

# L'en tete *revisited*

A flight of stairs up from a typical Saigon street, **Kelly Norman** visits L'en Tete and found a cosy restaurant providing an excellent dining experience.

OUTFITTED IN PLUSH VELVET couches and settees, the atmosphere at L'en Tete is immediately welcoming. Windows sweep the back wall, looking down onto the corner of Calmette and Nguyen Thai Binh streets in District 1.

Having recently changed hands, the restaurant also went through a menu renaissance, with a new manager Valentin Attali at the helm.

"We love wine, and so our focus was immediately on the wine cellar," says Francis, one of the new partners. After securing an impressive array and choosing the perfect house offerings, the new team got to work on the food and neither was a disappointment.

Appetizers of toast with baba ganoush, roasted peppers, and herb tomatoes perfectly accompanied the house Cabernay, which was served ever-so-slightly chilled.

As a vegetarian, I had discussed my sometimes-limiting diet ahead of time with Valentin, and he came through with a goat cheese salad (VND90,000) unlike any I'd tasted. Ensnared in a filo-like crepe pastry, the warm cheese was complimented by an understatedly tart vinaigrette-tossed salad, finished off with pine nuts and fresh capsicum slices.

My meat-eating companions enjoyed pan-fried foie gras with caramelised apples (VND285,000) and duck with



**Retro:** L'en tete has art exhibitions that change on a two-monthly basis

zucchini and mandarin salad (VND95,000). The foie gras, they reported, was pleasantly light and the sweetness of the apples was a perfect accompaniment to its savouriness. The duck was tender and pink with a touch of crispness to the skin, which the lemony zest of the salad brought out.

But it's not only food that the restaurant is serious about. According to Dominique, the family of proprietors take the art featured at L'en Tete seriously, choosing paintings they feel compliment the atmosphere, and keeping the ambience appeal-

ing by changing them every two months.

The presentation of the main courses was also fantastic. The wasabi tuna tartar (VND110,000) and rack of lamb with garlic cream (VND285,000) looked straight out of a French cuisine magazine. My companions savoured the tuna, commenting on how non-fishy the taste was, and how sublimely the wasabi completed the dish without overpowering it. The lamb was juicy and tender, and the highlight was the sauce, which I got to taste – a rosemary, olive oil, cream and garlic concoction that managed to be subtle and yet remained interesting.

My risotto with mushroom sauce (VND90,000) was rich and nutty, a perfect second course. The risotto was the ideal middle ground between al dente and too soft.

The desserts were equally sublime. The *chocolat fondant*, was made using a recipe passed down from Valetin's family. Rich and decadent, it was served warm and *a la mode*. I was in heaven. The *crème brulee caraibes*, made from capsicum, was equally amazing.

The combined ambience and

service make L'en Tete warm and inviting. Whether you're hanging out with a glass of their superb Chilean house wine or enjoying a full meal, it's a sublime experience that shouldn't be missed. **A**



**Sublime:** The goat's cheese salad (top) and the wasabi tuna tartar (bottom)

restaurants



**Laying on a spread:** Dominique, Valentin, Hoby and Aldric - members of the new team