

AUSTIN

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SPECIALS**
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THE END OF ANOTHER DAY



Bess Bistro on Pecan

An Austin Blockbuster

By Laura Kelso • Food photography by Stacy Sodolak

The buzz around Bess Bistro on Pecan was so big that even my husband, an in-the-closet stargazer, pleaded with me to try it out. "A celebrity restaurant?" I ask. "Lisa and Cliff are in town from Seattle, and you want to take them to Bess?" Our friends are former Austinites. They know the difference between delicious and subpar.

"Just because Sandra Bullock owns it, doesn't mean the food won't be good," he retorts.

I stare at him as if he's crazy. "When movie stars open restaurants, do you really think the endeavor is about their love for food?"

"Sure, for example ..."

I love it when I'm right. He was obviously at a loss for ideas.

"Listen, why don't we start by having a drink at Bess, then decide what to do?" he asks brightly.

"All right, but DON'T tell them it's Bullock's. Lisa will probably get arrested for

stealing paraphernalia." My friend Lisa is worse than my husband. I swear she moved from Austin to Seattle to get that much closer to Rodeo Drive.

Forty-five minutes later, my husband, our friends and I are sitting under a shaded terrace at the historic Stratford Arms building on Sixth and San Antonio streets. It's nice to be slightly elevated, still able to witness West Sixth Street's Saturday night antics. I sip a bright Whitehall Lane Sauvignon Blanc '05, while our friends, thrilled to be back in their former hometown, drink top-shelf margaritas.

We talk animatedly and nosh from a seasonal artisanal cheese board. It includes prosciutto-wrapped almond-stuffed dates, blue cheese, a hard cow's milk variety and a soft goat's spread. Our server brings some fresh multigrain bread, along with a plate of semolina-crust artichoke hearts. The fireworks intensify: a morsel of salty cheese, a bite of sweet stuffed date, the crunch of fried spinach tossed with tangy artichokes, bathed in lemon and Parmesan.

"Why don't we eat here tonight?" asks Cliff.

"Huh?" I look over at my smiling husband, my mouth too stuffed to answer.

"Absolutely," I manage to say. "I'll let the hostess know."

As I walk down the stairs toward what was once the Stratford Arms' bank vault, I think about how restaurants have the potential to be like great movies. Our introduction thus far has captivated and intrigued, but what next? The middle might very well be one long yawn.

Although Bess Bistro is Sandra Bullock's first foray into the world of restaurant ownership, she is not new to the industry. "Once a waitress," says Bullock, "always in the restaurant business." It is clear that she has a profound respect for Austin's culinary scene. "I think if you look at every Austin restaurant," she says, "you will find it stands out. That's the beauty of this town ... from a taco stand in a train car to a sushi restaurant in a restored house, everything is embraced, if it's done with passion and quality."

Certainly, that is Bullock's intent as far as Bess Bistro goes. The name "Bess," according to Bullock, is "an homage to all the great madams who ran their establishments with the sole purpose of creating a retreat of great service, superb food and wine and an ambience that, in its privacy, allows the customers to let go and enjoy."

Bullock's own Austin haven was a project four years in the making. During that time, she wrestled with everything from the interior design of the historic building space to the final menu details. But Bullock largely credits her executive chef, Ohio native Brenton Childs, for the restaurant's success since its opening in November 2006.

Childs moved to Austin in 1988 and started washing dishes at the International House of Pancakes. "I did not go to culinary school," says Childs, "but when I started working for David Garrido [former executive chef, Jeffrey's Restaurant], it went from a job in the kitchen to a career." Since that time, Childs has helped launch Vespaio, as well as opened the Las Vegas Salt Lick. He credits his mother for teaching him how to cook first, David Garrido for showing him the "restaurant basics" and Alan Lazarus (executive chef, Vespaio) for the "technique polishing."

Bess Bistro's menu is an ideal size—concise enough so as not to overwhelm, but still ample enough to satisfy the most persnickety of eaters. Manager Ryan Fulmer calls the cuisine "classic European meets the old South." I'd agree with that assessment, adding "comfort food" to his description.

Bullock explains how the menu evolved: "Brenton spent many a day in my kitchen, and we as a group just recalled all the dishes and foods that we loved. Eventually, we had too much and needed to narrow it down. We wanted it to be well thought-out, but simple. And with each season, to be able to add and subtract tastes."

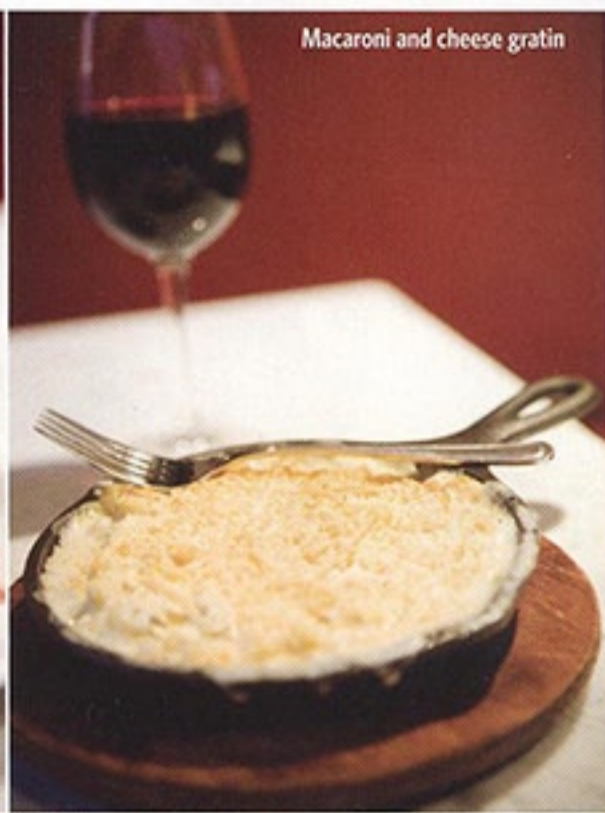
Many of those "tastes" are exceedingly fresh and, in some cases, purveyed locally. Take the hearty three-bean soup, a toothsome mixture of black turtle, white and red beans simmered with smoked ham hocks and goat cheese from Pure Luck Farm in Dripping Springs. Or the crisp butter lettuce salad from local Boggy Creek Farm.

But back to the plot on that fateful first evening. Like most good movies, the details that night were all in the denouement. After a short wait, our group was led from our patio perch to a cozy table downstairs in the dining area. The vintage space is simultaneously intimate, thanks to its wonderfully old exposed brick columns and pecan woodwork, and airy, due to the custom tile, antique mirrors and exquisite etched glass.

"I really feel the space dictated the 'look and feel,'" says Bullock. "I just followed its



Turkey and Gouda melt



Macaroni and cheese gratin



Bess chopped salad

CRITIC'S PICKS

DRINK: The signature Bess cocktail, Demi-Sec champagne served over ice with a twist of lime, is light, sparkling and absolutely fetching.

APPETIZER: The seasonal artisanal cheese board is a lovely way to start. Ours included prosciutto-wrapped almond-stuffed dates, a blue cheese, a hard cow's milk variety and a soft goat's spread.

ENTRÉE: Breaded and pan-seared pork medallions with sour apples, dried cherry sauce and a German potato cake represent comfort food at its best.

DESSERT: Bullock's sister, Gesine Bullock Prado, masterfully achieves that elusive balance between sweet and sour tastes in her lemon tart creation.



Lemon tart

orders." And our hip Seattle friends immediately took the bait. "I love the ambience here. This is what I miss about Austin," sighed Cliff, taking in the flare of the gaslights against the room's brick arches, the diverse clientele and the overall cool yet laid-back vibe.

"If only they knew!" I laughed to myself. But perhaps he had a point: Where were the signed guitars, pictures of Sandra and friends, movie prop pieces and the flashy blonde clientele? Where was all that "celebrity" razzmatazz I had anticipated?

No time to ponder that one, as our gracious server offered her at-length take on the specialties of the house. We took her recommendations and ordered a smorgasbord: tart homemade applesauce, crunchy caramelized cauliflower and a macaroni and cheese gratin, deceptively light despite being tantalizingly cheesy.

Entrées were equally appealing. My favorite—breaded and pan-seared pork medallions with sour apples, dried cherry

sauce and a German potato cake—represents comfort food at its best. The dish is nuanced enough to awaken dormant taste buds, while remaining—at heart—warm and satisfying.

Another lovely riff on a French classic is the chicken paillard. Tired old chicken breasts these are not. Instead, Childs sears cutlets that taste of fresh lemon, shallots, capers and tarragon. The chef further demonstrates his culinary versatility with classics such as steak frites, served with his addictively crisp pommes frites. Or consider a popular seafood option: a grilled line-caught king salmon, served—in a clever twist—on toasted herb spaetzle with olives and lemon butter.

"This is serious food," my husband commented midway through our dinner. "Yeah, not what I was expecting," I let slip, earning a suspicious glance from our friends.

Happily, the conclusion to the Bess Bistro story is as enticing as its opening scenes. Gesine Bullock Prado, Bullock's sister and a

pastry chef, designed several custom desserts for the bistro. She masterfully achieves that elusive balance between sweet and sour tastes in her lemon tart, and her flourless chocolate cake, drizzled with creamy ganache, is dense, delicious and decadent.

Bess not only challenges our preconceptions about celebrity establishments, but it also illustrates how well Bullock knows, understands and loves Austin. Referring to her eatery, she says, "Our daily goals are exactly the same as our long-term: constant quality, consistent ambience and a good time in a bistro that prides itself on service. And a little debauchery on the side never hurts, either."

Three days later Lisa called to thank us for the invite. "GUESS WHAT?" she practically screamed into the phone. "Bess is owned by SANDRA BULLOCK!" I laughed and admitted to withholding that small detail.

"You would never know!" she exclaimed. "I mean, Bess is so ... so ..."

"Austin?" I filled in.

"Exactly."

And this, dear reader, is what Bess Bistro is all about. Good wine, terrific food, close friends. You can't script a better ending. ☉

THE FACTS

CUISINE: Classic European meets the Old South

CAPACITY: 95 inside, 20 on terrace

SETTING: Casual

SERVICE: Above average

PROPRIETOR: Sandra Bullock

PRICES: Dinner entrées range from \$9 to \$25

RESERVATIONS: Not accepted

CREDIT CARDS: All major

HOURS: Lunch: Monday-Saturday

11 a.m.-4 p.m.; Dinner: Monday-

Thursday 5-10 p.m., Friday-

Saturday 5-11 p.m.; After Hours:

Monday-Thursday 10 p.m.-"late"

and Friday-Saturday 11 p.m.-"late"

DRESS: "Just make an effort"

NOISE LEVEL: Low

HANDICAPPED: Fully accessible

SMOKING: Permitted on patio

PARKING: Valet or street parking

ADDRESS: 500 W. Sixth St., 78701

PHONE: 477-BESS (2377)