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The Rest of the Best: Houston's Top 10 Bistros

By Katharine Shilcutt Thu., May 9 2013 at 8:00 AM

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Houston's bistros are much more modern -- and far less French.

How do you define a bistro?

If you're going to stick to the traditional Parisian definition, a bistro (or *bistrot*) is a small, tidy restaurant that serves inexpensive wine and simple dishes in a modest price range. Those dishes are traditionally French "comfort food" recipes like *coq au vin*, *boeuf bourguignon* and *steak-frites*.

In a modern American city, the concept of a bistro goes beyond its Gallic roots but still -- I think -- stays true to form even if it's not serving remotely French food. I consider a bistro in Houston to be a small, unpretentious restaurant -- usually of the neighborhood restaurant variety -- serving hearty, simple food and a selection of alcoholic beverages.

For this reason, I couldn't consider more upscale French restaurants such as L'Olivier, Aura or Philippe -- places which draw audiences from all over the city, as opposed to the restaurant's immediate area. Nor could I consider too-casual spots that don't offer alcohol or a menu beyond a few sandwiches and pastries.

Bistros occupy a necessary middle ground between these two ends of a spectrum as a restaurant that offers a charming atmosphere and a thoughtful food and wine/beer selection with mid-range prices.

3. Giacomo's Cibo e Vino

Just as Nosh is the South Asian version of a bistro, if a classic French bistro was born and raised in Italy, the result would be Giacomo's Cibo e Vino. This casual Italian restaurant and wine bar off Lower Shepherd near River Oaks captures the essence of Italian city life and the spirit of the slow food movement. Giacomo's snack-sized plates of rustic Italian food, its cheap, easy-drinking wines, great espresso and top-shelf gelato are the main draws -- and there's also a big, comfortable patio that's beckoning in this spring weather.