



THE SHOW MUST GO ON

Catherine's Café English Harbour, Antigua

By Louise Wollman

When it came to Antigua—and we came often in those early cruising years—we were Falmouth stalwarts. We liked the wide, open, breezy harbor, gawking at the megayachts in dock, veritable Park Avenue apartment buildings, one after another. All gleaming, all pristine.

English Harbour was quaint, preserved, historically accurate. But tight. Full of winds working at cross-purposes—to each other and certainly to us novices. Anchoring, we'd heard, was quite literally a drag. And the very thought of Med-mooring—well, personally, I'd rather be out in a gale.

No, English was a nice place to walk to: for an excellent haircut at Akparo Salon & Spa or a wee water taxi ride across to Slipway's chandlery. Or for the 6 p.m. spectacle of Tot Club toasts: "To my girlfriend and my wife: may they never meet." And, naturally, "God Save the Queen!"

Turned out English Harbour had

it's own queen. And it's own show, a matinée, as it were. This Gallic queen—Catherine—ruled with benevolence, wit and a champagne-bottle scepter over her lunch-only domain—Catherine's Café, sitting across the small harbor from Nelson's Dockyard and just beneath the Chandlery.

Catherine was sort of a cross between Ethel Merman and a stork: tall, long-legged, effervescent, pulsating with virtually uncontrolled energy. Any minute, she'd break into song or soft-shoe.

An unruly mop—industrial-sized—of ebony bottle curls, barely contained by a headband. Crinkly eye slits, a ski-jump nose perched above a darkly red-lipsticked smile, She seemed always posed, about to spring, a quasi-manic laugh mitigated by pert French élan as she shared some funny anecdote or inside joke with, could be one customer or a full table, just one or a gaggle of her animated waitresses and cooks, all clearly good friends.

Finished with whatever merriment, she'd lope off in another direc-

tion, gamboling through the crowded open-air restaurant porch, maybe to take an order, maybe to find entrees to deliver but always on her way to another pool of fun.

Despite the banter, service was fast, atmosphere and view serene, ambiance delightful. The staff wore clever tee shirts, their backs emblazoned "Garçon!"

Oh, and the food was excellent, light French bistro fare: focaccia and French bread; crisp salads dressed with neatly balanced vinaigrette; Prince Edward Island mussels bathed in shallot/wine sauce; an assortment of tempting quiches; daily specials. And dessert, a warm, ideally executed Tatin: achingly tart yet heart-rendingly sweet apples nestled in a buttery, faultlessly flaky crust.

We crammed several lunches into the next two weeks, focusing often on the steak sandwich: chunks of beef sautéed with onions and stuffed into a crispy baguette, slathered with enough tangy mustard/butter sauce to moisten but not sog up the bread. We'd polish off a bottle of chilled rosé and, cruiser-style, make Catherine's the day's main meal.

Always, Catherine flitted about, the embodiment of

***Sailing On Your Stomach
In the wake of an insatiable food sleuth***



freedom and frolic. I fully expected her animated French waitresses to belt out La Marseillaise...or a Les Misérables barricade song. Or launch a high-kicking can-can. Indeed, on the front door hung a chorus line of mini wood replicas: Cathy, Martine, Cecile, Marine, Corinne. The most ubiquitous, Sophie—pretty, bouncy and friendly—somehow wasn't represented.

I planned on asking why. But next season when we leaped from the water taxi, expectant and hungry, Catherine's Café still was, But alas,

Catherine, along with her troupe and petite statuettes—was gone.

Suddenly a slim, striking-looking man bounded over, flashed a winning, deep-dimpled smile and then stretched his hand in greeting. "You were looking, of course, for Catherine; I am Guillaume, the new owner," he said, his English excellent and—under the circumstances—spiced with reassuring French elisions.

"You will find the menu much the same," he promised. "We have changed little." Turning to escort us, his black tee shirt flashed the com-

forting white "Garçon!" logo.

We were willing, but, naturally, skeptical...So, Guillaume told us later, was most of Antigua. For who could replace Catherine the Great?

SOMETHING NEW

Despite all odds and bets against them, apparently Guillaume and Claudine Moquet have. They kept the décor, but draped the sunny yellow clapboard walls with amusing oil paintings. They wooed suppliers and Catherine's worshipful following. They executed the old menu flaw-



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lessly but added delicate shrimp flambéed in Pernod, a cheeky foie gras brûlée and other Claudine inventions. They replaced Catherine's saucy French waitresses with Antiguan gems: the efficient, always smiling Berlinette and the sassy Natasha, who teases customers unmercifully—and utterly successfully.

Before long Guillaume dropped the handshake and we—like most of their customers—were treated to his-and-her French kisses—well, the appropriate two-cheek variety anyway.

Who are these charmers? Actually, former cruisers, who took one year off to find something new. In July, 2005 they sold their house in Brittany, quit their jobs—librarian and machinery salesman—sailed their Dufour 45 to Guadeloupe and hung there with their two young kids. Knowing nothing of Antigua, they sailed into English Harbour, stayed two weeks, inevitably, lunched at Catherine's and loved it. Claudine eventually had this silly idea of buying the place. Back in chilly France, searching for new careers, she remembered the warm Caribbean.

"Why not?" they decided, made an offer and the rest is current history

Claudine's elfin twinkle and palpable desire to make everyone comfortable compensate for sketchy English. Guillaume's

Calvin Klein-model good looks are a handy accessory. But they're really about mastering and improving the business: hard, brand-new work they're succeeding at. They clearly enjoy—and pamper—their clientele.

Catherine's is cruiser heaven: an awninged porch, surrounded on three sides by water, where you get to feel smug—watching the tour catamarans motor past, piled chock-to-chock with chalky vacationers waving furiously. And superior, as hapless captains—not you—buck wind pockets and cross currents trying to anchor, most unsuccessfully, in crowded, muddy, chain-laden English Harbour.

During Classics and Race Week you get to be superbly fed, gape shamelessly and clap passionately as varnished beauties and salty winners parade officially by.

But you'll need a reservation then: the Claudine-Guillaume duet is a smash hit.

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