



DINING/RYE

A Contemporary Twist On Traditional French

By M.H. REED

FACED with today's dining trends toward grazing, fusion cuisine (particularly Asian), and the use of local and organic foods in a lighter style of cooking, most traditional French restaurants have been forced to beat 'em, join 'em or simply close up shop. Jacques Loupiac, owner of La Panetière in Rye, has decided to join 'em, gingerly, and his new direction is clear.

Like provincial figurines and ubiquitous roosters, lavish multicourse meals may have had their day. The décor at La Panetière has been pared down somewhat, and the look is more contemporary, dependent on dramatic spurts of brilliant color — in table napkins and floral arrangements — against stark white tablecloths. Special menus now offer small plates: half-portions at half price at lunch; and a two-course meal at dinner.

Although dishes are still listed mainly in French — a holdout that can't possibly last — Mr. Loupiac increasingly

gives credit to American products; we have boeuf du Kansas, agneau du Colorado, homard du Maine and canard de Long Island. Assimilation may be slow, but this French restaurant seems to be recognizing its American heart.

A beginning of fresh petit pain with butter from a cool gray crock and a tiny lagnappe — perhaps a thimble of squash soup — whet the appetite for the artistically arranged dishes that followed. Juicy partially boned quail cooked under a brick arrived on a bed of frisée laced with sweet-tart citrus sauce, the faultless arrangement punctuated by a poached quail egg and a small mound of caramelized endive. The sweet and the tart were employed brilliantly again in relishes that countered the richness of duck terrine scattered with bits of black truffle.

Set as though on a painter's palette, a seafood assortment made a delightfully light and refreshing starter: a fresh oyster, a bit of caviar, smoked salmon tartar and tuna, a hint of wasabi on a small salad of greens. With these top-notch starters to choose from, bland bison carpac-

cio could be skipped.

The names of a couple of appetizers were misleading. A lasagna included no pasta but layers of excellent forest mushrooms. A special ravioli, also bereft of pasta, brought crab meat sandwiched between two translucent slices of turnip. (True, ravioli is derived from the Italian word for turnip, but this is not something most diners would pick up on.)

A row of chanterelles gave earthy support to an entree of grilled Kansas beef, the smooth tenderloin full of meaty flavor; and roasted garlic flan and baby fennel lent their soothing yet distinctive flavors to silky riblets from a rack of tender Colorado lamb (\$4 surcharge).

Our only complaint about superb Dover sole with beurre blanc, melted shallots and boiled potatoes was the classic presentation; the white on white effect needed some color relief. In general, colorful vegetable garnishes were absent in the design of many entrees. Big scallops were rich and clean in a fragrant sauce thickened with mascarpone. Poached lobster carried a surcharge of \$4, but the hefty chunk was carefully poached to the precise tender moment. Only black sea bass (bar) was overcooked and mealy.