here is back again sharing slices of the lemon pie," MacDonald says. "It means a lot of different things to a lot of different people."

Indeed the lemon pie the couple covets is the *pièce de la resistance* of Le Bistro, then and now, and was hard to re-create. Early attempts were runny and inedible. It took research, emails and effort but eventually one former chef helped solve the puzzle. The recipe is a guarded-closely sweet secret, not unlike the Caramilk bar.

Was it worth the effort?

Ingram-Chambers says she sold 398 pies in February 2012; not slices, whole pies.

The real challenge might be satiating Haligonians' appetite for the resurrected restaurant. ■■■

How to make "Le Bistro by Liz"

Ingredients

- One veteran restaurateur
- An abundance of devoted patrons
- Red and white checkered table cloths
- One cozy atrium
- A handful of dedicated staff
- Plenty of Parisian influences
- A smattering of fresh flowers
- A load of "Yummy Lemon Parfait Pie"

Directions

Carefully mix all ingredients together and serve immediately.



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 tadams@metroguide.ca

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