

*"Whistler's Reluctant Culinary Star"*

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WHISTLER, B.C. — Too young, too female and too skinny: Melissa Craig has heard this assessment of herself more times than she cares to remember.

But with her recent win at this year's Gold Medal Plates Canadian Culinary Championships, one of the country's top cooking awards, the 28-year-old executive chef and the infamous restaurant she commands are finally being taken seriously.

Quiet, restrained and nervous, Ms. Craig may not fit everyone's image of a domineering, egotistical top chef, but that's only the tip of a much more striking irony - that she runs the kitchen at Whistler's Bearfoot Bistro, the undisputed *enfant terrible* of B.C. restaurants.

Unapologetically decadent, the Bearfoot is less subtle than other Whistler rooms at separating moneyed visitors from their cash: 1999 Dom Pérignon is available by the glass at \$80; \$290 will buy you 30 grams of Russian caviar.

Add in the theatrical service - "*Un, deux, trois: voila!*" is the enthusiastic mantra that accompanies the presentation of entrées - and owner/manager André Saint-Jacques's penchant for lopping the top off Champagne bottles with a sabre, and it's easy to see how the restaurant's buzz may not centre on its menu.

It regularly misses out in local restaurant awards to the more conservative Araxi, in no small part because of the annual Masquerave party that, until it was cancelled last year, routinely made the local press and licensing authorities pout in prudish horror at the free-flowing champagne and nubile bodies covered in everything from body paint and sushi to melted chocolate.

Ms. Craig visibly shudders at the thought of it: "I hate the party - and I also don't like people being able to click on our website and see naked people.

"That's all André," she shrugs (she and Mr. Saint-Jacques are also a couple). "And it's a big reason people come. He makes being here exciting - he can wake up a room in a

second. ... But I don't see why my food shouldn't be taken seriously as well."

And it should. Ms. Craig's dishes are exceptionally refined, with flavours and textures perfectly balanced. A deeply savoury veal cheek ravioli is bathed in a corn purée and scattered with crunchy corn kernels and crispy bacon; a duo of Wagyu beef combines a perfectly braised cube of short rib with two morsels of rare strip loin - it's the definition of umami. Caribou is bedecked with truffles and foie gras; the king crab croquette that was part of her Gold Medal Plates winning dish is rich with mascarpone. If Ms. Craig is frugal in character, she couldn't be more indulgent on the plate.

"I'm looking for the best of the best from anywhere in the world," she says. "In the summertime, I always use produce from Pemberton and the Okanagan, but I'm not going to use Pemberton organic beef when I can fly in Kobe from Japan - it's night and day."

It's also a long way from the pork chop and mushroom soup casseroles of her childhood. Originally from Duncan on Vancouver Island, Ms. Craig spent a year at B.C.'s Malaspina University College before taking her apprenticeship at the island's renowned Sooke Harbour House. She then spent a season at King Pacific Lodge - a floating luxury fishing resort in northern B.C. - before heading to Australia for a year. On her return, she was about to accept a post at Lumière in Vancouver when she was asked to try out for a spot as executive sous chef at the Bearfoot Bistro.

She's been at Bearfoot ever since: Within six months, she was chef de cuisine and a year after that, executive chef. She was 25. Eager to learn all she can, Ms. Craig now regularly travels around the world. She's visited Dom Pérignon in France to taste vintages and learn how to pair them with food, and spent two weeks at Lucas Carton in Paris under Alain Senderens, where they worked her hard during 14-16 hour days: "I think I was the first female to ever set foot in that kitchen."

A recent trip to Japan with Listel Hotels (owners of the building that houses Bearfoot) made a huge impression: "I was taught how to make soba noodles by a man who's been doing nothing else for 35 years. The way they prepare and handle food there - everything about it was mind-blowing."

Her latest passion is molecular gastronomy. After a visit to Spain's famous El Bulli restaurant this past fall, Ms. Craig has been gradually introducing new equipment into the kitchen. For the Gold Medal Plates competition, she came up with soy "pop rocks," and little spheres of coconut jelly are currently complementing an *amuse bouche* of pork belly

in the restaurant. "I can do anything here," she says. "The support I have from Listel and the Bearfoot is endless."

For the time being, however, success means even more travel: The Gold Medal Plates is a fundraiser for Canadian Olympic and Paralympic athletes and, as the winner, Ms. Craig is expected to act as an ambassador for the national team. It's a situation that's causing her some concern: "It's great that I get to travel with it," she says. "But the restaurant is my No. 1 focus: I want it to get even better and in order to do that I need to be here to play around with food and make sure everything leaving the kitchen is perfect."

Right now, she's in Toronto interviewing potential staff. She knows she needs a strong team if she has to be away a lot, and in Whistler, that's a tall order. Her brigade is 20 strong at full speed, and mostly filled with transient workers eager to ski and snowboard. Ms. Craig has never found time to hit the slopes during her entire Whistler career, a fact that floored British superchef Heston Blumenthal (The Fat Duck) when he visited Bearfoot during Christmastime.

Her plan is to stay at the Bearfoot through the Olympics this summer at least, but beyond that she says she hasn't really considered what's next in her career. Her focus is on what she will do today in the kitchen - that's where she relaxes.

"When she's cooking, she moves like a ballerina," Mr. Saint-Jacques says. "The kitchen is where she is happiest."

If Ms. Craig is a reluctant star, Mr. Saint-Jacques is happily riding the wave of publicity. "André is going crazy," she sighs. "I've told him he can look into the offers coming in, but just not commit to anything without checking with me. He's like '*Iron Chef!*,' and I'm saying, 'Whoa! Calm down.' "