

LET'S TALK TO JOSÉ GUTIERREZ ABOUT . . .

French-American cooking

Describe the modern French-American bistro food at River Oaks.

Our menu reflects some American favorites with a French twist. For example, our mac and cheese is made with Gruyere cheese.

Are there challenges using American ingredients in French cuisine?

Not these days. Some American ingredients are as high quality as French, especially cheeses.

Talk about how French techniques put a stamp on your food.

Everything I make uses French technique. All sauces and stocks are made that way, and French technique comes through in the way we extract flavors for many applications, not only sauces and stocks. All the cooking techniques are French, from the way we saute, braise and cook foods to the way we cut vegetables, all French technique.

What do you look for when sourcing ingredients? What can be sourced locally?

I look for quality without sacrifice. We use everything local that we can—vegetables, eggs, meats. I have always insisted on organic ingredients. Now, they are easier to find—and I don't have to use FedEx as much.

What classical French fare do your diners expect? Are they adventurous?

Customers ask for custom menus and favorites from the past—coq au vin, braised short ribs, cassoulet, foie gras,

anything with truffles, crêpes. It's all about the customers. When they let me know they want something Italian or Spanish, and are adventurous, they let me do the menu to pair with wine.

Did you adapt your early culinary training in France to meet American tastes?

Yes, I made Southern nouvelle cuisine in the late 1980s. We made hushpuppies stuffed with shrimp Provençal, turnip greens ravioli, and grits pudding with peaches and local honey.

Talk about what your restaurant patrons expect to see on the menu.

Some things can never change: the burger, the tuna entree, chicken paillard. Our diners eat with us three or four times a week—we are a neighborhood bistro.

Are there some classical French dishes you'd hesitate to put on the menu at River Oaks?

Sweetbreads, chicken en vessie (pig's bladder) and all the organ meats.

What kinds of menu items are customer favorites? What are your favorites?

Cheese beignets and crab cakes are customer favorites. My favorite is the halibut and our fish tacos.

What advice do you have for others who want to blend French and American?

Train with the best. And don't be afraid to experiment. Some of our mistakes make the best dishes. 🍴



JOSÉ GUTIERREZ IS OWNER/CHEF AT RIVER OAKS, MEMPHIS, TENN.