

Gastronomy in Houston: Is the French cuisine trendy?

Houston is the 4th largest city in the United States thanks to a population around 2.3 million, coming from all around the globe. Its rich melting pot allows a large diversity of cuisines representing around 70 countries. The city counts more than 10,000 restaurants and the most frequented are the steakhouses, Tex-Mex, Asian or Italian restaurants.

However, the French cuisine is very little represented in this cosmopolitan city for there are less than twenty restaurants offering traditional French dishes. One of the most renowned is Artisans where Chef Jacques Fox realizes dishes in the purest French tradition.

I had the chance of meeting Chef Fox and of interviewing him to better understand the restaurant industry here. He has been living in the US since the 80s which gives him a great perspective on the industry. I wanted to direct the interview around questions which could be useful for anybody wanting to open a restaurant or bakery in the area – or even for culinary lovers.



Q: How is the restaurant industry doing in Houston?

A: The industry is slowly regaining its footing after the falling of oil prices in 2015. The economy of the area depends on the gas industry. If everything is going well for them, we can hope that our industry will do well. However, if the gas industry is having difficulties, your turnover will be impacted. People do not organize working dinner to sign contracts anymore. Companies are cutting budgets.

Q: And what can you tell about the French cuisine more specifically?

A: The steakhouse and the Tex-Mex food monopolize the majority of the market. It is rare to come to Houston to eat at a fine French restaurant. You need to be tenacious to manage a traditional French restaurant in this city. The vast majority of Americans do not perceive French cuisine as something you would eat on the daily. It is reserved for special occasions. French cuisine can be intimidating. It has the reputation of being highly sophisticated. We have to show that we do not only cook stiff dishes and that it can be appreciated outside of special events.

Q: As a habitant of the area for numerous years and as a Chef in the city, can you spark opportunities for a French Chef eager to become well-known here?

A: There are opportunities. The concept chosen should be simple and should stand out from the rest but without going too far. Most of the time, people do not take long lunch breaks or find it easier to go through the Drive Thru of restaurants.

It is important to be aware of the bursting point of the market. Here, you will find a restaurant at every corner street and new ones are opening every day. I believe that to have something that would work over a long period of time, you need to come with already a name made in France. You should be dynamic and determined, yet do not be afraid of the work in the kitchen, in networking... You should always be seen when you want to be known in the culinary world.

Q: What about the provision of capital and budget needed to open a restaurant in Houston?

A: It is better to go to town. The best option is to find Business Angels to finance it. The return on investment can take time and in most of the cases, restaurants do not make profit before the five first years.

Taking a loan is a possibility, however its repayments can begin to be very heavy especially if the restaurant does not have a lot of customers.

If you are planning on investing 5 million on the project, you should make sure that you can have at least 20% of this amount in your pocket, just in case of difficulties.

Q: What other advice would you give to be a successful Chef in Houston?

A: Speaking English is imperative! In the United States and particularly in the South, people love to be able to communicate and get to know you. A Chef cannot stay in the kitchen all the time. He has to be everywhere in the restaurant. It's by talking with your customers that you will give a good reputation to your restaurant. You do not need to be bilingual but be able to maintain a

discussion. The French accent is not an issue, it even gives you some charm.

I would advise anyone wanting to open something here to spend around 2 weeks in the area. You should contact the French and American Chamber of Commerce to help you in your research and to discuss with restaurants and bakeries. It will give you a picture of the reality of the market to adapt your business plan to fit the local economy the best. You will also be aware of the cultural customs.

Houston is a highly spread city. The nightlife activities are not numerous around restaurants like you would see it in Paris or New York. Naturally, it impacts dinner time which is often earlier than in France.

Q: What are the 3 essential things to know in order to settle properly in the city?

A: The chosen location should be well thought of. It should be located in an upcoming area. Being closed to hotels is an advantage. People do not want to walk in the heat or drive in traffic to go eat.

Having a lawyer by your side is a necessity. American laws are numerous and different than French laws. Surrounding yourself with someone able to guide you through the meanderings of the legislation should not be neglected.

American accounting does not follow the rules of French accounting. You should seek help from an accountant, at least at the beginning in order to manage your accounts correctly and understanding how it works.

The below list is not exhaustive and there are more essentials to think about such as

rules of hygiene, taxations, banking options, human resources regulations... This is why it is always preferable to be advised and guided during the opening procedure. Organizations such as FACC and also experts are always willing to help you.

Q: What type of cuisine and design would you recommend?

A: First, you should focus on understanding the customs and the relationships people have with food. Before opening my restaurant, I worked for numerous hotels around the country. It is where I have been able to understand what they like to eat and how they like it. It made me figure out that I could not cook traditional French food as I would in France. You should cook a cuisine that I like to call eclectic French – adapting dishes to their tastes. Working closely with an American Chef is an advantage. He would be able to advise you on what the customer would like or no.

Other cultural habit that is not common in France is the fact that a lot of meal can be personalize in the US. You can pick the sides, dressings, if you want to add or take something out... However, it is difficult to change a gastronomic plate. The plate has been studied in order to create a harmony between the ingredients and make the flavors pop together.

Regarding the design, you should not try to reproduce the Michelin restaurants. They like frills but you do not want them to feel out of place entering your place. For example, at Artisans, we decided to not put tablecloths – something that they are not used to have on tables here.

The majority of our income is from private parties. While designing the dining area,

we added two rooms that you can privatize. We can welcome working dinner, anniversaries, birthdays and even weddings in the biggest of the rooms. It is an advantage to have at least one private room in your restaurant.

Q: How did Artisans become well-known to the population of Houston?

A: To be known, investing in marketing is a must. We are highly active on Facebook and we are also on the app Open Table. Thanks to social media, it is easier to reach to a large number of people. Open Table, which allows you to pick a restaurant by the type of food you would like, ensures us to be found by a public wanting to eat French.

When we opened Artisans, we did not try to cut the budget by cutting marketing expenditures. We focused on spending on buying pages in papers. For a page, it could cost around \$2,500. If you only do it once, it would not help you. I suggest hiring a person responsible for everything about marketing for the restaurant.

Q: In France, Chefs have a certain status, is it the same here in Houston? Or did you need to change your management style?

A: It is different. The Chef is a cook like the others. The chefs in the US are not held in the same regard or respect compared to the ones in France. The people working in the kitchen or waitressing have not received the same “savoir-faire” than in our hospitality schools. However, it is starting to change thanks to the arrival of culinary/hospitality schools in the country.

When I first arrived in a new kitchen in the United States, most of the time, I would

take several days or weeks to cover the basics of waitressing or running of the kitchen.

Q: Let's talk about Artisans. What can you say about it?

A: Artisans is different than the other restaurants in the city. We thought about following the concept of "Chef's table". The entire restaurant is designed around its open kitchen. Customers can admire the making of the plates from scratch until the dressing. It is a singular concept that can be surprising at first but who everybody ends up liking at the end.

The uniqueness of Artisans is also in your cooking style which follows the French tradition, and which gives it the capability of being one of the only authentic French restaurants in the heart of Houston.

Q: And what about the menu?

A: Our menu is "A la carte" where you can find escargot or veal to just name a few but we also offer courses lunch and dinner.

The 3 courses lunch was thought about, so it does not take too much time to enjoy and can be right for people working in offices on a lunch break. Its reasonable cost is around \$29, and you will eat a soup or salad, main meal and dessert (that you will be able to pick from a selection)

For dinner, we offer between a six courses to a 8 courses dinner. They are more sophisticated, and you cannot choice the courses. The starting price for the courses dinner is \$85.

We always use fresh and quality products in all our plates. 40% of our income comes from the courses dinner.



Q: To conclude, how do you wish people remember Artisans after a meal there?

A: At Artisans, we want our customers to feel comfortable and not hurried, enjoying the atmosphere and the meals brought to them. The goal is not only to cook them French food but to make them live a different experience and a moment of sharing and togetherness.

Find Chez Fox on:

<http://artisansrestaurant.com/>

<https://www.facebook.com/artisansrestauranthouston/>

Lea Chapusot, FACC Houston