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CANADA'S NATIONAL MAGAZINE

JUNE 13, 2011

Taste



The star: David Hawkworth (left); on the dinner menu: slow-cooked halibut, chorizo, artichoke, basil, barigoule, tomato preserve (right)

THE BEST NEW RESTAURANT IN CANADA

Vancouver's Hawkworth gets a rave for both the food and the exceptional setting

MOST PEOPLE WHO have met the great chef find David Hawkworth to be a reticent and soft-spoken man, someone apparently most at ease when communicating with produce, knives and heat. But on the evening of May 16, he was ebulliently disposed, flashing smiles left and right, even at a food critic—me—inconsiderate enough to show up for dinner at his long-awaited eponymous new restaurant on its opening night. “Look,” he said, gesturing proudly at the view from the big windows that straddle his entranceway, overlooking busy West Georgia Street and the grand facade of the Vancouver Art Gallery. “We could be in London, Paris or New York.”

Indeed, the setting of the Hawkworth Restaurant in the Rosewood Hotel Georgia—which opened without that prefix in 1927—is exceptional. And taking it in, I remembered that Hawkworth had summed up its top-city calibre almost exactly the same way when he had first showed me the site in the fall of 2008. Back then, both his new restaurant and the reborn Hotel Georgia were expected to open about a year later.

The intervening recession, which slowed the project, also gored our fine-dining scene from

coast to coast. Recent ventures from Canada's top chefs have not made headlines for raising the bar, but for lowering it. In Montreal, Normand Laprise has ventured into the bistro business with Brasserie “T.” Far more alarmingly, in Toronto, Marc Thuet no longer has a restaurant, Jamie Kennedy lost his flagship wine bar, and Susur Lee has had a go at take-out and bar snacks, and now shills for Kraft. Vancouver's seminal fine-dining restaurant, Lumière, was shuttered in March, and Hawkworth's former restaurant West has struggled to fill his empty whites since he left in 2008. Hawkworth's track record there, combined with delays for his new project and the general malaise in the industry, have together made Hawkworth Restaurant the most hotly anticipated Canadian opening of the year.

Several years, actually. But if Hawkworth was feeling the pressure on opening night, his outward demeanour spoke exclusively of relief. And why not? I have only ever known his cooking to be exquisite, and the new restaurant is stunning. I recommend sizing it up precisely as I did, beginning in the lounge with the house cocktail—a refreshing blend of Plymouth gin, lemon juice, orgeat syrup and orange blossom water shaken with ice and an egg white, a mix updated from a hotel recipe from 1945. Next, pass through an elegantly framed wood archway into one of two adjacent dining rooms.

To my eye, the first, dubbed the Pearl Room, with its sculpted, Venetian plaster walls and massive and striking oval chandelier, is the ideal spot for dinner, while the second, under a dramatic wall-spanning installation by local artist Rodney Graham, is the perfect spot for lunch. The mood in each is subtly different; what's important is that the menu is the same.

My meal began with Hawkworth's single

carry-over dish from West—a magnificent terrine of foie gras parfait set in a congealed puddle of apple jelly, a dish adapted from the repertoire of Marco Pierre White, for whom Hawkworth worked many years ago (at Canteen). Then there was a carpaccio of meltingly tender loin of yellowfin tuna, draped over a crunchy julienne of Japanese pear and creamy avocado, scattered with crunchy puffed rice and an enlivening sprinkle of yuzu juice. A dish of crab salad made with supple chunks of local Dungeness interspersed with dollops of lemon foam, sliced hearts of palm, salmon roe and dill sprigs looked like pop art, and after one bite proved just as ephemeral. Toothsome orchiette were mounded over a smear of balsamic-spiked truffle purée, folded with morels and mousserons, and dressed with an implausibly tender hunk of lobster, wild garlic foam and truffle shavings. A taste of the 72-hour sous-vide-cooked beef short rib with black pepper “jam,” green papaya and crunchy peanuts is a reminder of the range of notes with which Hawkworth is comfortable. And the exceptional texture and succulence of his pan-roasted duck breast speaks of his mastery of more basic techniques. And the fact that we are very lucky to have him back. JACOB RICHLER

