

Deluxe Dining

The award-winning talents of chef Brad Horen means Aura should be packed at all times

By JAMES RUSSELL

One of the benefits of living in a tourist destination is the number of upmarket hotels housing decent—and, in some cases, downright excellent—eateries. The Inn at Laurel Point, for example, recently underwent a \$5-million re-modernization makeover, which included transforming the dated Cook's Landing Lounge into the sleek and modern Aura, now featuring large floor-to-ceiling light boxes providing an "aura" of coloured light that can be changed to fit the season or mood. The night we visited, the hue matched my gorgeously creamy yellow Spinnakers Wit Beer (\$6.75), the summer option in Aura's policy of featuring one of the local brewpubs beers on tap at all times.

While catering to visitors may be a hotel kitchen's primary *raison d'être*, we Victorians should take full advantage of this one—especially since the folks at Laurel Point made the wise decision to hire the Canadian Culinary Federation's 2007 chef of the year, Brad Horen, who last summer won a silver medal representing Canada at the Global Chefs Challenge Continental final in Orlando, Florida. Turns out we've got one of the continent's finest chefs working away in James Bay as we speak. And, oh man, is he good.

Horen was most recently executive chef at Calgary's award-winning Catch restaurant and oyster bar, and was known for utilizing the freshest seafood flown in from Canada's coasts, and pairing it with locally sourced meat and produce. At Aura, all of his wild fresh fish comes from the Finest at Sea boats at Fisherman's Wharf—a mere two blocks away—and a tour of Vancouver Island's local food producers has led to a Pacific Rim-inspired menu that is a locavore's delight.

Small plates (\$10-\$18) make up half the menu, while selections "from the water" and "from the land" provide the mains (\$18-\$32). Whatever you do, don't miss out on the simply dazzling Aura crusted wonton prawns with togorashi dipping sauce (\$15), the taste and texture of which caused a look on my face that compelled my wife to ask me if anything was wrong. Staring, stunned, out the wall of windows back over the Inner Harbour toward the Empress Hotel reminded me where I was and I snapped out of it long enough to start deciphering what makes this dish so good.

To start, these spot prawns have genuinely fresh shrimp flavour, unlike the ubiquitous frozen, packaged, imported tiger prawns. Coated with a physically thick but texturally light crust of finely shredded wonton wrapper, the prawns are morphed into something resembling a small deep-fried hedgehog. Simply



dip into the aioli-like sauce seasoned with a Japanese spice mix and you have to agree with the menu when it says "soon to be a classic."

In an attempt to balance out what we assumed might be a heaviness in the deep-fried prawns (we were wrong), we ordered the spinach and wild mushroom salad (\$13), which turned out to be the richer of the two. Baby spinach leaves are mingled with four varieties of wild B.C. mushrooms and caramelized onion, then bathed in truffle vinaigrette and topped with a salty crisp round of double smoked bacon. Yum.

The wonderful and innovative combination of coastal ingredients with French and Japanese gastronomic traditions continues on the larger plates and is showcased by the surf and turf (\$28), a highly unusual medley featuring a hefty cube of rich, melty braised short rib, three gorgeously plump, perfectly seared scallops, and, for the starch, warm tempura vegetable maki sushi. Years of chef competitions have honed Horen's skills in producing unexpected fusions with complex yet harmonious dances of flavour and texture, and this one is executed with conviction, courage even. The hoi-sin-based drippings from the beef mingle with the barely opaque scallops and steamed baby bok choy, providing a dipping sauce for the sushi, creating an organic wholeness that makes it seem perfectly natural. Oh yes, and it tasted awesome too.

The excellence continues with the cinnamon smoked duck breast with caramelized apple, fondant potato, spring asparagus, spaghetti squash and apple cider sauce (\$26). It arrived on a beautiful white oval plate cooked just past medium and sliced luxuriously thin. The sweetness of the apple-based accompaniments was, again, simple but creative and perfectly matched. A thick ring of roasted potatoes filled with a pureed inside is stacked high upon the squash, while the *el dente* white and green asparagus spears lay under the duck. Soon to be a classic, indeed.

The first-class service—by people who were obviously proud to be working in what has become one of Victoria's best restaurants—completes the experience. Don't allow Aura to simply be the dining room for hotel guests. It's too good for that. This place should be packed at all times. **M**

Aura
at The Inn at Laurel Point,
680 Montreal
Breakfast: Monday-Sunday,
6:30 am-10 am
Brunch: Sunday, 10 am-2 pm
Lunch: Daily, 11 am-2:30 pm
Après menu: Daily, 2 pm-5 pm
Dinner: Daily, 5 pm-9 pm
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