

SOPHISTICATED LIVING

{St. Louis' Finest}

Mar/Apr 2014
five dollars

slmag.net

BROTHERHOOD

Written by Judith Evans

Photography by Carmen Troesser, cover photography by Alise O'Brien



To take a trip from Italy to France, walk across Wydown Boulevard with restaurateur Zoë Robinson.

Her Italian restaurant, I Fratellini, sits on the south side of Wydown just east of Hanley Road. Bar Les Frères is on the north side of the street. Robinson and Chef Ny Vongsaly oversee both restaurants, making the quick trip across Wydown many times a day. “We’re always crossing the street,” Robinson says. “Sometimes, we find each other in the median.”

The restaurants’ names, which translate to “the brothers,” are a nod to her sons Spencer Robinson, 22, and Eli Robinson, 20. Yet I Fratellini and Bar Les Frères are siblings in more ways than their joint parentage. Each offers intimate settings, eclectic and welcoming décor, and authentic food and drink.

I Fratellini, open since 2001, is the big brother. Les Frères opened in 2011 and doubled in size late last year, from one storefront into two. “It’s a fun space for us – and we’re just getting started on it,” Robinson says. “It’s given us the flexibility to take reservations, which has opened up a whole new world for us.” Les Frères’ original room seats 27, while the new room accommodates 22 people for a sit-down dinner or as many as 35 for a cocktail party. I Fratellini seats 34.

“I have a partner in crime who helps me design these places,” she says. That coconspirator is David Richardson of David Kent Richardson Decorations and Interior Design. “He is a great curator. We would shop together, or I would find things. Being able to create like that is such a joy.”

Diners looking for typical French bistro fare won't be disappointed at Bar Les Frères. Pictured here are two favorites: Toulouse sausage, and roasted bone marrow.





Vongsaly, who is originally from Laos, and Robinson are collaborators. “He met me right when he came here, around ’82,” she says. “He’s always done the cooking.”

They wanted Bar Les Frères’ new space to feel like a library, complete with massive wood tables that can be brought in for private parties. “The other side feels like a fun little bar in a boutique hotel in Paris.” At night, candlelight creates a jewel-like effect. “It is truly spectacular,” she says.

Candles also light the night at I Fratellini. “We keep the lights really low, lots of candles at night. It’s very romantic – it’s romantic, but it’s lively.” Open the door, and you’ll be struck by the room’s energy. “It really does feel like Europe,” she says.

Robinson collaborates with Vongsaly on the menus, which change seasonally, with elements that may be altered from day to day. “I’m a cook – I don’t cook in the restaurants. But I can definitely put a menu together,” she says. “I plant the seed, and I hound until that becomes a dish we like.”

Vongsaly, a native of Laos, is also in charge of the kitchen in Robinson’s third restaurant, the Pan-Asian BoBo Noodle House, a quick-service restaurant on Skinker Boulevard catty-corner from Washington University. He also was the chef at her previous restaurants, Café Zoë and Zoë’s Pan Asian. “He met me right when he came here, around ’82. He’s always done the cooking.” His heritage was a bonus when they opened Les Frères, she notes: “He had a little bit of a French background.”

She describes the food at Les Frères as “simple French cooking, old school, not heavy on butter or cream. I’ve gone with classic French dishes but we’ve made it our own.” Working from a tiny kitchen, Vongsaly and his staff turn out a full menu, from potato blinis with caviar and crème fraîche to lobster bisque to duck confit with Bordeaux sauce.

"The other side feels like a fun little bar in a boutique hotel in Paris," says Robinson of Bar Les Frères.





David Richardson of David Kent Richardson Decorations and Interior Design, is Robinson's "coconspirator" in design.



Top to bottom, left to right. Lobster ravioli with lemon, basil, and Parmigiano-Reggiano from Il Fratellini. Grilled prosciutto-wrapped Belgian endive stuffed with fresh mozzarella. Arugula salad with pine nuts, Parmigiano Reggiano and red wine vinaigrette makes for a delicious antipasto. One of I Fratellini's house specialties is its linguine with clams, white wine, and garlic.

The wine list is French with a focus on Champagne, and the cocktails are classic. French 75, made with Champagne and gin and a twist of lemon, is the best seller. Another favorite is the Pamplemousse, a combination of grapefruit liqueur, cassis and, of course, Champagne.

At I Fratellini, Vongsaly celebrates good ingredients, strong flavors and simple preparations. “He is pretty bold with his seasonings,” Robinson says. “Walk in and smell the garlic, hear the fish sizzling in the pan. It envelops you.”

One popular antipasto is thinly sliced strips of zucchini “carpaccio” that are quickly grilled, brushed with olive oil and topped with Parmigiano-Reggiano. Another is Belgian endive

stuffed with fresh mozzarella, wrapped in prosciutto and thrown on the grill. “Both make a wonderful lunch,” she says. (I Fratellini is open for lunch on weekdays. Both restaurants serve dinner daily except Sunday.)

I Fratellini’s pastas are made locally to her specifications. “We learned when we were in Italy, when there’s an artisan in your village...” you take advantage of that expertise. They fill the stuffed pastas in-house. Two favorites are the lobster ravioli, served in a lemony butter sauce with shreds of fresh basil, and mushroom ravioli.

The wines are Italian or made with grapes native to Italy. The cocktails are classic Italian. “We’ll do a lot of Campari-type things, a twist on that.” There are twists on the classic peach-



Bar Les Frères is the perfect date-night spot.

and-Prosecco Bellini, too, such as the Rossini, made with Prosecco and fresh strawberries.

The menus of these sibling restaurants converge in two dishes. At Les Frères, Vongsaly coats Missouri trout with crushed almonds and serves it over haricot verts. At I Fratellini, the trout is encrusted with pistachios and served over sautéed spinach. Both versions are drizzled with citrus butter. “Same dish, different profiles,” Robinson says.

At Les Frères, filet mignon au poivre is accompanied by scalloped potatoes redolent with Gorgonzola cheese. At I Fratellini, porcini mushrooms enhance the beef and the potatoes are enriched with Parmigiano-Reggiano. “Those are the only two dishes that are on both menus,” Robinson says.

Like Vongsaly, many staffers at the two restaurants have long tenures with Robinson. “We work really hard on our service and consistency,” she says. “My manager has been with me for 22 years, and I have servers who have been with me that long and longer.” That experience translates to a high level of professionalism and service. “I want them to feel like we’ve gone above and beyond,” she says.

“A restaurant of course is about food. I’m big on the aesthetic, and I like people to have a real experience. I think people deserve more than just a good plate of food – they deserve a complete experience. It’s the whole thing.” 

Judith Evans is a James Beard award-winning food journalist, a food blogger and a past president of the Association of Food Journalists.