

Back to basics

Alexis Couquelet

Alexis Couquelet takes *Time Out* to the construction site of his new restaurant Couquley to talk about the bistro revolution and why so many basic dishes are mangled in kitchens around town.



For over five years, Couquelet has been executive chef at many of the city's successful gastronomy concepts, and in that time the well-established chef has observed the market for dining out and has developed his own interpretations of what the city is missing, what it needs and what it potentially could develop into. 'It's every chef's dream to open his own restaurant at some point down his career path. For me to have the opportunity to do so in Beirut is both an honour and a challenge,' Couquelet admits as he stands at the centre of his restaurant-to-be, imagining what it will look like within a few weeks.

Couquelet knows exactly what's missing in Beirut's gastronomic scene and believes he's capable of providing the town with just what it needs, a real bistro. He and his partners have been working slowly and diligently to ensure that once the bistro is open it is flawless in every way. Couquley is an amalgamation of simple French food with a contemporary and relaxed New York approach. Being a French American himself, Couquelet has devised a menu of quality French and American basics.

'I wanted to introduce very simple French specialties, and a few American ones, which you might find around but that I assure you are not done the proper way even in the more refined of restaurants,' Couquelet says. 'What surprises me is that these specific dishes are extremely simple but obviously difficult to master. I want to share with the locals what a Croque Madame or Monsieur really tastes like and what a real Philly Steak is supposed to be.' He's also introduced typical French dishes

including duck, foie gras and steak tartare.

The aim of Couquley is to gather everybody from businesspeople seeking a venue for meetings or a quick lunch to groups of friends, couples and even individuals wanting to go out solo for a nibble, coffee or dessert. The prices, in turn, reflect Couquelet's vision. 'The bistro is definitely a place you could visit at least twice or three times a week, whether because of the pricing or because of the menu variety it offers. I think the place has it all, the quality, the charm and a wonderful ambience, not to mention that we have a great urban location with cosy indoor seating and a charming outdoor area.'

Couquelet acknowledges that no successful concept in Beirut is safe from copycats and from the snowballing of competitors. His hope is for the locals to recognise the authenticity of the concept and perhaps to be credited for starting a new movement in the local hospitality industry. 'I'll be waiting for competition with open arms.' Meanwhile Couquelet will be hard at work in the kitchen delighting his guests.

Couquley opens in October (01 442678). The Alleyway, Gouraud Str, Gemmayzeh.

