

Dish Omaha – August 20th, 2025

Jeff: Time now for another edition of Dish Omaha, featuring KVNO's resident foodie, Diane Watson. Bonjour!

Diane: Bonjour, Jeff! Welcome to an occasional series we're going to do here on Dish called Remember When. We will be taking a look at some of the storied restaurants that made Omaha what it is today, but aren't with us anymore, and share some memories and some stories. Today, we are going to talk about the French Café.

Jeff: Ah, yes.

Diane: Do you have any memories of the French Café?

Jeff: I remember my first time going there. I was in college, working at Physicians Mutual, and became friends with one of the vice presidents there, who was a big fan of...

Diane: Fancy.

Jeff: ... The French Café, and he took me there for lunch, and I just remember thinking, what is this magical place?

Diane: That is a perfect word, I think, and when you think about what that restaurant meant to so many people, the history makes it even more magical than it even happened to begin with. When the French Café opened in 1969, the old market was kind of declared dead. The neighborhood was decaying, there wasn't much happening, and Sam Mercer, as most of us know, who had worked as an attorney in Paris, planned the revitalization. He owned most of the property in the old market, and he decided to open a restaurant to try to attract more people in, and get the restaurant, or get the neighborhood going again. He brought in a chef, I'm going to, I speak French too, but we're going to try to do this name, Chef Toisson Moliac, I probably butchered that a little bit, but he had been a chef at La Louisiane in Paris, and Café de Paris in Cambodia. This guy was legit.

Jeff: Mhm.

Diane: The French Café was the only French restaurant between Chicago and San Francisco.

Jeff: Incredible.

Diane: Isn't that amazing? And he didn't stay very long, but then he brought in another guy who had worked in Paris, so the food was absolutely the star, but people couldn't get over the ambiance like you did, thinking it was magical. These romantic floor-to-ceiling windows, the exposed brick, the stained glass, just gorgeous, but the draw was, of course, the food. We all remember la soupe à l'oignon gratinée. Can you translate that?

Jeff: Oignon gratinée, onion soup.

Diane: It was \$1.

Jeff: Oh, la la. (Laughter)

Diane: And the escargot de bourguignon, \$2.25. House pâté with pistachios, \$1.75. How about veal cordon bleu for \$6? The desserts were also a star, chocolate mousse, creme de menthe parfait, crêpes suzette. Now I'm so hungry. Menez, who was the current chef, left, and then Mercer sold it to two of the managers. And then in 1975, the restaurant was honored in Mainliner magazine, which was the United Airlines magazine.

Jeff: Oh, wow.

Diane: We remember how important those magazines were. And then they made an attempt to make the restaurant, quote, this is their quote, less highfalutin. You know, I think people sometimes get a little like, well, it's white tablecloth.

Jeff: Right, right.

Diane: Am I good enough to go in there? So it remained a special occasion place. And then in 2008, they really kind of revitalized the menu. The food reviews were fantastic. The interior was criticized a little bit for being tired, you know, and people's tastes change.

Jeff: Yeah, yeah.

Diane: In 2008, Jeff Camp, who had owned Travato's, came in and worked there. He had been trained in classic French techniques. And then he eventually became the chef de cuisine, executive chef. And there's a story. He hired a young chef de cuisine after he became executive chef who was trained in very modern techniques. And there was the trend of celebrity chefs coming in. And on the first night, this new young chef went into the freezer to see what was available. He was there two and a half hours, and he threw away almost everything in the walk-in because the new techniques didn't appreciate frozen food.

Jeff: Wow.

Diane: Right?

Jeff: Sounds like an episode of The Bear, if you've seen that.

Diane: I love that show. The restaurant closed on March 4th, 2012. But as we know, then in 2013, Le Bouillon opened in its space. And my friend Paul Kulik had worked at the French Café in the 1990s. And he's done a really nice job of honoring the history and tradition, but making the restaurant much more accessible, I would say. He still has the French onion soup and beef bouillon. But he's a wine merchant store in Montcov, which is a fantastic champagne bar in the basement.

Jeff: Oh, it's so cozy down there in the Howard Street wine merchant. They have such unusual, interesting wines.

Diane: Very. Things you can't see anywhere else. And of course, the Sam Mercer artwork all over the place. So, if you haven't been downtown and had some French food in a while, it's a fun visit. Excellent.

Jeff: Diane Watson, merci beaucoup.

Diane: Très bien. Au revoir.

Jeff: Au revoir.