

[Register for free](#) | [Login](#)

Forget authentic; you want food that tastes great

BY DAVID HAMMOND December 26, 2012 2:29PM

Updated: December 26, 2012 4:00PM

Sitting with Chef Dirk Flanigan at his French-inspired Henri (18 S. Michigan), I sliced into a platter of venison he'd just set before me.

Spotting a lightly charred Brussels sprout atop the dark red meat, I remembered the words of Julia Child, America's most recognizable interpreter of French cuisine, "There's nothing worse than charred vegetables."

"Do you think," I asked, "that you'd ever see a Brussels sprout like this in France," and Flanigan said, definitively, "No." Still, the sprout's earthy, sulfuric note played perfectly with venison.

During the final months of 2012, Flanigan has served a series of dinners reflecting different regions of France, including Alsace, Burgundy and Champagne.

Having just returned from Champagne, I clearly remembered the very simple foie gras presentations I'd enjoyed in Reims, usually served with little pickles and bread.

Henri's version was spectacular, with an emulsion of prune, tangerine, blood orange and vanilla along with pickled red onions.

"How's that compare with what you had in France," Flanigan asked.

"Much more complexity, more 'worked on' " I said. Flanigan nodded, "For my guests, I needed something more. I couldn't get away serving foie gras with just pickles."

So in a dinner designed to represent a specific region of France, Flanigan had applied his own creative twist to the ingredients, making them perhaps more delicious, though also less authentic.

Big deal.

Authenticity has become a sacred standard by which some food enthusiasts judge a meal. But it's likely impossible in the United States to prepare, for instance, authentic French, Mexican or Thai food in a way that looks and tastes just like that food does in those countries.

Availability of seasonal ingredients, the water used, airborne yeasts and other local environmental factors all affect the finished product. Add to that the creative impulses of chefs such as Flanigan who understand the necessity of re-concepting foreign classics to please local patrons, and the chance of savoring fully "authentic" flavor becomes less likely.

Still, it's possible to maintain native techniques and commitments to excellence while serving food that bears perhaps slight resemblance to what's actually served in the food's country of origin.

And few would complain about that.

E-mail detective@suntimes.com.

© 2011 Sun-Times Media, LLC. All rights reserved. This material may not be copied or distributed without permission. For more information about reprints and permissions, visit www.suntimesreprints.com. To order a reprint of this article, [click here](#).

