



Globe Life

Food & Wine

RESTAURANT REVIVAL

THE TORCHBEARER

A year after its Olympic high, Vancouver's restaurant scene is reeling from the economy, the HST and higher liquor prices. Everyone is watching chef David Hawksworth to see if his bold new high-end restaurant will fly in these pared-down times. **Fiona Morrow** reports



VANCOUVER

There are few Vancouver chefs with as much riding on them right now as David Hawksworth. Three years ago, the much-lauded former executive chef of West quit the venerable fine-dining restaurant, announcing he was opening his own spot in the soon-to-be revamped Rosewood Hotel Georgia.

His would be the signature restaurant in the deluxe renovation – and Mr. Hawksworth was putting his own money – and stellar reputation – on the line.

The development for the hotel and adjacent 48-storey condo was launched in early 2008 with a swank affair at which attendees were told that Steven Spielberg had already booked a suite for the duration of the Olympics.

Presumably Steve found other digs, because the hotel and Hawksworth Restaurant have yet to serve a single guest. The project stalled when the global economic crisis hit, but as the anniversary of the Games rolls around, the building is back on track. Hawksworth Restaurant

is set to open on May 7.

When he left West, Mr. Hawksworth was at the top of his game in a city that revered him for his French-infused West Coast cuisine. His reputation remains intact, but the Vancouver restaurant scene he returns to has radically changed.

First there was the pre-Olympic boom, when in the summer of 2007 alone, more than 30 new restaurants opened.

Then, in 2008, international celebrity chefs Daniel Boulud and Jean-Georges Vongerichten both announced they were opening their first Canadian outposts in Vancouver – much to the chagrin of Toronto and Montreal. But by January, 2009, when Boulud's two rooms – DB Bistro Moderne and Lumière – and Mr. Vongerichten's Market had opened, the global financial meltdown had struck.

Hot spots became ghost towns as people stopped dining out. The Games – which most restaurateurs had banked on being a gold rush – proved to be the difference between sink and swim.

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Neil Wyles
Chef/owner,
Hamilton Street Grill

After months of delays, David Hawksworth's new restaurant at the Rosewood Hotel Georgia is back on track. But the restaurant scene he returns to has radically changed.

DARRYL DYCK FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL



Restaurants that couldn't adapt to the quickly changing climate of Vancouver's dining scene were forced to close. Capones was one such casualty. JOHN LEHMANN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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Restaurants: Some are dialling down the price point; others try rebranding

» "In 16 days, I did two months worth of business," says Emad Yacoub of Glowbal Group, owner of Italian Kitchen, Coast and Glowbal Grill. "But if I look at the first three months of business of last year against the previous year, the total is the same. You hear the same story again and again."

"The Olympics were huge," says Neil Wyles, chef/owner of one of Yaletown's oldest establishments, Hamilton Street Grill. "But the Monday after the closing ceremonies, everyone went back to wearing black and stayed home."

And then the B.C. government stepped in. The HST was introduced in March, 2010. By the end of the year, restaurants had also lost their 8.5-per-cent liquor discount and were suffering the effects of tougher drinking-and-driving laws.

"It's death by a thousand paper cuts," Mr. Wyles says.

And, certainly, many businesses succumbed to the pressure. Some of the city's oldest rooms - Delilah's, Capones, The William Tell - closed.

Smart restaurateurs are beating

the bailiffs by staying agile: re-branding, refocusing and dialling down the price point.

"The economic climate made me change the way I do business," says Sean Heather, owner of Gastown mainstays The Irish Heather and Salt. "People want value. ... They don't care about tablecloths, they care about the pedigree of the food."

Small is the new big, with a raft of tiny new spaces opening up that serve 30 or less at a time. Mr. Heather's latest operation, Judas Goat, seats 27, while Andrey Durbach shut down his romantic West End spot Parkside and hoofed it to East Van to open the 30-seater, everything-under-\$20 Cafeteria.

Glowbal Group's Mr. Yacoub flies against the majority of the city's independent operators. On one small stretch of Albemarle Street in the business core, he already has the big, brash Italian Kitchen and the seafood emporium Coast, and he just bought another large building on the same block with plans to open a steakhouse in the fall.

He contends Vancouver is only

just catching up to the fact that the world of fine dining has changed.

"Business gets done when the room isn't stuffy," he says. "It's all about creating energy."

"Most big cities have moved on," agrees Lee Man, who writes about food for Vancouver Magazine and is one of the judges in its annual Food & Drink Awards.

He suggests that the Games made local chefs nervous - that everyone was trying a little too hard. "The food in the city has certainly improved since the Olympics," he says. "It's less self-conscious - everyone seems to have relaxed."

But customers - at all price points - are still eating out less often, and being pickier about where they go. The new reality, Mr. Heather says, is building loyalty and rewarding regular customers. Facebook and Twitter are crucial, he says. "It's more competitive than ever. We're losing some of the camaraderie that used to exist between restaurateurs in the city as things get more serious. Maybe that's a sign that we are growing up."

If the market has shifted in his absence, Mr. Hawksworth doesn't seem fazed. He believes the time is ripe for something a little splashier, more glamorous. "The city is dying for it," he insists. And he has no doubt his name over the door will be the draw.

"Jean-Georges - he's not there. Daniel Boulud - he's not there," he says. "It will be good for Vancouver to have a chef in his own restaurant."

It's true that the two New Yorkers haven't made their presence felt as strongly as was anticipated. Market is seen as a special-occasion destination, notes a former senior employee. Though the more casual DB Bistro is doing decent business with its neighbourhood crowd, Lumière - once the city's most talked-about restaurant - is hardly mentioned these days.

"Everyone is just holding their breath in anticipation of Hawksworth," Mr. Man says.

"This is the best spot in Vancouver," Mr. Hawksworth grins as he looks out the windows of his new restaurant, which overlook the Vancouver Art Gallery.

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Sean Heather
restaurateur