



STEVE RUSSELL / TORONTO STAR

Mark Cutrara, co-owner and chef of Cowbell, apprenticed as a butcher to learn organics and provide a unique, ecologically friendly (and locally grown), French bistro menu.

# Cowbell rings true to simplicity

## Cowbell

★ ★ ★ ½

Address: 1564 Queen St. W. (at Sorarun Ave.), 416-849-1095

Chef: Mark Cutrara

Hours: Tuesday to Saturday, from 5 p.m.

Reservations: Recommended

Wheelchair access: Yes

Price: Dinner for two with tax, tip and wine: \$100

## AMY PATAKI

RESTAURANT CRITIC

Mark Cutrara had an epiphany. Luckily for the rest of us, it was delicious.

Cutrara is the chef/co-owner of the enjoyable new Cowbell bistro. Last year, he read *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Michael Pollan's non-fictional examination of our food origins. Cutrara (ex-Globe Bistro, Silver Spoon) began to ask questions of his own, canvassing Ontario farmers.

Cutrara's answer was a local, sustainable approach to food. He's not the first Toronto chef to hoe this row — Jamie Kennedy, Yasser Qahawish, Anthony Rose have all done the same — but he may be the first to apprentice as a butcher to learn organics down to the bones.

Cowbell marries ecological awareness to the French bistro tradition with dexterity and grace. It is a

place where both Al Gore and Anthony Bourdain would be happy to eat, a restaurant that treats ingredients — and customers — with respect.

Cutrara buys grass-fed beef from Harrison Farms in Bradford and ages it on site. He churns organic cream into butter and recycles glass milk bottles into water carafes. The borage and lovage come from his pesticide-free rooftop garden. In many cases, it's not a 100-mile diet, but a 100-metre one.

But these are the least of Cowbell's abundant charms. The room is a sanctuary of quiet good taste. The mosaic floor and flocked velvet benches say "France," but most of the furniture is local and recycled. Occupying every last chair are Parkdale's gay, straight and chatty inhabitants. The unisex bathroom, with its red leather bench and crystal chandeliers, is the last word in comfort.

The white "Cowbell" T-shirts staff wear are as unpretentious as the daily changing blackboard menu, with its dozen choices (including one vegetarian option). Prices range from a \$6 salad to \$30 for steak frites.

Cutrara's cooking is simpler now than when he was at the Globe, and

more heartfelt. But he's no fanatic: he knows the limitations of local ingredients in January and promises to have more on his winter menu than turnips and rutabagas.

"I'm not doing this for political or ethical reasons. I'm doing it because the flavours are there," says Cutrara, 36.

And so they are. Tomatoes, in a stoplight's worth of colours, taste of summer. Tiny artichokes and fat fava beans practically glow with sunlight.

These vegetables frequently partner pan-fried fish fillets — Lake Erie perch one night, trout another. The trout, farmed in chilly artesian waters near Owen Sound, can also be had lightly smoked and profoundly buttery. The trimmings are used in an intense puréed fish soup that's like bouillabaisse on steroids.

Nor does much go to waste when it comes to larger animals. A pork salad might feature nuggets of smoked ham, a slice of tender tongue and — here's what gets my vote on *Variety Meat Idol* — fried pig's ear, crunchy and creamy all at once. More ears, this time in jellied ribbons, drape the accompanying greens. The vinegary gelatin wobbling in the centre of the plate supplies a much-needed counterpoint to the richness.

Such economy enhances Cutrara's green cred, and makes him a favourite amongst his suppliers.

"He uses the entire carcass, not just the best cuts, leaving us with the rest. He told me, 'I'm a chef: It's my job to make the whole animal taste good,'" says cattle farmer Dennis Harrison.

Better than good, actually. The beef is perfect. The New York strip in steak frites is denser than a feedlot steak, but infinitely tenderer. Both qualities come from two extra weeks of dry aging, which shrinks and tenderizes the meat. It is grilled medium (we're not asked) and crowned with a pat of butter. The flavour is pure, the fat irrelevant. Beside it, corn-fed marbled beef is as appealing as polystyrene in a landfill.

The banquet burger is one of Cowbell's few missteps. Tucked into an Alchemy Bakery sesame bun, the toothsome patty of ground chuck is disappointingly topped with spongy Italian-style mozzarella and too-subtle-by-far Niagara prosciutto; bring on instead gooey cheddar and crisp bacon. The Heinz ketchup at least remains true to Cowbell's down-to-earth spirit.

Both the steak and the burger come with frites that manage the

extraordinary trick of tasting just like crisp baked potato wedges (a very good thing, in my estimation). But Cutrara recently learned that baking potatoes don't come from Ontario and is switching tubers.

For all its vision, Cowbell has some blind spots. Desserts are one — the tarte tatin anemic and the white chocolate mousse disturbingly similar to the crème fraîche ice cream alongside.

The wait staff's knowledge is another, well informed one night and lacking the next; one server calls choucroute garnie "a southern French stew."

But the sense of welcome helps right the wrongs. Cutrara works the room, quietly spreading the gospel of naturally raised meats and local vegetables.

No need. The taste is convincing enough.

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Outstanding	★★★★
Excellent	★★★½
Very good	★★★
Good	★★½
Fair	★★
Poor	★½
Awful	★