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Véritable Bistro Français

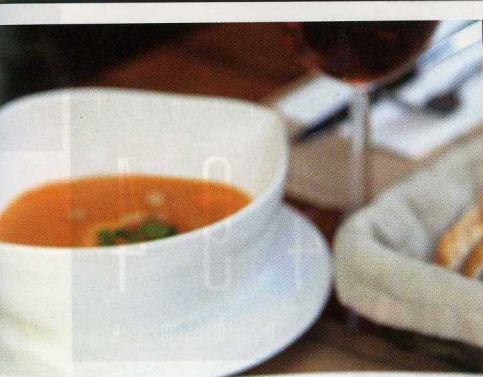
Le Saint-Ex's down-home ambiance and unpretentious French cuisine have made it one of Itaewon's best-loved residents.



Seoul's Itaewon area has always been a melting pot where Korean and foreign cultures blend. However visitors to Itaewon even a decade ago probably wouldn't

recognize the place today, as diverse, popular and increasingly sophisticated as it has become. Although not the wealthiest of Seoul's districts, Itaewon has a uniquely cosmopolitan character that is becoming more pronounced and noticeable with each passing year.

Much of this cultural growth can be attributed to the pioneering businesses that came to the neighborhood years ago, bringing foreign cuisine and style with them. Le Saint-Ex, an unabashedly French eatery that opened its doors in 2001, is one such place.



Situated in a quaint alley off Itaewon's main street, Le Saint-Ex is modeled after what proprietor Benjamin Joinau refers to as the "French neighborhood bistro." Joinau and his business partner, Sang-joon Ahn, took a risk by establishing their restaurant at a time when foreign cuisine was more difficult to find in Korea and Itaewon had a more rough-and-tumble reputation, among Koreans in particular. Rather than offering expensive, ornate western dishes, like some Seoul luxury hotels, the two wanted to create a relaxed, local atmosphere that focused on quality and community instead of pomp. Along these lines the chefs at Le Saint-Ex hand-make as many of their ingredients as possible, visit markets to source fresh local food, and develop seasonal dishes that strive to utilize produce as it is available.

One of the main goals of the bistro, according to Joinau, is to bring variety into Korea and introduce people here to French cuisine. To this end, Le Saint-Ex uses a blackboard to list a constantly shifting cast of set meals and specials in addition to the a la carte menu, which allows chefs to experiment with a versatile range of dishes. Recent standouts include savory trout and scallops with crab soup, and prawns with chestnut and pumpkin risotto. Fine cheese platters are also on offer that feature brie,

goat cheese, munster, and other hard to source (in Seoul) varieties of cheese with fresh bread. The platters can even be paired with the perfect wine to complete the authentic French experience.

A recent introduction to the menu that has proved a hit with patrons is the café gourmand. An ideal way to cap off a meal, this includes a cup of espresso accompanied by miniature desserts such as a tiny apple crumble, raspberry mousse and chocolate crème brulee, as well as a scoop of homemade caramel ice cream. The attention to detail that goes into making this dish is just one example of the care and effort that Le Saint-Ex puts into its meals. For Joinau, it is all about quality. Even though the men behind Le Saint-Ex have had the opportunity to establish other branches in Seoul, they chose not to. When asked why, Joinau simply says, "It is difficult to have both quality and high profits. A restaurant should be about the food it serves...business expansion is not the highest priority."

As a veteran of the Itaewon dining scene, Le Saint-Ex has become a major fixture in the foreign community and is well known for its quality dishes and inviting neighborhood ambiance. In recognition of the bistro's accomplishments, it received the Best Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) award from the European Union Chamber of

Commerce in Korea (EUCCK) in 2009. This December, Le Saint-Ex will be celebrating its 10th anniversary with events, food and wine specials, and a few cuisine themes throughout the month, including French style oysters and specialty duck dishes. The restaurant will even host a cooking class on December 8 and a cheese tasting on December 15 as part of the anniversary celebrations.

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Le Saint-Ex is open for lunch from 12-3 pm, and for dinner from 6-9:30 pm. They also offer brunch on the weekends, and can make space for large groups if contacted in advance. As the restaurant can get quite busy, it is usually a good idea to make reservations for dinner or brunch. For more information about Le Saint-Ex, call them at 82-2-795-2465, or visit their website at <http://www.lesaintex.kr/>.

By Dylan Wood