

COOUTURE CUISINE

By ANDREA KENNEDY

FRENCH CUISINE IS THE CHANEL COLLECTION OF THE FOOD WORLD. Classic. Timeless. At least it should be if done right, and it is at Pelham's Bistro Rollin.

"The standard has been set," says Executive Chef Manny Lozano. "How you meet that standard is our everyday goal."

Model standouts are his steak frites pan-crusted to perfection – no grills in his kitchen, thank you very much – and the steamed melt-in-your-mouth mussels that leave an eye-rollingly buttery broth behind. Lozano works wonders with veal cheeks, truffles and sweetbreads.

And if his menu reads like a Chanel walk-in, the French onion soup is a bouclé jacket. Plush-textured with a crisp edge, it envelops you in luxurious warmth.

"When The New York Times says it is as good, if not better, than the one they've had in Paris, you kind of can't take it off the menu," Lozano says.

Though the bistro identifies as American – they do offer items outside of the French tradition and, obviously, they aren't located in France – roll up to its sidewalk patio and you'll swear you're bike-riding with a baguette in your basket sporting a raspberry beret. It's a trellised snapshot of Paris down to the royal blue Rue Rollin street sign that transports you to its namesake Parisian lane, widely known as the city's oldest, where philosophers René Descartes and Blaise Pascal once lived. Lozano's French offerings are equally rooted.

"We don't reinvent the wheel on certain things," he says. "Chicken liver mousse is a recipe I wouldn't dare touch. Alain Ducasse uses that recipe and he won't touch it. And if he's not going to touch it, who am I to touch it?"

It's rich, velvety and impeccably smooth. It's also house-made, just one of more than a dozen pâtés in Lozano's repertoire. Can't think of any Westchester eateries that offer house-made pâtés? "That makes two of us," he says.

He's old school like that. And though he honors those before him who perfected the cuisine – there's a reason why culinary schools train in French technique – he humbly considers himself an eternal student who pleads the fifth in naming his "best" works.

"Whatever I think now is my best dish may get replaced by something else," Lozano explains. "It's really just one great journey. It's this craft I'm trying to perfect every day, and it's a fun ride."

The ride has included stops at top-echelon Manhattan spots like March, and Aureole, and six years as sous chef at L'Absinthe. He and another vet of the latter teamed to open the Relais & Châteaux inn Winvian in Morris, Conn. before Lozano joined longtime Pelham family the Bratones to launch Bistro Rollin in 2009.

If you know of the Bratones – and with their decades-long history in Westchester, most locals do – it's no wonder that the sophisticated business family made Lozano their chef selection. Barbara, former executive director of La Napoule Art Foundation on the Côte d'Azur, and Arthur, managing partner of a private company based in the Middle East and a longtime trustee of The American University of Paris, are like local ambassadors of cross-the-pond culture. Even interior artworks are by celebrated Austrian painter Alexander Rutsch (who also called Pelham home) from the Bratones' own collection.

But while sophisticated, the bistro is far from stuffy. It's instead the ideal union of casual warmth and elegance. The French have their own term for it. (And no, it's not "je ne sais quoi.") A recent trip to Paris with the Bratones introduced Lozano to the concept of "bistronomique" – innovative haute cuisine in a laid-back atmosphere.

"I think people think it's cool to be casual and have a really nice meal at the same time," he says. The French are, of course, harbingers of cool.

And how did Rollin measure up to its Parisian counterparts? "We're doing OK," Lozano says with a smile. "And I say that modestly."

If the food doesn't speak for itself, rave reviews do, including those by chefs hailing from a five-year-voted best restaurant on the planet.

"We had some chefs from Spain come for dinner from elBull (which closed in 2011) ... We got a beautiful letter from them saying that they were very impressed. It was a very flattering letter."

On a more regular basis, folks will trek from the city or Long Island for Lozano's fare, while others nearby will frequent several times a week. His 10-year-old son, though, gets Dad's dishes regularly – from lasagna (a favorite) to occasional fancy French plates like pommes de terre duchesse – that they enjoy once they've worked up an appetite on the ball field.

Whether sporting a baseball mitt or kitchen mitt, Lozano keeps his own style more low-key casual. What exits his



Chef Manny Lozano. All images courtesy of Bistro Rollin.



Duck breast à la Bistro Rollin



French onion soup à la Bistro Rollin



Mussels à la Bistro Rollin



Streetside seating at Bistro Rollin

kitchen may be worthy of Chanel, but he's satisfied in chef whites and trademark bandanna.

"That's my fashion statement," he

says with a grin.

Bistro Rollin is at 142 Fifth Ave. in Pelham. For more, call (914) 633-0780 or visit bistrorollin.com. ■