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SEPT. 24, 2012



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**Bold flavours:** Vancouver's Hawksworth creates playful dishes like pan-fried scallops with Korean fried cauliflower (left); yellowfin tuna ceviche (above)

## RESTAURANT OF THE YEAR HAWKSWORTH

EVER SINCE THE last recession came along and dealt a near-fatal blow to our fine dining scene, most of our established restaurateurs have struggled with what to do next. Most have been fishing downmarket, opening comfortable trattorias and bistros with nicely priced, safe little menus that put educated diners to sleep. New, exciting food has instead mainly come courtesy of those young chefs opening fun, small rooms on the cheap, without reservation books or proper cellars, their loud music and mismatched chairs anathema to grown-ups coast to coast. And then there's Hawksworth, our restaurant of the year.

It gets the nod because it captures the zeitgeist perfectly. On the one hand it is sublimely swanky, with a Damien Hirst "heart and butterflies" gracing a wall in its elegant, leather-panelled lounge, a grand chandelier in the Pearl Room, a commissioned Rodney

Graham in the Art Room and a 1920s heritage salon for its private functions upstairs. But you cannot call it fine dining. There are no tablecloths or purse stools or *amuses gueules* and sorbets—and an average dinnertime main course is priced under \$35, a tick under what you pay at the Keg. Basically, Hawksworth strikes a perfect pitch of casual posh—precisely as one more typically finds it in cities like New York, London and other sophisticated places four times Vancouver's size.

Still, none of that would matter much if the food did not hit the same note—and it does, every time. Chef and owner David Hawksworth's compositions are playful, artistically colourful, and feature bold flavours, along with an increasing—nearly Asian—preoccupation with texture and mouth feel. But they are also conceptually simpler than those of his fine-dining past, with fewer elements on

the plate. The culinary message can usually be grasped in a mouthful or two, as opposed to some of his earlier dishes, which more frequently demanded your full attention.

"You start off with something to prove, full of piss and vinegar," Hawksworth said recently of his evolution as a chef. "Then one day you say, 'Forget it. I'm not putting nine things on that plate. I'll put three. And each of them will be perfect.'"

The perfectionist chef has assembled a team, from chef de cuisine Kristian Eligh on down, which can execute this particular vision, even when chef is travelling and not at the pass. Whereas his haute cuisine relied on his personal touch, Hawksworth is still Hawksworth even when Hawksworth is not there. Which is why it is the restaurant—rather than the owner-chef who came up with it—that takes the prize. **JACOB RICHLER**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN CULLEN