



# FRENCH *Flair*

*With its Warm Ambiance and  
Bistro Standards, Le Deauville  
Caters to a Horse-Industry Crowd*

By Cynthia Grisolia | Photos by Lee Thomas



The French bistro Le Deauville planted its *bleu, blanc, et rouge* on the corner of North Limestone street more than 10 years ago. Its goal: to serve genuine French fare at reasonable prices in a welcoming atmosphere. Fast-forward to a balmy Saturday night in 2013 and the friendly *bôte* is still buzzing with Lexingtonians enjoying duck confit and steamy crocks of onion soup. While the city has seen an explosion of new downtown eateries in the decade and the forced shuttering of more than one old standard, Le Deauville has emerged pretty much unscathed. One has to wonder, what keeps 'em coming back?

Plenty.

The eatery is still quaint and breezy; its glass-door façade and sidewalk tables are perfect for people-watching; and the menu features all the expected classics: escargot, bouillabaisse, heady cocktails, lots of *fromage*. There's also lots of atmosphere, and it appeals to the horse-industry types who regularly frequent the spot. Inside, ceiling fans orbit at an unhurried pace as if they were borrowed from the set of a Tennessee Williams play. Dark wood paneling, tile floors, and leather banquettes make everything very *douillet* (that's cozy). All that's missing are the plaintive strains of Edith Piaf on the sound system.



Top, the cozy bar welcomes regulars while sidewalk tables invite people-watching.

“How many times have I gone to a French restaurant in New York and there are no French people there,” said co-owner and manager Marc Puil, who took over Le Deauville from its original owner, Christophe Descarpentries, in 2007. “I run a French restaurant and I am French. We are the real thing.” *Bien sur.*

Much of the credit for the restaurant’s sustained success over these years goes to Puil. On Descarpentries’ watch Le Deauville quickly became trendy — a place to see and be seen. But the venue eventually developed problems and other bistros were soon vying for Lexington’s hungry Francophiles, including Toulouse on Vine Street, a restaurant launched by Le Deauville’s original chef, Gerard Aiache, and Le Bistro on South Ashland (both now closed). Puil was the co-owner/manager at Toulouse before sweeping up Le Deauville in a sort of culinary *coup d’état*. “To me, there were too many French restaurants in Lexington,”



Marc Puil works hard to ensure Le Deauville’s popularity.

said Puil. “I thought, let’s close Toulouse, let’s take Le Deauville, and let’s get the chef from Le Bistro,” he added, referring to his current executive chef, Mohammed Mouktafi, better known around town as just “Chef Mo.”

As a manager, Puil brought to the plate years of experience earned in two of the world’s finest food capitals: Paris and New

York. Born in France, Puil began working in restaurants at age 15, eventually attending cooking school in Paris. But after a few years in the kitchen, Puil decided he might be better suited for the front of the restaurant. “I didn’t want to be in the greasy work, you know?” he said with a laugh.

When he came to America, he initially lived and worked in Philadelphia. (“When I moved from France, I started all over,” he said. “I learned how to speak, everything”). After moving to the Big Apple, he landed a job as a waiter at Le Refuge, a tiny but

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Left, from seared salmon to a crisp white wine to bouillabaisse, Le Deauville satisfies French cravings.

Industry types have also chosen Le Deauville for Kentucky Derby parties and annual get-togethers. “We do a boys long lunch there once a year before Christmas,” said

exceptional French bistro on Manhattan’s Upper East Side. “It was not hip,” said Puil, “nobody talked about it. But it attracted people like Robert Redford and Yoko Ono. Meg Ryan came there when she was making a movie about France. It was fun.” Puil later worked at other New York celebrity meccas, including Le Chantilly, owned by boxer-turned-flamboyant celebrity chef David Ruggerio, and at the holy grail of French eateries, Lutece. “It was the first chic bistro in Manhattan,” said Puil. “Everybody wanted to go to Lutece because that was *the* place to go in New York.”

Puil’s prowess for handling famous folks came in handy once he arrived in Lexington, where he found the city swarming with a glitterati all its own: horse people. During his tenure he has turned Le Deauville into one of the key dining hubs for racing-industry VIPs and Kentucky Horse Park competitors both local and international. On any given night you might see Joe Costa, president and CEO of The Red Mile at a favorite table. Thoroughbred trainer Christophe Clement is a regular when he’s in town. Come April many of the Rolex Three-Day Event riders drop in for a meal and jockeys Kent Desormeaux and Jean Cruquet, who won the Triple Crown aboard Seattle Slew in 1977, are also frequent guests.

“Every time I go, there is a bunch of horseman there,” said the French-born Cruquet, who dines at Le Deauville three or four times a month. “During the horse sales all the French people go there,” he adds. “I like it because it’s French, of course!” he laughed, “but Marc is so accommodating. He knows what I want. I don’t even look at the menu. He just says, ‘I’ll take care of you.’”

Andre Lynch, who works at Ashford Stud in Versailles. “It’s a great place to take clients — good food, good wine, and you will run into everybody there,” he added. “My mother visits from Ireland once a year and she always asks to go there.”

Puil acknowledges running Le Deauville has been an education. “Before I came here, I didn’t know it was all about ... horse power,” he said. But he does now. “Hanging out with these people, I know when the sales are on, when Keeneland is open, or when there’s a jumping show at the horse park.”

While the horse industry provides Le Deauville with a steady clientele and word-of-mouth keeps business strong, the downtown restaurant boom, said Puil, hasn’t slowed. You might say it’s still in a feeding frenzy. “The horse industry brings people from all over the world,” said Puil. “It’s a very cosmopolitan crowd. But there are three times as many restaurants as there were a few years ago,” he noted. “The crowd is growing every year, but not by three.” With such fierce competition, he said, “You have to change. We have to keep up with the new crop.”

To stay competitive in 2013 and beyond, Puil continually looks for new ways to lure new customers and to keep loyal fans coming back. New innovations include Monday night’s all-you-can eat sweet and savory crepes and Tuesday’s all-you-can eat mussels, which has been a wildly popular event (both menus have



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helped attract UK students and faculty to the tables). The restaurant offers nightly happy hours with half-priced appetizers and an early-bird prix-fixe dinner menu of three courses for \$24.50. Daily specials, meanwhile, emphasize what's fresh, organic, and seasonal, such as wild-caught grouper or maybe a crab, salmon, and avocado Napoleon. The restaurant even has Wi-Fi.

While vying for diners, however, Puil never loses sight of the original mission: Le Deauville is still an authentic French bistro serving traditional food at reasonable prices in a wel-

**Chef Mohammed Mouktafi is a veteran of upscale Lexington kitchens.**

coming atmosphere. It's still *la vraie affaire* (that's the real thing). Where else in town can one observe France's national holiday over moules frites and a crisp sauvignon blanc beginning at three in the afternoon? "Oh, our Bastille Day celebration, it's huge," said Puil with a chuckle, "and we are the only ones to do this in Lexington."

You can practically hear the chorus of *La Marseillaise* now. 🇫🇷

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