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## Out to Brunch Sunday Pleasures At Tony Neighborhood Bistro

Brunch is back. All over town, open for brunch banners are going up. Roland Park's Petit Louis has been running a Sunday brunch for a few months now, and while the place might be packed to the rafters at its midday brunch peak, it's only about half full of savvy patrons on a Sunday afternoon. Perhaps humidity slows down word of mouth, which isn't such a bad thing. The dining room's noise level is the prevailing Petit Louis complaint that travels around town--some diners find it not to be the euphonious hum of civilization but merely a din. At least for now, Sunday afternoons in the beautifully appointed rooms--cheers for stained glass, gleaming wood floors, and marble tables set with reassuring amenities such as porcelain salt cellars and cream pitchers--are relaxing and sweet.

For their brunch, name-brand restaurateurs Cindy Wolf and Tony Foreman have simply folded a mere handful of breakfasty items into the regular à la carte menu, much of which happens to be perfect brunch fare. For instance, a croque monsieur (\$10) can fortify diners for an impending afternoon of hiking or TV sports, as does a bowl of onion soup (\$7) or a salad of fig, serrano ham, and mache (\$10). Its coffee (\$3.50) is good. So are the Bloody Marys (\$7.50) and mimosas (\$8), but they're pricey--not New York expensive, but a couple rounds add up to an expensive meal.

Of the brunch-only options, the stellar selection is Louis' steak frites with the sunny addition of a single poached egg (\$24). This is a good cut of well-marbled and very tender beef. Unlike a more traditional variation of steak frites, Petit Louis leaves its steak intact--a nervy game, because the typical cuts (e.g., hanger steak) reserved for this preparation can turn up tough at the table. A gentle but tastily effective application of coarse salt and pepper appears to be this kitchen's solution. Be careful not to season this dish before tasting it. The mound of shoestring fries are liberally seasoned, too, and it's refreshing to yield control to the kitchen. The egg makes the whole thing pretty.

French toast (\$10) gets the gourmet treatment. Slices of rich and eggy fresh brioche are fried up in cinnamon butter and served with a raspberry wine reduction. There's nothing cloying about this preparation, and the cinnamon effect is subtle, not powdery. The heated sauce adds a great deal of lustrous delight. The ideal accompaniment to these rich and sweet notes is a side order of the house's smoked bacon (\$4), prepared to a lean crisp--or, even better, a plate of spiced lamb sausage, with tiny, stirring notes of harissa, a hot chile paste.

The ingredients in a fluffy omelet (\$12) of mushrooms, bacon, and Gruyère were nicely prepped--sautéed and chopped into manageable bits. Here a notion toward clumsy American excess would have been welcome--more cheese would have better collected the other ingredients, given the whole omelet a more ingratiating presence in the mouth. Supersize us.

From the regular menu came the contender for local item of the year--duck confit (\$17), that testament to the wisdom of cooking things in their own fat. The leg-alone version here is modest in size--at least compared to the thigh-as-well Goliaths seen elsewhere around town--but appropriately profligate with crispy skin, fatty flavor, and juicy meat. Crisp and vivid haricots vert accompanied this entrée nicely, but the traditional and nutritious, duck-fat-absorbing lentils would have been better--brunch time, anytime.

Petit Louis has become what it set out to be--a place where people with sufficient pocketbooks can take weeknight meals when the no-cook mood strikes. But it's hard for everyone to approach Petit Louis casually. This meal cost \$166.74, before tip--granted, it included two cocktails each for a party of four, the menu's most expensive items, and double orders of side dishes. It wouldn't be at all hard to keep the bill smaller, but it would be far easier to find a satisfying brunch elsewhere for much less. The main attraction at Petit Louis is the unblinking, down-the-line professionalism and impeccably set atmosphere, which is not one for special occasions, really, but for total immersion in the quotidian good life. The French really do know their way around a duck leg and a piece of bread. And good dining is worth it, especially if someone else is footing the bill.