

Savouring Alsace

bite back

Maitre Karl Cafe and Bistro

197 High St, Willoughby

Phone: 9958 1110

Open: Tues-Sun (8am-4.30pm;
6pm-10pm)

Two courses: \$42, licensed and
BYO (corkage \$6 per bottle)

Overall score (out of 20)

Value for money	16
Service	18
Ambience	16
Food	18

18

Someone born in Alsace in 1869 would have changed nationalities four times by 1946. That helps explain why, while Maitre Karl's chef Joel Baur is from the Alsace capital, Strasbourg, the food criss-crosses Europe. Alsace to-and-fro'd between Germany and France for nearly a century so the cuisine in that (now) French province is a curious but exciting mix of both nations.

Karl Geissler, who opened this buzzy suburban eatery just two months ago, hails from Bavaria. He describes the food at Maitre Karl as "French/Euro".

"From time to time we will include Czech dishes, too," he says. "The menu will change every two or three months and, while we have focused on richer dishes throughout winter, we plan to 'lighten up' a bit in the warmer months."

When four of us paid a visit on a recent Tuesday night the place was chockers.

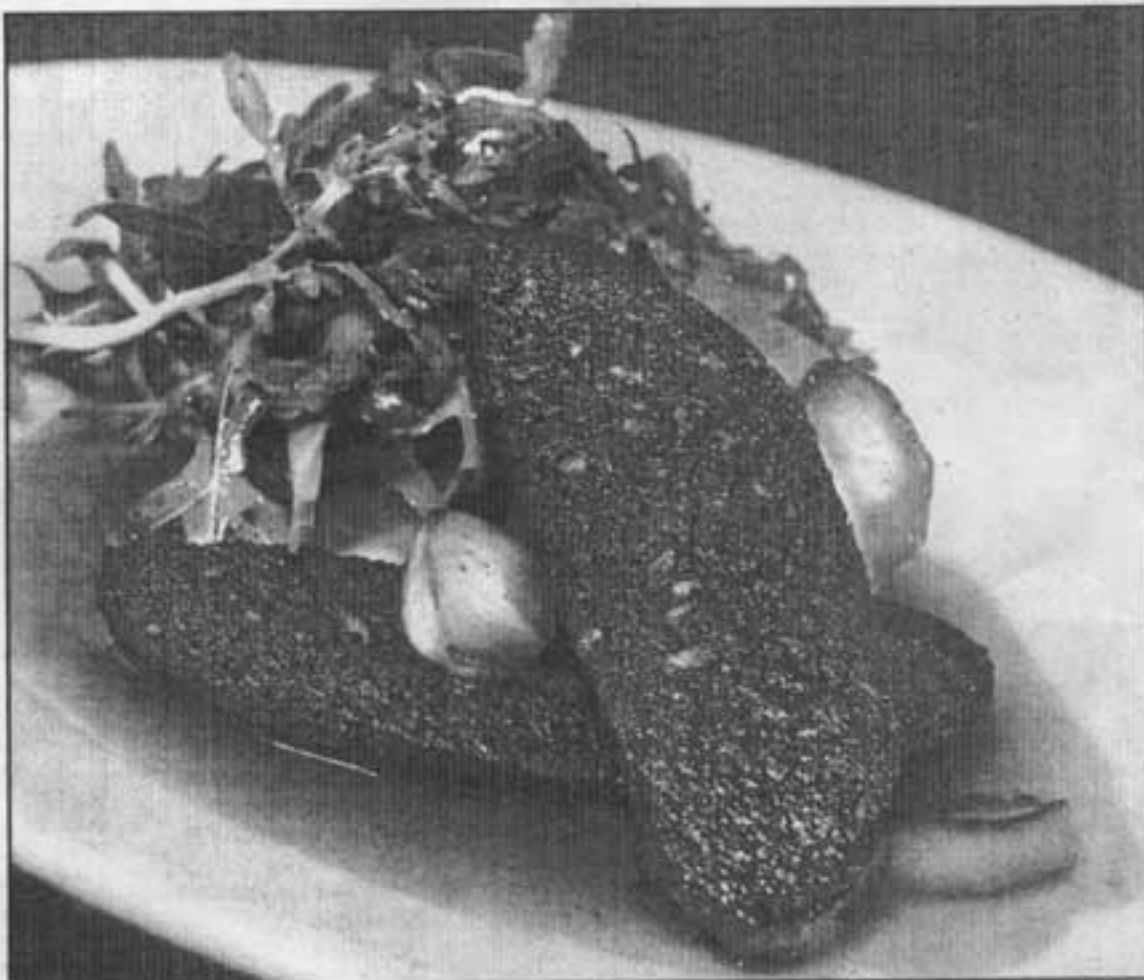
As a pipe-opener we decided to share a "flammekueche" — also called "tarte flambee" — Alsace's answer to the pizza.

Maitre Karl offers nine versions; we opted for the traditional and basic, labelled here as classic (\$14.50). Ingredients were finely sliced onion and bacon atop a cheese (instead of pizza's tomato) base.

The feather-light concoction was "better than any pizza I've ever had" declared one of our group. He was equally enamoured of his entree, which was marinated prawns on a risotto cake (\$17.50).

I went for an entree of boudin noir (\$14.50), black pudding — less appetisingly known as blood sausage — on a bed of apples and crushed sweet potato. And courtesy of the apple, it married perfectly with a bottle of riesling. A fabulous dish if you blot out the ingredients: onion, pork blood and fat. The French version is tastier than stodgy British black pudding, with this example hailing from Normandy.

For mains we selected a couple of black-board specials: cassoulet (\$25.50) and crisp pork knuckle with choucroute and onion confit mash (\$26.50). The pork knuckle was



French-bred . . . the black pudding (above) is a Normandy delicacy. Below: Maitre Karl owner Karl Geissler (seated) and chef Joel Baur

Pictures: JOHN FOTIADIS

huge. If you plan to order something like this, be sure to skip lunch or, as my old dad used to say, "have something light, like a glass of water and a cork".

It was not only massive but fall-off-the-bone tender with the crispiest crackling skin imaginable. Choucroute — called sauerkraut in Germany — is a traditional Alsace accompaniment of shredded, salted, fermented and stewed cabbages.

The cassoulet (casserole) — with a duck leg towering over a hearty helping of white beans and sausage — was also first class.

Due to the pre-entree "flammekueche" and dinosaur-ish knuckle, we had no space for sweets. Probably a pity since Geissler proclaims: "We bake all our own cakes."

He asserts a big part of Maitre Karl's business is afternoon tea and cakes for mothers doing the school run.

Geissler was food and beverage manager of the old Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Macquarie St and his background shows. And with chef Baur, 32, having cooked in the US, Switzerland, Provence, the French Alps and, of course, Alsace, the food is well-prepared.

There's no hurry to go though. I reckon Maitre Karl will be around for a long time. Even in fickle Sydney.

JEFF COLLERSON

