

reviews.

An Edible Journey – Elizabeth Levinson

SeaGrille at Brentwood Bay Lodge (May 1st, 2009)

Entering the foyer, one is instantly captivated by the soaring West Coast architecture that demands that nature be let inside. Large windows draw the eyes across the room to the charming bay (which I'm later told is the deepest fjord in British Columbia) with its fish boats and pleasure boats. Even in the guest rooms, the sense of being surrounded by the lushness of the out-doors is ever-present. Though the rooms are luxurious, I found myself regularly looking outside, so as not to miss any wildlife or any shimmer of light on the bay.

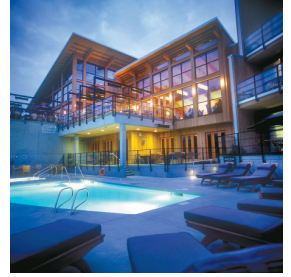
The background of superb luxury in the rooms, the world-class spa and kayaks at the ready for relaxation and recreation is, to me, really just a foil for the dining experience ahead. While one can dine pretty well in the lodge's pub and on its casual summertime deck, it is the newly named SeaGrille dining room that beckons foodies.

Edible journeys – indeed, my own edible arrivals – don't always coincide with the traditional dinner hours, but I was readily accommodated for dinner at 3:00 p.m. so that I could do another interview in Victoria at 6:00 p.m. I'd already experienced the pub food in summer: mimosas and chicken wraps on the deck made me feel as though I was on vacation

The dining room, just after a particularly busy winter holiday season, is calm and elegant, and I welcome the chance to spend time with executive chef Peter Whatmough and sommelier Benjamin Howard. Peter says the two "make a really good team," and that becomes evident throughout the service, although their backgrounds couldn't be more different.

Peter knew he was interested in cooking at age 14 when he was working as a dishwasher in Oakville, Ontario, and would "watch the chefs on the line, and I liked what I saw." That was back in the days when you could transfer directly from high school to George Brown College's culinary program. At age 16, Peter was on his way.

He apprenticed at the Four Seasons Inn on the park in Toronto, then worked mainly as a fix-it guy, designing and redesigning kitchens for some top Calgary and Victoria eateries. He worked on



reviews.

designing and redesigning kitchens for some top Calgary and Victoria eateries. He worked on contract, most recently helping to establish the kitchens of Catch and Wildwood in Calgary. Finally, he moved his family to Victoria, where he “was able to take a couple years off” before bringing his hefty 25 years of French and Italian fine-dining experience to Seagrille in August 2008.

Benjamin was a performer with Cirque du Soleil, although that amazing feat is getting slightly ahead of his story. He was born in Kelowna, where, as he was growing up, “the Okanagan wine industry started to get its legs.” He “(fell) in love with wine” working as a server at Belvedere in Calgary, Emerald Lake Lodge in Field, British Columbia, and Hasting House on Saltspring Island, and is very excited to be working at SeaGrille, where “we’re right in the nucleus of the Vancouver Island wine scene, and we have such a beautiful dining room in which to enjoy it.”

Like any Vancouver Island restaurant worth its salt, SeaGrille is paying attention to the importance of sourcing local foodstuffs. Peter works with several local growers through Saanich Organics; brings duck and chicken in from Cowichan bay; mussels (and lamb when it’s available) from Saltspring Island; oysters from several bays along Vancouver Island’s coastline (and sometimes an octopus!); and he relies on James from Marconi Mushrooms who “can get anything locally but also things like fresh white truffles from Alba, Italy.” He hasn’t found a local supplier of venison “as good as Brag Creek in Alberta,” and when I have the chance to taste the grass-fed specimen, I have to admit it’s some of the best I’ve eaten.

I thoroughly enjoy SeaGrille’s monthly tasting menu. At \$55, it is well priced and I’m intrigued to find that, while the first four courses are prescribed, diners can select from any dessert item. That’s about enough choice for me when my main purpose is to relax and appreciate the art and science of the kitchen.

Organic garden greens with Golden Delicious apple slices, Stilton and pecans and pear-pancetta vinaigrette are matched with a fruity Wild Goose Blanc de Noirs, a wine that Benjamin describes accurately as “having more character than the average BC blush.” A soup of roasted pumpkin warmed with nutmeg, cinnamon and cloves, and served with generous Gruyere shavings, a drizzle of white truffle oil and fresh thyme is served in a bowl the size of a pudding basin, cleverly designed to slant toward the diner and give



reviews.

it's contents great presence. The wine pairing, Lake Breeze's Pinot Blanc, has a fresh acidity that perfectly complements the soup and rich cheese.

The pan-seared sablefish that follows on a bed of lentils, with portobello mushrooms, chanterelles, shiitakes and roasted root vegetables presented both whole and pureed, is divine. The local Averill Creek Pinot Noir is, as Benjamin puts it, "all about the dirt." It goes well with the oily fish, the pureed beets and the overall earthiness of the dish. And I'm delighted to hear the word "dirt" used with refreshing lack of pretense (I'm afraid I'm getting a bit cynical about everything from this or that *terroir*).

Another great wine match by Benjamin is from the nearby Chalet Estate Winery. Served with the venison course, it's a Cabernet/Merlot blend that definitely has "enough structure to stand up to the gamey meat."

Those with more resistance might have concluded this perfectly cooked and presented meal with a light sorbet, but I was inspired to try one of Peter's signature desserts: the Phyllo Dream. Again an oversized bowl arrived, this time with an elegant swirl of spun sugar and a backed phyllo pouch containing banana, hazelnuts and white chocolate. A little Elephant Island Frambroise was drizzled around the edges, and a pleasingly tart Cape gooseberry finished the dish. Almost! A glass of Quail's Gate Late Harvest Optima, with its lovely apricot and peach nose and finish, made this Dessert experience one to savor and remember.

Elizabeth Levinson

An Edible Journey. Touchwood Editions; 3rd Revised Edition (May 1, 2009)

