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HAWKSWORTH RESTAURANT
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Eat & Drink

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Hawksworth reignites Vancouver's fine-dining scene

OnThePLATE
 By Andrew Morrison

Former West chef's first solo venture earns high-end praise

Every major city has its pantheon of high-end restaurants, yet Vancouver, truly one of the most exciting food cities in the world, has very few.

That's been a constant source of fascination to me, and I've come to think that it's chiefly because Vancouverites are casual people at heart. Our collective penchant for the laid back is the main reason why I think Daniel Boulud's Lumiere failed and David Aisenstat's Shore Club has struggled.

I figure it's why half of all the fine dining restaurants that have opened in the past six years have closed, and why a host of other older rooms of equally aspirational culture and calibre are no longer with us. It's turned out that we're just not that into it.

Still, let's not forget that we need the upper crust of our restaurant scene to remain robust, if only because they're the ones setting the right examples for the crowded middle and lower echelons to follow. Those who truly appreciate great food and service, then, should give a little nod or curtsy when entering (or even just passing by)

Hawksworth in the newly renovated Rosewood Hotel Georgia.

The restaurant takes the name of its owner and of one of our top chefs, David Hawksworth. It's his first go as an owner-operator, and what he's delivered is a delicious summation of a career spent training his way through Michelin-starred European kitchens and turning West Restaurant on South Granville into the Canadian culinary powerhouse that it is today.

It's been a long time coming. Hawksworth left West to start working on this project some three years ago. There were many delays, but the end result reveals a restaurant — open for breakfast, lunch and dinner — that was well worth waiting for.

The look of it belongs to Toronto design house Munge Leung. Its rooms (yes, rooms) exude a high level of aesthetic sophistication. There are three in total — four if you count the private York room upstairs with its ebony-stained original hardwood floors and soaring ceilings hung dizzily with chandeliers.

For the main event, however, one enters through the bar and lounge, which feels rather like a private faculty club at some exclusive Italian fashion school that doles out Master of Swank degrees. The low-slung chairs are laid with vintage leather, as is the bar front, which is topped with polished Spanish granite. It's a fantastic bar, and the



Chef David Hawksworth
 Doug Shanks photo

bench of talent that they've lined up to service it — the "C" worn by Brad Stanton, formerly of Uva — is deep. And be sure to give the bar menu a whirl: the thick-set fries with harrisa flavoured aioli are fantastic.

Next door is the Pearl Room. Its slightly shimmering walls and furnishings are exceedingly attractive, but it's the rounded rectangular chandelier that steals the show. Hanging low over the dining room and dense with the lustre of upwards of 400 crystals, it dominates the space, silent yet loudly opulent.

Keep moving. Now we're in the unimaginatively named "Art Room," where a large, colourful and most probably priceless installation by Rodney Graham marks the end of the entirety, a dramatic punctuation point on the most beautiful restaurant to open in Vancouver in a very long time.

At some point, one must sit down and eat. It's a "modern Canadian" menu, which in this case means it utilizes mostly local ingredients and takes its cues from Asia and

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France. Start with the Thai-inspired beef short rib appetizer (\$16). The melt-on-your-tongue slices of beef do a black pepper and peanut jam dance on the palate with papaya and honeydew for partners. The soup of roasted tomato and fennel is subtly flavoured and placidly textured, with only the occasional slice of spot prawn or bacon crumb showing on the tooth (\$12). For a middle course, the foie gras parfait is a real dandy (if I can coin a descriptor, it's "smearsome"). It comes supplied with brioche slices and a generous spread of apple concentrate. I took that to mean that I was to construct the most decadent sandwich in town (\$20). Top marks.

For main courses, aim for the slow-cooked cylinders of halibut wrapped in thin sweaters of chorizo (\$28). The sausage's oil and intense, meaty flavours permeate the fish, fluffing its already cake-like consistency into something of a miracle.

To the eye and in the mouth, it was pure magic. The other winner was a beautiful arrangement of agnolottis stuffed with fresh spring peas luxuriating in a roasted celery emulsion studded with morels. Light and decorous, just like the restaurant serving it.

It's still early for me to pass full judgment on Hawksworth. It's just too good and versatile a restaurant to judge after only a few visits. There were some misfires — a main course chicken with fromage blanc that was over-seasoned to the point of being hardly edible, and a pair of cocktails took nearly 20 minutes — but the service was extraordinarily good and it's only been open for a month. In time, I suspect it will be as near to flawless as can be. I'm certain that it has the potential to be the best restaurant we've seen arrive on our streets in a very long time, and I can't wait to go back.

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