

# Monitor: Treats for the Island's tastebuds

BY AMY SMART, TIMES COLONIST JULY 17, 2011

Local spot prawns, little wing oysters, dungeness crab and Saltspring Island mussels. This is the feast that chef Takashi Ito and his crew have prepared for the preview of the third annual Taste: Victoria's Festival of Food and Wine.

Food lovers, writers and connoisseurs crowd around the table, stationed in front of a breathtaking backdrop at The Inn at Laurel Point. It almost looks tropical, but local is the word of the day.

Actually, chef Ito helped the Inn make the switch from black tiger shrimp - imported from Asia and in danger of overfishing - to the local catch featured today. But taste won't be compromised.

"I always say, it can't just be local, it has to be good," Ito says.

Twenty years ago, a food event such as this was a bit of a rarity. But this year, there are events and festivals all over Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands, emphasizing local, sustainable and seasonal fare.

The Saanich Strawberry Festival, the B.C. Shellfish Festival and Fernwood Bites are just a few of the culinary events that have already taken place this season.

"It has really blossomed, over the last 15 years or so," says Times Colonist food columnist and chef Eric Akis. "It makes sense because we have the longest growing season in Canada, which enables us to grow all kinds of things - from artichoke and fig to every berry imaginable."

Food culture may be booming now, but someone had to plant the seeds for local cuisine to grow.

When former sommelier Gary Hynes launched Eat magazine in 1999, there weren't many culinary events on the Island.

"When I think back to that time, it was really the very beginnings of the developing food culture," Hynes said.

Still, a few trailblazing localists had begun looking to their backyards for the freshest food, Hynes and Akis said, though they worked mostly independently of each other.

Both said chefs were the vanguards of the movement. And Sooke Harbour House, which has been called a "grandfather of Canadian cuisine," was the pioneering restaurant. By sourcing local produce, Akis said Sooke Harbour House built local cuisine.

"They were leaders," he said. "Other chefs took notice."

Camille's fine West Coast dining restaurant, opened by David Mincey 22 years ago, was another innovator.