

# DiRōNA RESTAURANT SPOTLIGHT

## Hamersley's Bistro: Seems Like Home

By Vickie Mabry, Managing Editor,  
Distinguished Dining

Last summer, I sat with my mother and an old friend at a table near the window in Hamersley's Bistro at the corner of Tremont and Clarendon in Boston's tony South End. We were eavesdropping. Two men at tables over were telling the waiter that they had just driven all the way from Iowa just for the Roast Chicken with Garlic, Lemon and Parsley. So, when I talked with Gordon Hamersley last month, the first question I had to ask the chef, co-owner and creator of said chicken, was: What is up with that? Why would two guys from Iowa drive all the way to Boston for roast chicken?

"You'd have to ask them," laughs Gordon. "But it probably had something to do with a review Bob Levi, of the *Boston Globe*, wrote about our restaurant some-time ago. He raved about this damn chicken dish. Over the years, it's become a kind of cult dish. It's easy to make and easy to eat. It's comforting — like the restaurant itself." Gordon's reference to the restaurant's atmosphere took me back to that summer evening I spent at Hamersley's Bistro.

We were among the first to arrive. The interior was painted the color of sweet butter adorned with wooden ceiling beams, iron chandeliers and white gauzy curtains. Our table setting was equally simple. A large window between the dining room and the kitchen allowed us to watch the cooks at work.



Gordon Hamersley

We were nearing the end of a girl's only weekend on the Cape. For our last night in Massachusetts, our host wanted to take us to Hamersley's Bistro. A quick check on the DiRōNA website cinched the decision.



Seated and settled, we poured over the menu, which changes with each season. My friend ordered the Smoky Duck Breast with Curried Peach Chutney and Couscous Salad. I chose the Pan Roasted Lobster with Corn, Green Beans and Tomato Salad. My mother, with her proclivity for the sure thing, ordered the chicken.

To be fair, it wasn't just the recommendation of two men from Iowa that led her to decide on the chicken. Mom grew up on the farm and she has always had an appreciation for good food, simply made from the freshest ingredients. It turns out, that fresh food, made well and served in an unpretentious manner is exactly what inspires Gordon Hamersley.

When Gordon started cooking in 1975, he discovered that he "liked the adrenaline charge." He trained with Wolfgang Puck in California where he met his wife Fiona. Together they moved to France in 1982 spending the year totally immersed in the culture. Once back in the states, Gordon and Fiona put everything they learned and loved about French bistro cuisine into their own New England version. Hamersley's Bistro opened in 1987 in a tiny storefront on Boston's hip South End eventually moving to its current location in 1993.

I asked Gordon what influences his cooking. "Wolfgang taught me the importance of finding good purveyors," Gordon admits. "But in France I really developed an understanding for regional economy and the fact that, good food, grown nearby, frankly, tastes better. There's a strong connection between the farmer and the chef."

Fiona runs the front of the house and oversees the wine selection, almost always in reaction to Gordon's culinary creations. In his cookbook, *Bistro Cooking At Home*, Gordon explains:

"I love cooking food with bold flavors for Fiona to fool

around with. As she tries each wine, she scribbles down descriptions. Sometimes she'll throw her pen down in disgust and shout something like, 'Just because asparagus is in season doesn't mean we have to put it in every dish!' I usually keep eating knowing that sooner or later she'll find a wine that will work."

Indeed she does, judging from the wine list we chose from last summer. It included 70 varieties of red wine; 59 white wine labels and nine champagnes. Twelve were available by the glass and 30 were available in half bottles. We had three different wines by the glass, none of them disappointing.

For dessert we shared Lemon Custard, a slice of Peanut-Butter-Chocolate Ice Cream Pie with Chocolate Sauce and the Warm Peach Tart with Vanilla Ice Cream and Caramel Sauce. We moved our forks with great care, back and forth, between each plate. Tasting, smiling, saying very little not wanting to trivialize the meal or the trip.

Later, when I asked Gordon what it is about his 17-year-old restaurant that keeps bringing people back.

"We're not the coolest or the hippest restaurant in town, but we do strike a chord. We know what we're good at and I think that confidence shows. The atmosphere is warm and comfortable. It's casual, but we take it seriously. We've got a great staff that do a good job of making people feel at home."

He was right. It did feel like home. From the warm yellow walls to the honestly prepared roast chicken and straight-forward glow of hospitality found usually among family and friends — Hamersley's Bistro felt like home to at least a couple guys from Iowa, two Georgia girls and one knowing Cape-Codder.

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