

Casual Dining: La Boulette

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STORY PHOTOS (1)



La Boulette's chèvre burger (goat cheese on a lamb patty), deliciously crisped sweet-potato fries and Caesar salad.

Photograph by: Allen McInnis, The Gazette

It's another burger place in a bumper crop of burger places. At first there's not a lot to distinguish La Boulette from its considerable competition across town. But this Rosemont address nails it by not going too gourmet, keeping its prices grounded and its approach relatively gimmick-free.

Looking around, the decor lands somewhere between on trend (planks of reclaimed wood for walls and tables, the requisite banquette) and tacky (faux-'50s references in a multitude of framed shots of drive-ins and neon signs, and a jammin' oldies soundtrack that's easy listening – if you can call bobbing between Lionel Richie and Elvis easy to listen to). Open just a few months, it's already a no-brainer for the neighbourhood: a couple of older men drink wine on the sidewalk patio, bare-shouldered couples exchange bites, kids squirm in their seats while chewing on fries, everyone sharing the warm air through the open windows.

I tried three burgers, each with positive results. The classic is a beef patty with caramelized onions, tomato, pickle and mayo. Note: no lettuce, which I personally find interferes with the pure burger experience. The meat was juicy and tasty – almost, but not quite, more juicy than it was tasty – and not too messy, not too dry, not over-salted, the toppings balanced. The bun, squishy and absorbent, was kept basic but allowed itself the extravagance of studding with both white and black sesame seeds.

The burger au bleu delivered on all counts. The caveat being that you've got to love blue cheese, because the St. Ermete came on very strong. Mixing well with caramelized onions and sautéed mushrooms, it rivalled, even surpassed, the version at Burger de Ville (my go-to order at the Montreal West location).

The chèvre burger brought a mild-flavoured lamb patty with a hint of char, a slice of goat cheese, tomatoes, caramelized onions and mayo. Again, a neat little package. The chèvre overpowered the lamb; the kitchen makes a point of not holding back on the promised ingredients.

There are other non-beef burgers among the dozen choices: lamb "pulled" and paired with brie or "kefta" style with yogourt and herbs, a vegetarian option with lentils and Dijon sauce, and also an Asian-style chicken and shrimp patty (which sounds rather like the weird dumpling burger at Le Hachoir in the Plateau). If the menu borrows from other successful places in town, it has improved on the ideas.

Also impressive: La Boulette's fries, specifically the sweet-potato fries, a concept with a history of sounding good but inevitably coming out soggy. Here, they miraculously arrived deliciously crisped with a pure rooty taste beneath the twice-fried crinkly surface. Our choice of paprika mayo delivered a blast of dry smoky spice with each dip.

Thinking a non-burger item might be La Boulette's Achilles heel, I ordered the hot duck, a play on the hot chicken sandwich – a dish in the Quebec casse-croûte lexicon often referred to by its English name. While it didn't look particularly appetizing as the waitress approached – the brown stew spreading over the humps of buns screamed "seniors' home" – this was another surprise. Made with morsels of duck and porcini mushrooms, the sauce was rich and deep, served with a sprinkling of bright green peas. Crunchy and just faintly creamy coleslaw was a bright spark on the side – someone behind the scenes knows what they're doing.

A dessert of croustade – apple and raspberry under a crumble of granola – is something you've had before, something you've probably even made yourself, but something you'll enjoy here. That pretty much goes for the whole experience. It's part of the bigger burger wave, but La Boulette has its priorities straight in putting tasty before trendy.