

A tasty tale of two dinners

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AN exceptional meal in Whistler isn't hard to find -- two of Canada's best chefs are tripping distance away from each other, on opposite sides of Whistler Village Square.

And while technique, ingredients and attention to detail are evident in both establishments, the two are miles apart in personality.

At Araxi, the resort town's most elegant and established restaurant, chef James Walt uses potatoes, vegetables, greens, even organic beef, from his own community of Pemberton just up the road from Whistler. He uses those just-picked, perfectly ripe ingredients to make food that will take your breath away: rich, complex flavours; perfect plating; elegant finishing; and just a few touches of molecular gastronomy -- aka science -- to add clever details such as gelée pearls and flavoured "sand."



CREDIT: NEWS photo Deana Lancaster
Saddle of Rabbit at Araxi restaurant in Whistler, is plated with fresh Alba truffles, potato purée, crosnes (tubers), and 'truffle sand.'

Across the cobblestone square and down the stairs, chef Melissa Craig is making news as the chef at the Bearfoot Bistro, which is no small feat in the face of the restaurant's decadent reputation. Owner André St. Jacques has drawn attention for his 20,000-bottle wine cellar, steep prices, his predilection for sabering Champagne (slicing the top of the bottle off, rather than pulling out the cork) and the racy Cornucopia party that featured plenty of nudity -- until it was cancelled before last year's event.

But even with all those distractions, Craig wins raves for her food: sublime and sophisticated, beautifully balanced and smartly presented.

Last year, she won not only the Vancouver edition of Gold Medal Plates -- a culinary competition that raises funds for Canadian Olympic and Paralympic athletes -- but she took gold in the national final as well.

So it wasn't surprising that both restaurants had full houses for their wine dinners during this year's Cornucopia, Whistler's annual celebration of wine and food. Nor was it very surprising that they were so vastly different from each other.

On Friday night, Araxi hosted a five-course dinner, featuring the wines of one of Australia's great wineries, the 164-year-old Penfolds.

With the winery's 2005 Yattarna Chardonnay and the 2003 Cellar Reserve Pinot Noir, Walt's Qualicum Beach Scallop Soup was nothing short of

spectacular. A deeply flavoured, salty-sweet bisque was poured at the table over an arrangement of baby radish, salsify, toasted ginger, bacon and dungeness crab. Without hesitation I will tell you it was the most luscious soup I have ever tasted -- an opinion shared by my tablemates apparently. Two of them asked for a second helping (which I'd have joined in on if I hadn't been so surprised by their moxie).

A Foie Gras Press, made with fig jam, toasted pistachios, fruit punch and gala apple "pearls," paired beautifully with the Bin 389 Cabernet Shiraz from both 1990 and 2005, especially the former. And Saddle of Rabbit -- served with the Bin 707 Cabernet Sauvignon 2005 -- was adorned with the heady flavours of truffles: fresh shaved alba truffles, and truffle "sand," made by vapourizing the liquid of truffle and olive oil.

Dry aged Pemberton Meadows beef was sided by crisply breaded sweetbreads, sunchokes, golden beets, globe carrots and sauce diable, and it was paired with the iconic 1998 Penfolds Grange: an incredibly ripe and silky red.

For a finale, Okanagan Jonagold apples were poached and served with a cheese croquette and creme fraiche ice cream, and served with the Penfolds Grandfather Tawny.

A hard act to follow, I suspected, as I headed to the Bearfoot Bistro's Château de Beaucastel dinner the next evening.

And in fact, St. Jacques and Craig didn't follow it all. They did something completely different.

After a reception in the massive wine cellar (featuring much sabering of Champagne bottles, natch), we headed upstairs to be greeted by a checkered and Crayola-hued "Diner" placemat at each place setting.

For \$295 per person, the Bearfoot Bistro was serving a themed "Diner" dinner. With free-flowing Pommery, and nine different bottles of Château de Beaucastel poured, it was a far cry from a rip-off, but it was certainly fun. The dishes were nothing like typical diner food, of course.

The All Day Breakfast was a quail egg benny scattered with Canadian caviar, paired with the 1989 Pommery Grand Cru from a three-litre jeroboam.

Steak & Fries was composed of cubes of tender Wagyu beef from Japan, huge flakes of Piedmont black truffle, crispy fries and white truffle aioli passed around the table in a squeeze bottle. It was matched with the 1990 and the 2006 vintages of the Château de Beaucastel white.

Mac 'n Cheese was a luscious version of the comforting dish, made with cave-aged Gruyere, topped by white alba truffles, and served with the Roussanne Vieilles Vignes from 1990 and 2006.

Quebec foie gras, Mission figs, toasted pine nuts and whispery layers of onion topped the BB Pizza, certainly the richest pizza I've ever had, and it came to the table in a clever, single-serving pizza box. It was the 1997 Roussanne Vieilles Vignes that stood up next to this pie.

A palate cleanser of citrus and champagne granite was served like a slurpee, complete with the scoop-bottomed straw. And then we were on to the "main."

Perhaps the BB TV Dinner was the most surprising: juicy Okanagan venison, wild mushrooms and Jerusalem artichoke and creamy mashed potato, all served in a tin foil to-go container. Two bottles of the 1989

Château de Beaucastel red were poured with it -- one, a typical 750 millilitre bottle, and the other, a three-litre jeroboam. It was clear that the wine in the smaller bottle had seen more aging, and it was interesting comparison.

The same phenomenon was true with the final wines: again the same vintage, 1995, of the Hommage a Jacques Perrin, but poured from the smaller and larger bottles.

The cheese course came wrapped in red and white checkered paper: a tiny Grilled Cheese Sandwich served with heirloom tomato jam and an olive oil ice cream shake (sounds crazy, I know, but it was delicious).

We finished on a sweet note: with a tiny Banana Split: a scoop of banana custard on a pecan chocolate cake.

It was an outstanding dinner, one that will be talked about for years to come. Because despite the "lowbrow" theme -- carried out in amazing detail -- this was high-level cuisine, rich with quality ingredients and served perfectly, just like the Araxi dinner.

Pick a favourite? Not I!

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