



CAFÉ FRANÇAIS

WITH ALISON COTES

DO YOU prefer croissants to toast, cafe au lait to flat white, oeufs brouilles to scrambled eggs?

In that case, you're probably in the mood for a genuine French breakfast at Belle Epoque at Emporium, where the bilingual menu is easy to understand, some of the waiters have French accents, and nobody speaks Franglais or expects you to do the same.

Belle Epoque is where we go when we realise that we can't afford to go back to Paris this year, which is most of the time.

It's as good a substitute as you can get in Brisbane, with its pressed metal ceilings, foxed walls, antiqued mirrors and ancient-looking tiles – a triumph of fake 19th century that would fool anyone except an expert.

There are booths with red leather seats, big comfy armchairs and plenty of privacy, where you can imagine having an illicit tete-a-tete with a Cabinet minister – well, a French Cabinet minister, perhaps.

And for just a casual drink, the bar is straight from the Folies Bergere.

But we were there for breakfast, with a frail old lady, a dear friend, who doesn't walk very well even with a walking frame.

We managed a parking place right outside, she managed the few steps to our table and, once we were settled, we ordered not champagne, but French vintage bubbles.

When in France, we tend to drink Blanc de Blancs, which is made chiefly in the southeast corner from straight chardonnay, by the same method as in the Champagne district, but not to be called by that name.

They have it by the bottle at Belle Epoque, but we were after only a glass each, so drank some other French sparkles which were almost as good. But at \$11 a glass, it was just right for a Saturday breakfast.

We looked at the breakfast (all right, petit dejeuner) menu, and were pleased to see that, although it caters for the hearty Aussie appetite with its all-Australian offering, even that has a certain je ne sais quoi, with free-range poached eggs, house sausage, double smoked bacon, sauteed mushrooms, tomato cooked Provençal style, and sourdough toast – the best of both worlds for \$19.50.

But we're playing ladies, so I had the best eggs benedict this year, with garden spinach and smoked Mures trout from Tasmania, nicely runny free-range poached eggs, and a superb hollandaise which actually tasted of the lemony-vinegary reduction and was flecked with fresh herbs.

It was all piled elegantly on a toasted batard (like a baguette but shorter and wider) and cost \$18, maybe a little more than other cafes, but what price perfection?

One friend had the vegetarian omelette, made from free-range eggs, of course, and goat's cheese, with a house potato and brie



FRENCH FLAIR: There's a Parisian air at Belle Epoque (top), crepes with chocolate (above left) and vegetarian omelette. Pictures: Mark Cranitch

croquette, sourdough toast and gruyere – three cheeses in one dish (\$16.50).

Another breakfast favourite is Pain Perdu, where the basic ingredient is a sweet brioche soaked in flavoured egg and milk before pan-frying, and which comes with a strawberry soup and creme fraiche, a meal from the Elysium Fields for \$15.

Bread, in the form of a croissant (made on the premises the night before), sourdough or fruit toast, comes with organic butter and fruit confiture (\$8.50), while the crepes, as thin as a communion wafer, are accompanied by poached pears, shards of honeycomb

and a little jug of hot melted Valrhona chocolate, and cost \$15.50.

And if you want to spin it out a bit and combine breakfast with morning tea (and why not?), you can take your double-shot Vittoria coffee with one of those positively evil pastries from the on-site patisserie.

I went back for a vanilla slice the other day, and you can forget the solid custard powder-yellow horrors with bright pink icing of your youth. I'm going to eat this delicate whipped creme anglaise with subtle vanilla frosting streaked with chocolate every day in heaven, if I ever get there.



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Page 2 of 2

Belle Epoque

Address: Emporium Complex,
1000 Ann St (next to Emporium
Hotel)

Phone: 3852 1500

Opening hours: From 7am-late,
seven days

Liquor status: Fully licensed,
BYO special bottle, \$15
surcharge per bottle

Prices: All breakfast dishes
under \$20, Vittoria Cinque
Stelle coffee from \$3.50. Check
the menu for other meals at
www.belleepoque.com.au

Owners: Anthony John Group

Chef: Trent Robson

Parking: On site

Wheelchair access: Yes, with
lift to toilets

Other: Seats 150; all credit
cards; table service; vegetarian
and gluten-free; 15 per cent
surcharge public holidays;
airconditioning; noise level
moderate

The score:

Food: 19

Service: 17

Ambience: 18

Value for money: 15

About the score: 0-5 go
somewhere else; 6-9 major
change required; 10-13
reasonable, room for
improvement; 14-16 good; 17-19
excellent; 20 the pinnacle