

A rocky year's silver linings: bistros and Boulud

From celeb chefs to reasonably priced food, Vancouver continues to inject new ideas into its dining DNA

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This is the year that Vancouver shone, eclipsing Toronto and Montreal as the culinary capital of Canada. When we weren't luring Manhattan's legendary superchefs to our shores, we were winning contests around the world. Herewith, a few highlights:

INVASION OF CELEBRITY CHEFS

Who could have guessed that Vancouver would attract the likes of Daniel Boulud and Jean-Georges Vongerichten? Even the city's biggest boosters shook their heads and did a double take. The arrival of these two New York superchefs (Mr. Boulud's revamped Lumière and new DB Bistro Moderne launched this month; Market by Jean-Georges opens in the Shangri-La Hotel on Jan. 24) caps Vancouver's ascendance as a culinary mecca. Although some still question the value of foreign fly-in chefs, I believe that these three restaurants will inject some exciting new ideas into our dining DNA and raise the bar of competition even higher.

ROB FEENIE STRIKES BACK

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This time last year, every foodie in town was gasping over the fact that Vancouver's most famous chef had walked away from his own restaurants (Feenie's and the above-mentioned Lumière). Nowadays, they're drooling over his delicious new menu items at the Cactus Club Cafe (butternut squash ravioli for only \$16!). Going down market was one of the best moves Mr. Feenie ever made. And it's probably no coincidence that the Cactus Club's new flagship location, the downtown Bentall 5, is reportedly one of the busiest restaurants in the country.

CANADA'S BEST CHEF

Melissa Craig who? Last winter, the talented young executive chef of Whistler's Bearfoot Bistro was called in at the last minute to replace Pino Posteraro at the Gold Medal Plates competition in Toronto. The 28-year-old chef, who had a silver medal in the regional semi-finals, walked away from the three-day event with the top prize and was crowned Canada's "best chef." The upset win plucked Ms. Craig out of ski-resort obscurity and turned her into a star. Watch for her new White Spot ads this spring as she follows in the footsteps of John Bishop, Rob Feenie and Umberto Menghi as the restaurant chain's new celebrity chef.

BISTRO BONANZA

If there is a silver lining to be found in this economic recession, it's the recent proliferation of reasonably priced French bistros. Mount Pleasant's Les Faux Bourgeois charged out of the gates last fall, oozing Old World charm, lusty veal sauces and some of the lowest wine markups in town. The West End's La Brasserie nipped at its heels a couple of months later with its crispy suckling pig and an impressive lineup of imported beer. These are, without doubt, two of my favourite new restaurants of the year.

ITALIAN COMES OF AGE

My two other favourite new restaurants are Cibo Trattoria and La Quercia. Cibo's chunky olive sauces and heavenly paper-thin pouches of pork agnolotti took Italian food to a new level of simple sophistication. La Quercia, focused on the polenta-rich regional specialties of Trentino-Alto Adige, expanded our horizons north of Tuscany.

China Rising

Fame is fleeting and recognition is hard-won. Just ask Sam Lau, owner of Zen Fine Chinese Cuisine. After being named the "greatest Chinese restaurant outside China" by a New York Times reporter last

spring, the Richmond restaurant had to close its doors a few months later. Still, the accolade helped showcase our underappreciated local Chinese restaurant scene, which is elsewhere considered one of the finest in North America. The new Chinese Restaurant Awards, to be announced Jan. 15, are a long time coming.

COCKTAIL CULTURE

"If you add up the number of bars [in Vancouver] doing great, original, classic creations ... there are probably more bars doing it here than there are in Manhattan." So said cocktail historian Jared Brown when he was here this past summer to judge the International Cocktail Experience competition, won by West Restaurant's Colin MacDougall and David Wolowidnyk (the latter is also the Grey Goose Vodka "arbiter of cool" national pour master champion).

Our cocktail scene really sprouted this year, with our master mixologists winning awards all over the world. To sip some of the best, head to: Beyond Restaurant and Lounge, Boneta, The Cascade Room, Chambar Belgian Restaurant, Chow, George, Uva Wine Bar, Voya Restaurant and Yew restaurant + bar.

STAR INGREDIENT

Masa Shiroki of Granville Island's Artisan Sake Maker took the spent lees from his fermented rice wine and turned it into a star ingredient on menus across the city. Recycled food has never tasted so interesting. The pale grey, vitamin-rich mash is being used as mayonnaise, a cure for prosciutto and a base for sorbet. My favourite application was invented by Colleen McClean, former executive chef at the Irish Heather, where she used it as a marinade for fish and chips and turned halibut into silk.

BEST MEAL OF THE YEAR

It was a tie between two lunches: one prepared by Daniel Boulud at a private reception last spring to announce his new partnership with David and Manjy Sidoo and an unforgettable summer afternoon at Mission Hill Family Estate's Terrace restaurant in the Okanagan Valley.

Mr. Boulud's Coquille St. Jacques Black Tie (a black-and-white stack of thinly sliced scallop and truffle wrapped in golden puff pastry) was so exquisite the room went silent when it arrived. But my lunch at Mission Hill was just as breathtaking. Spot prawn ceviche wasn't just an appetizer - it was a finely layered jewel box studded with citrus granita balls, cedar-infused gels and Lilliputian flowers. The light-as-air cheesecake on lavender sable with fresh cherry compote and lemon balm "bubbles" was extraordinary.

Executive chef Michael Allemeier and Terrace chef Matthew Batey are culinary artists who are creating meals on par with those of some of the best Michelin-starred restaurants in Europe.

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