



From left: Emmanuel Vallier, Karim Hadjadj, Cristobal Huneeus and Laurent Brouard all own bistros in Hong Kong

THE BISTRO BOOM

With bistros popping up across Hong Kong, four restaurateurs reveal the challenges of bringing authentic French dining to the city.

Text by Tiffany Chan, photos by Samantha Sin
Special thanks to Jules Bistro for the location

When Emmanuel Vallier arrived to discuss the bistro business on a rare beautiful spring morning, he came bearing gifts: buttery, flaky croissants, a box of pain au chocolat, lengths of crusty baguettes and a thick loaf of farm bread, all fresh from the oven at Stan Café. As the aroma of coffee and baked goods filled the air, Jules Bistro's chef-owner Laurent Brouard and La Cabane co-founders Karim Hadjadj and Cristobal Huneeus join us to talk about the boom in Hong Kong's bistro scene over the past decade.

Riding on the success of La Cabane wine bar, Hadjadj and Huneeus opened their bistro four years ago in a nook on the lively part of Hollywood Road. The bistro is all about conviviality, Huneeus says. And sure enough, seven days a week, regulars spill merrily out onto the pavement in front of La Cabane, wine in hand. La Cabane is a social place rather than what Huneeus describes as a "caricature" of a bistro. Steak comes with polenta fries, for instance, instead of classic potato fries. "The funny thing is those who stick to the charcuterie and the cheese are often the French," Huneeus says with a grin.

Brouard dreamed of running his own bistro for 20 years as he worked for resort groups and as executive chef at Chez Patrick. He finally opened Jules Bistro in Happy Valley on his birthday two years ago and named it for his grandfather, a bouchon charcutier after the war. It is everything you would imagine a bistro to be: maroon and eggshell walls, marble tabletops, wooden chairs, checked napkins. Brouard serves classic bistro dishes ("I'm not a creative chef," he says, flatly) such as onion soup, escargots and boeuf bourguignon.

Many of the recipes he inherited from his grandfather, and in many ways, the restaurant is a tribute to him.

As well as Stan Café in Stanley, Vallier manages the épicerie, deli and wine bar B.A.M in burgeoning Po Hing Fong, which opened last autumn. At his trading company K-Element, he also supplies hotels and restaurants such as the Four Seasons, Mandarin Oriental, The Peninsula, Seasons by Olivier E and, coincidentally, Jules Bistro, with French artisanal products.

"Manu is my competitor, but he's my friend," Brouard says, patting Vallier on the back. "I get all my cheeses and cold cuts from him. He knows the farmers, the producers, and the stories behind every product."

The four Frenchmen are neighbourly and gregarious, immediately launching into a passionate discussion, barely pausing to take a breath between words and tearing bites of croissant.

Passions rise even further when the conversation switches to opening a Western restaurant in gentrified neighbourhoods like Sheung Wan. Obtaining a restaurant license can be difficult, time consuming and often unpredictable, the men lament. The idea that Western restaurants and *gweilo* businesses – bistros and tapas joints alike – automatically result in drunken frivolity is a prevalent one, if not a misconception, among the local community.

"We are a deli and a wine bar," Vallier says. "We bring business, we bring activity and we bring life. We don't want to bring noise." Brouard jumps to his defence: "It's true," he says, "I was just there last weekend with my

wife and kids, we grab coffee and dessert and it's all very casual."

But starting a business is not the only obstacle. A bistro aims to offer fresh ingredients, good food and good wine at reasonable prices, which is not easy to achieve in this competitive and expensive city.

Vallier is forthright with his concerns: "A bistro is difficult to manage with the highest rentals in the world, and we offer entry-level prices. It's also difficult to access imported food at an entry-level price."

Brouard compares the experience of running a bistro in France. "The price we charge the customer is very different here than in France," he says. "In France, we have direct access to the product. Here, we order from someone, who orders from someone, who orders from someone. So obviously it will be slightly more expensive."

Freshness of ingredients is another problem, Huneeus says. "When you open a bistro in France, you get the market at the tip of your fingers, you get the products at the perfect time. In Hong Kong, it's a little bit more complicated. A bistro is about accessible food, fairly priced, therefore you can have a good Western meal for an accessible price, not cheap but accessible, within \$600. It's not easy to make this quality of food at this price. For us, it's important to have that price bracket and still eat well.

"The difference, for me, is really the sourcing," he says. "I can compare this with dim sum – I've never had good dim sum in Paris." ■



THE Σ NITTY GRITTY ∑

1. Describe a bistro in one sentence.

Laurent Brouard: Tradition, conviviality, friendly.

Karim Hadjadj: Initially a bistro was a place to drink. It comes from the late 19th and early 20th centuries when there were a lot of bistros and they were social places. After that, the bistro changed to a place to eat. A convivial place where you can drink and eat. That's more than one sentence.

Cristobal Huneus: For me, it's about fresh, simple or original dishes and fresh produce plus wine. Traditionally, it was the in-between coffee place and the place you went for drinks.

Manu Vallier: *Chaleureux*, or warm.

2. Favourite bistro in Paris?

LB: Restaurant Chez Paul. It's one of the oldest bistros in Paris, it's my favourite place. I love everything about it. It opened at the beginning of the 1900s, the walls have been there a long time and are now dark and greasy from all the smoke. It's a beautiful place.

KH: Verre Vole. It has a short, simple menu and top selection of natural wine. The drinking is very important.

CH: Racines has the most changeable simplified menu you can find, just two dishes – two starters, two mains, two desserts – that change every day. It's quite classic, not super inventive, but always very precise. The chef is particularly detailed, and the cooking is always perfect.

MV: L'Assiette, but I could list more than 200 places.

3. What are your favourite bistro foods?

LB: I really love snails. I don't dislike any food in this category, unless it is not made properly.

KH: You should be able to say *carte blanche* and be confident that whatever they put on your table is going to be good.

CH: I like to be challenged and surprised. If I've never been to a bistro and get a traditional menu, I go with the simplest dish, which will tell me if they've got it right or not. If I go to a place that is modern and inventive, I would get a recommendation of the house.

MV: Oeuf mimosa (devilled eggs), lentil salad, steak tartare, ile flottante

(floating island of poached meringue on crème anglaise).

4. Most underrated bistro food?

LB: I don't think there is any underrated food. If it's not popular, I think it's the way it's written on the menu, it has to appeal to people. Tell people how it's cooked and the origin of the product.

KH: Vegetables have the tendency to be underrated at any restaurant.

CH: Well-seasoned vegetables.

MV: Oeuf meurette (poached eggs in red wine sauce).

5. What did you have for breakfast this morning?

LB: Like every morning, orange juice, tea and biscuit. Sometimes I take coffee in the morning when I need a boost, but usually don't need it.

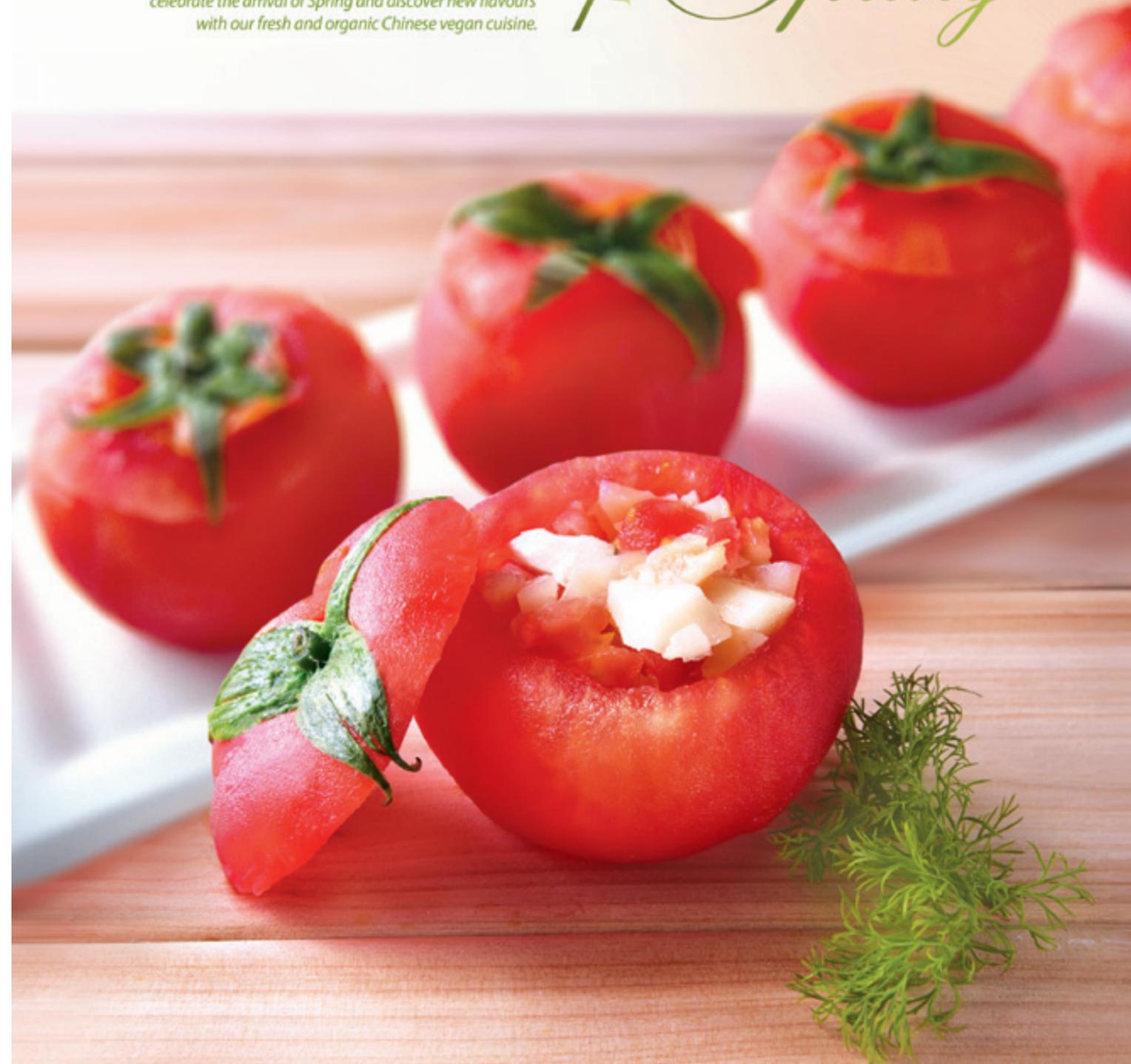
KH: Beef, cheese and mushroom roll.

CH: Porridge with fruit and coffee.

MV: Fresh orange juice, croissant and a nice cup of espresso.

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