

Sublime Simplicity

AURA waterfront restaurant + patio serves up surf 'n' turf with a fantastic twist.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY GARTH EICHEL



AURA Restaurant's surf 'n' turf puts an asian spin on a classic comfort food.

VICTORIA'S AURA WATERFRONT RESTAURANT and its parent hotel, Inn at Laurel Point, have received a lot of accolades of late. Following extensive refurbishing, both have won a number of awards for everything from innovative interior design to environmental best practices, to name a few.

For its part, AURA started generating considerable buzz in 2008 when it recruited Executive Chef Brad Horen from one of Calgary's top restaurants. Horen and a handpicked crew of chefs had just won four gold medals for Team Alberta at the IKA World Culinary Olympics in Erfurt, Germany, organized by the World Association of Chefs Societies. (Competing against 1,600 chefs from 54 countries, Horen's team missed first place overall by less than half a point.) Shortly after

this achievement, Horen *et al* relocated to Victoria. To be sure, Cowtown's loss was our gain.

With talent like this, I couldn't wait to try the fare on offer at AURA. Surely, I thought, the menu would be an extraordinary collection of exotic and unpronounceable dishes – any one of which would titillate the senses and impress dinner companions.

So just imagine my disappointment when I was able to recognize and pronounce everything on the menu. Really, how is one supposed to put on airs when the menu is perfectly sensible? That said, I noticed enough variations on classic favourites to warrant a closer look.

Speaking of looks, AURA's décor is of the stylish elegance that is sure to elicit comment. With its honey-hued Italian-

polished onyx bar, recessed walls, and backlit partitions, AURA has a cosmopolitan vibe that lives up to its name. What's more, its plate-glass windows offer a post-card-perfect view of Victoria's Inner Harbour. It's not hard to see why the establishment won first place for hospitality design at the Seattle Design Center's 2009 Northwest Design Awards.

Now, about that menu. I asked Chef Horen for a personal suggestion, hoping that he'd introduce me to something new and other-worldly – the kind of thing that rocked the judges at the Culinary Olympics.

"I'd recommend the surf 'n' turf?"

"Surf 'n' turf?"

"Sure. It's a menu favourite."

"But, but I want something pretentious."

"Trust me. Simple, recognizable food that is prepared well will always prevail. Done right, and with the best and freshest ingredients, even mac 'n' cheese, or steak and potatoes, can be amazing. At AURA, we want to give people simple food that is prepared well and tastes great." To that, Horen adds, "we don't serve miniature portions that leave people still feeling hungry at the end of the meal."

"Okay, you're the one with the medals. Surf 'n' turf it is."

(Privately, I wonder if I'm going to be the only person wearing a lobster bib tonight.)

While Horen sets to work, I study AURA's menu to gain a better appreciation of what to expect. The first thing I notice is that their surf 'n' turf – and several other seafood dishes –



sport the venerable Ocean Wise stamp of approval (see article “Guilt-Free Food”, page 21). But what really gets my attention about their surf ‘n’ turf are the varied Japanese influences – miso and Sapporo beer braised back ribs, “Silk Road” cherry tea smoked scallops, gyoza, bok choy and a kabocha squash puree. Perhaps, my concerns about pedestrian fare were misplaced.

Problem now is: what kind of pairing could possibly compliment this peculiar ribs and scallop combo? Chris Jones, AURA’s manager and wine steward, who holds a level 2 with the International Sommelier Guild, swings by my table to offer some drink suggestions, which include clear crisp beers, such as a Japanese Sapporo and a local Phillip’s Blue Buck, as well as a full-bodied Blue Grouse Pinot Noir from the Cowichan Valley, which is devoid of the tannins that causes most reds to leave a fishy aftertaste. All three seem like a good bet, but Jones saves his most interesting recommendation for last – a chilled Indigo Wind sparkling junmai sake. I’ve never heard of such a thing; naturally, it appeals to my dilettantish ways.

Novelty aside, sparkling sake is actually quite light and refreshing. Unlike warm sake, which can assault the senses of the uninitiated like turpentine, chilled sparkling sake is a remarkably mild and sweet drink that has a lush and creamy hint of citrus. It is crisp and slightly effervescent, cleansing the palate with no pungent aftertaste. Consistent with these qualities, it is a sublime companion to the mélange of flavours – and colours – represented in AURA’s surf ‘n’ turf.

As one might expect, presentation is a big part of any dining experience, and so the same care and sophistication that goes into the design and atmosphere of AURA’s dining room can be found in the kitchen, where Chef Horen and his team painstakingly prepare each dish as a small work of art. This extends to the surf ‘n’ turf,

which first appears as an abstract blend of vibrant yellow squash puree, succulent green bok choy, caramel brown back ribs and glistening white seared scallops and gyozas. Sprinkled on top are toasted pumpkin seeds that add a spiced and earthy dimension to this dazzling array.

It tastes as good as it looks. Starting with the “surf”, the cherry tea smoked scallops have a slight smokey-sweet flavour that doesn’t overpower these fresh, delicate diver-caught molluscs. As for the “turf”, the pork back ribs, marinated in miso and Sapporo beer and braised in their own juices, have a sticky tang and subtle saltiness that is instantly recognizable as Japanese in origin. This extends to the gyozas, which are, without question, the most exquisite I’ve ever enjoyed. Filled with minced pork, ginger, garlic, green onion, soy sauce and shitake mushroom, the gyozas are seared at high heat on one side and lightly browned on the other, giving these delectable pockets of goodness a unique texture that is both crunchy and chewy. Balancing the protein portions, the vegetables are light and savoury with a velvety squash puree and bok choy gently cooked in butter, all topped with the fiery crunchiness of spice-toasted pumpkin seeds.

“It’s a spin-off of the classic surf ‘n’ turf, without going over the top,” says Chef Horen. “Think of it as elegant comfort food.”

Horen attributes the Japanese influences in this dish to his mother-in-law and his wife, Junko Sadahiro, an award-winning sugar artist who works in AURA’s kitchen as a pastry chef. But like most innovative chefs, Horen says he and his crew like to change things up and experiment with new variations: “Surf ‘n’ turf will always be on the menu, but it evolves from season to season, never staying the same. This is the version we’ve developed for our winter menu.”

With this disappointing news, I suddenly find myself hoping Ground Hog Day 2010 will grant us an extra long winter. 🐿️

Top: Team AURA chefs (from left to right): Junko Sadahiro, Brad Horen, Jessie Cole and Patrick Gayler

Middle: AURA’s elegant interior garnered a first place for hospitality design at the Seattle Design Center’s 2009 Northwest Design Awards.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE INN AT LAUREL POINT.

Bottom: Sparkling junmai sake is a refreshing and novel pairing for AURA’s surf ‘n’ turf.