

# Cheese: It's What's for Dinner

Backstage at Caseus, the cheesiest show in town.

By Nicholas Day

**Caseus**

93 Whitney Ave., New Haven, (203) 624-3373. Bistro hours: Lunch: Mon.-Sat.: 11:30 a.m.-4 p.m. Dinner: Wed.-Thurs.: 5:30-9:30 p.m., Fri.-Sat.: 5:30-10 p.m. \$\$ MC/Visa/Discover &

Jason Sobocinski, the owner and creator of the bistro/cheese shop Caseus, spent a lot of time growing up at his family's deli-grocery on Wooster Street, Cavaliere's. Founded by his great-grandfather and taken over by his great-uncles, the late Cavaliere's was an old-school Italian storefront with produce stacked outside and homemade sausage inside. So it may say something about how New Haven has changed that Sobocinski's own storefront is an upscale gourmet haven with obscure cheeses that top \$30 a pound and artisan fresh sausage that's flown in from Berkeley. Or that his restaurant upstairs, headed by French chef Fabrice Renaudin, has been almost fully booked at lunch and dinner lately.

Sobocinski, who worked until recently at Formaggio Kitchen in Cambridge and just received a graduate degree from Boston University in gastronomy—really—originally intended to return to New Haven and open a simple cheese shop. But he couldn't make the numbers work for the shop alone, so in an accounting sidestep that will seem either brilliant or boneheaded, he opened a shop and a restaurant.

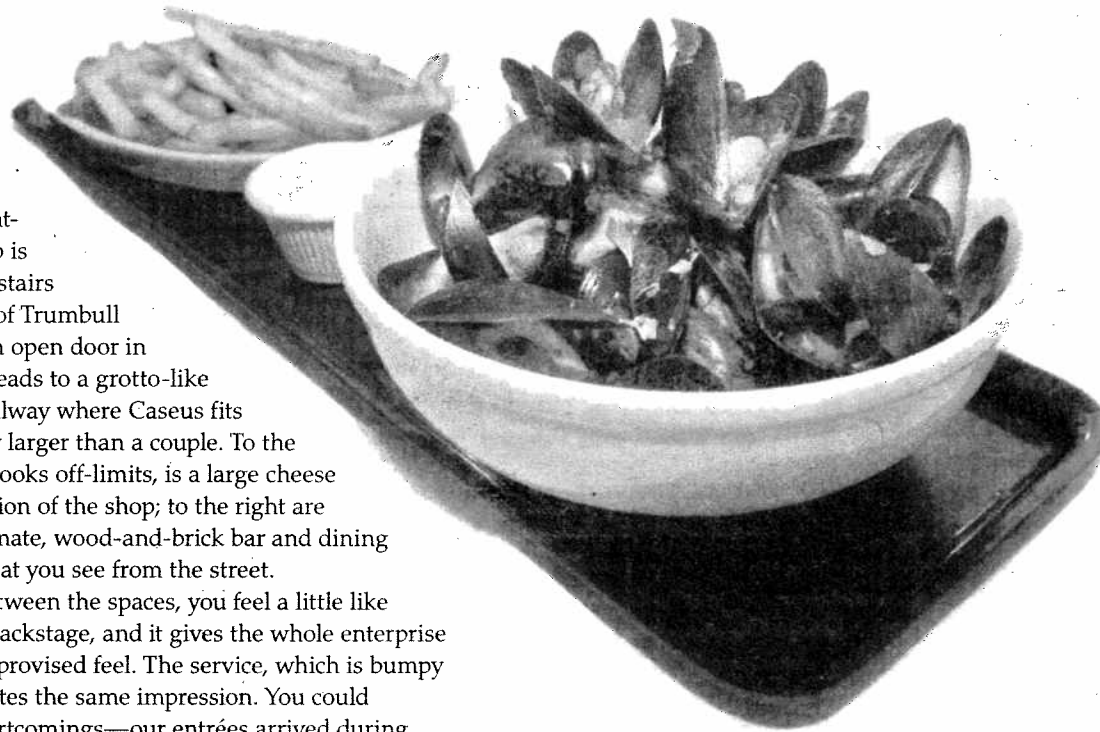
That's why the first step at Caseus is to figure out where

everything is. The somewhat hidden, basement-level cheese shop is down a flight of stairs from the corner of Trumbull and Whitney. An open door in the shop's back leads to a grotto-like dining room—hallway where Caseus fits almost any party larger than a couple. To the left, which only looks off-limits, is a large cheese fridge, an extension of the shop; to the right are stairs to the intimate, wood-and-brick bar and dining room—that's what you see from the street.

Wandering between the spaces, you feel a little like you've been let backstage, and it gives the whole enterprise a charmingly improvised feel. The service, which is bumpy but spirited, creates the same impression. You could dwell on the shortcomings—our entrées arrived during our appetizers, our credit card nearly went moldy on the table—but when the wait staff is scattered because they're so enthusiastic about explaining the cheese selection ("And then there are different types of rennet that are used..."), flaws are easier to forgive.

Bistro standards dominate the menu: A hanger steak (\$17) with wonderfully fatty frites; a deep dish of mussels in white wine and garlic, also with frites (\$16); organic roast chicken (\$19 dinner/\$17 lunch). *Poutine* (\$10 dinner/\$9 lunch)—the French-Canadian, cardiologist-subsidizing dish of french fries, cheese curds and gravy—makes a surprise appearance.

Short ribs (\$20) with pasta and glazed carrots seems initially like a parody of 1950s mid-America cooking—roast and noodles for dinner, kids!—but the long-braised short ribs are powerfully concentrated and the fresh noodles, soaking up butter and beef juices, have more flavor than pretty much



Mmm...mussels and frites.

anything cooked in 1956. It's a dinosaur-sized serving, and it dwarfs, say, the delicate, flaky tart du jour (\$11 dinner/\$10 lunch), recently roasted cherry tomato and thyme. The tart has a lightness and grace that gives the pate brissee crust an almost puff pastry-like lift; nevertheless, its tiny diameter could stand to be stretched an inch.

Caseus is priced on the high side of reasonable: a lovely *frisee aux lardon* salad—frisee, Niman Ranch bacon, hazelnuts, poached egg and, in a recent version, Cava vinaigrette—is pushing it at \$13 (dinner/\$12 lunch), especially if the hazelnuts never show up (they didn't make it in mine).

The obligatory onion soup (\$7) is great, but what it needs, curiously, is less cheese: Caseus serves it in a wide-mouthed bowl, and about halfway through you realize that you're running out of onions and broth—long-simmered, rich, delicious—and floundering on bread and cheese. Even so, the soup's superb, and if you're looking for an all-cheese dinner, order the macaroni and cheese (\$13 dinner/\$10 lunch), too, which is really more like cheese and macaroni. In this creamy white-sauced version, the proportions are nearly flipped. Of course, there's an extensive cheese plate and a charcuterie plate (both \$14), and Caseus has an intriguing, off-center list of wine and beer, both heavily European, for pairing. Each cheese comes with a lengthy explanation, something that Caseus promises in the slogan emblazoned on its awning: "Every cheese has a story." Narrative: It's what's for dinner.

editor@newhavenadvocate.com



Say cheese! The enthusiastic, spirited staff at Caseus.

KATHLEEN CEE PHOTOS