

# THE GEORGIA Straight

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BY CAROLYN ALI

Robert Belcham will never forget his experience dining at the Fat Duck in Berkshire, England. When the Vancouver chef visited in 2006, Heston Blumenthal's establishment was widely considered one of the best restaurants in the world; it still boasts three Michelin stars and a list of prestigious global awards. The meal for Belcham and his wife cost more than \$500—before wine.

"It was the most disappointing restaurant experience I think I've ever had," Belcham tells the *Georgia Straight*. "My expectations were absolutely massive. I don't think the food could ever be as good as what my expectations assumed it would be."

Belcham, who now co-owns Campagnolo and Campagnolo Roma, tells this story not to pan the Fat Duck but to illustrate how personal the dining experience can be.

"There's a lot of things that can affect the final outcome of your meal. It's the smallest little things, too," he says. "Like the fake accent of the gentleman in the dining room who seated us. I just couldn't believe it. I was like, 'Why does he have a fake French accent? We're in the middle of the English countryside.' It made no sense to me." Belcham also puzzled over why the restaurant would use farmed Scottish salmon, which he felt was bland and watery compared to wild B.C. salmon, rather than a better product.

For a variety of reasons, the Fat Duck just didn't do it for him. "I've had some of the best meals of my life at three Michelin-star restaurants," he says. "I've had some of the best meals of my life on the side of the road eating from a hawker stand. It's all about time and place and the people you're with, the mood that you're in. There's a billion



The Acorn's Shira Blustein (with co-owner Brian Skinner) says that even small things like a restaurant's lighting make a big difference. Tracey Kusiewicz photo.

## Dinner is all in the details

What separates a good restaurant from a great restaurant? Industry insiders share what makes or breaks the experience

variables that determine whether or not you're going to have a great meal...and a big part of your experience is going to be determined by you."

Food. Atmosphere. Service. Expectations. When the *Straight* called dozens of local chefs and restaurateurs and asked them what separates a good restaurant from a great restaurant, they emphasized these elements. They revealed the details they feel elevate the dining experience, from perfectly chilled beer glasses to precisely placed tables. Then there are the intangibles, like individual expectations and the energy of the room... Here's what they had to say.

**RESTAURATEURS SEE ALL** It's pretty much a given that a good restaurant serves good food. But for many of those interviewed, a great restaurant needs to do more than that. "What really separates a great restaurant from a good restaurant...is how consistent they are and how much attention they put into details," says Angus An, owner of Maenam.

Shira Blustein, co-owner of the Acorn, points out that tiny details add up to an exceptional experience. "There is attention to every little thing, right down to the napkins, the cutlery, the barware, the glassware, the plates, the food...the lights dimmed to the right

level," she says. "When you go into a restaurant that just has all of that, you can feel it, that richness." When restaurateurs go out to eat, they see things other diners might not. "I look for cleanliness and tidiness," says Andrew Wong, who owns Wild Rice. "I think those are good indicators of how closely the individuals of that space are watching things. So if there's no dust in the corners, their kitchen's probably very clean as well."

Robert Wilson-Smith, head chef at Heirloom, admits that when he dines out, he always peeks into the kitchen en route to the loo. He looks to see if the kitchen is tidy, "if it looks like it's just ticking along and well organized, or if it looks like a bunch of overworked, shell-shocked people."

Others say they notice the look and feel of the menus, whether there are crumbs lodged in the banquette seating, if a light fixture desperately needs maintenance, or whether the parsley garnish looks like it's been washed. "We can't go out and just simply enjoy it. It just comes up as an instinct, the stuff that we notice," explains David Gunawan, former executive chef of Wildebeest whose next project is a restaurant called Farmer's Apprentice.

Tannis Ling, owner of Bao Bei Chinese Brasserie, says that she pays close attention when dining out because she's always trying to improve her own place. "We look at the garnish, how the plates come out, how they're plated," she says, noting

that she was adamant about Bao Bei having chilled beer glasses after experiencing that small pleasure elsewhere. "We notice how many people there are [working] on the floor. We notice how the sections are split up...and that [one] server is taking way too many tables or one server is taking way too little...It's a tricky part of the business, so when we go out, we really notice how other people do it."

So what impresses those in the industry? For Frank Pabst, executive chef at Blue Water Cafe, it's a mastery of the basics. "When you order a hot meal, it's hot. If you order something medium-rare, it's cooked medium-rare. I expect something to be seasoned well, so I don't need to add salt to the dish myself," he says. In terms of service, Pabst prefers it to be unobtrusive. "I'm always impressed if there's always water in the glass, always wine there, out of nowhere, basically."

According to those interviewed, it's not enough that a diner has a fabulous experience on his or her first visit. The mark of a great restaurant is that it delivers every single time. "You are only as good as your last performance," declares Pino Postorero, chef and owner of Cioppino's Mediterranean Grill & Enoteca. "You have to go every day with the same drive and focus, keeping attention to the details."

"Consistency is something we all try to work for," Maenam's An emphasizes. "Not everyone works every single day, so we try to make sure that when Person A and Person B make the same

see page 33

### READERS' CHOICES OF BEST...

#### CHEF

1. DAVID HAWKSWORTH
2. Rob Feenie
3. Marc-André Choquette

#### NEW RESTAURANT

1. FABLE  
1944 West 4th Avenue,  
604-732-1322
2. Wildebeest  
120 West Hastings Street,  
604-687-6880
3. The Acorn  
3995 Main Street,  
604-566-9001

#### BURNABY

1. THE PEAR TREE RESTAURANT  
4120 East Hastings Street,  
604-299-2772
2. Anton's Pasta Bar  
4260 East Hastings Street,  
604-299-6636
3. Hart House (tie)  
6664 Deer Lake Avenue,  
604-298-4278
3. Horizons (tie)  
100 Centennial Way,  
604-299-1155

#### NEIGHBOURHOOD FOR RESTAURANTS

1. GASTOWN  
2. Main Street  
between East 2nd Avenue  
and East 33rd Avenue
3. Kitsilano  
West 4th Avenue

#### NEW OUTSIDE VANCOUVER

1. THE FAT COW & OYSTER BAR  
20178 96th Avenue, Langley,  
778-298-0077
2. Chomp Vegan Eatery  
7-201 Morrissey Road, Port Moody,  
604-917-0201
3. Cotto Enoteca Pizzeria  
6011 Hastings Street, Burnaby,  
604-299-8002

#### NORTH SHORE

1. SALMON HOUSE ON THE HILL  
2229 Falkstone Way, West Vancouver,  
604-926-3212
2. Burgoon  
3 Lonsdale Avenue, North Vancouver,  
604-904-0933
3. Tomahawk Restaurant  
1550 Philip Avenue, North Vancouver,  
604-988-2612

#### RICHMOND

1. BLUE CANOE WATERFRONT RESTAURANT  
140-3866 Bayview Street,  
604-275-7811
2. Kirin Restaurant  
200 Three West Centre,  
7900 Westminister Highway,  
604-303-8833
3. Hog Shack Cookhouse  
160-3900 Bayview Street,  
604-272-7264

#### SURREY DELTA, WHITE ROCK, LANGLEY

1. THE BOATHOUSE RESTAURANT (TIE)  
14935 Marine Drive, White Rock,  
604-536-7320
1. GIRAFFE RESTAURANT (TIE)  
15053 Marine Drive, White Rock,  
604-538-6878
1. CACTUS CLUB CAFE (TIE)  
7907 120th Street, Delta, 604-591-1707  
15079 22nd Avenue, Surrey,  
604-535-8799
2. The Fat Cow & Oyster Bar  
20178 96th Avenue, Langley,  
778-298-0077
3. Vault Restaurant  
5764 176th Street, Cloverdale,  
604-576-4243

#### NEW WESTMINSTER, PORT MOODY, COQUITLAM, PORT COQUITLAM

1. WILD RICE  
810 Quayside Drive, New Westminister,  
778-397-0028
2. The Boathouse Restaurant  
900 Quayside Drive, New Westminister,  
604-525-3474
- 2770 Esplanade Avenue, Port Moody,  
604-931-5300
3. Tamarind Hill  
628 6th Avenue, New Westminister,  
604-526-3000

#### WHISTLER

1. ARAXI RESTAURANT + BAR  
4222 Village Square, 604-932-4540
2. Barefoot Bistro  
4121 Village Green, 604-932-3433
3. Rim Rock Cafe  
2117 Whistler Road, 604-932-5565

#### HOTEL DINING

1. HAWKSWORTH RESTAURANT  
801 West Georgia Street, 604-673-7000
2. YEW Restaurant + Bar  
791 West Georgia Street, 604-692-4939
3. Tableau Bar Bistro, 1181 Melville Street,  
604-639-8692



## Dinner details

from page 31

dish, it's always the same....If people are coming back, they're coming back for a reason."

Cioppino's Posteraro notes that having a low staff turnover matters. "If you don't have a big turnover of staff, it makes a great difference because your product is constantly the same," he says. "Can you imagine if you have to train somebody every week in the kitchen?"

"It's about being organized and being able to do 150 people and everybody is treated exactly the same," says David Hawksworth, executive chef at Hawksworth Restaurant. "That is the real tricky part, because everybody is coming in with such high expectations...you just have to be on top of your game to make sure you nail it for everybody."

According to Hawksworth and other chefs, passion breeds consistency. As Lee Cooper, executive chef at L'Abattoir, puts it: "Generally, if you really care, you've been committed to what you do for quite a while, so chances are you probably are quite skilled. People don't get good without genuinely giving a shit about what they do. You have to care about it, so everything kind of falls into place after that."

**EVERYBODY'S ONBOARD** Along with passion, good teamwork is an important element that great restaurants have in common.

Chris Whittaker, executive chef at Forage, says the best restaurants have kitchens that run like a machine. "It's having that core group that knows where they're needed and when to pick up slack," he explains. "It's that team mentality. It's not, 'Well, it's his station; it's his problem.'"

At Fable, executive chef Trevor Bird emphasizes the importance of having a motivated team made up of people who live and breathe cooking, even if they don't have formal cooking-school training. "Motivation and willingness to learn is most important," he says. "I hire based on that."

Chef Gunawan emphasizes how a restaurant's core philosophy is one of the key things that help set it apart. "It depends on the chef, really," he says, "what inspires them in the morning and how they come about composing the dishes, whether it's technique-driven or ingredient-driven, or is it a cultural influence? It's something that they believe in."

At Forage, it's important to chef Whittaker that all staff members believe in his restaurant's philosophy of local, sustainable, seasonal eating. He asks prospective hires to name their favourite ingredient. If they can't, "it weeds people out pretty quickly."

Krissy Seymour, chef and co-owner of the Pig on the Street food truck, asserts that regardless of whether or not a restaurant has great food, diners can sense if its staff don't believe in the product they're selling.

see next page

## READERS' CHOICES OF BEST...

### OVERALL

- 1. CHAMBAR RESTAURANT**  
562 Beatty Street.  
604-879-7119
- Hawksworth Restaurant  
801 West Georgia Street,  
604-673-7000
- Tableau Bar Bistro  
1181 Melville Street,  
604-639-8692

### FINE DINING

- 1. HAWKSWORTH RESTAURANT**  
801 West Georgia Street.  
604-673-7000
- Chambar Restaurant  
562 Beatty Street,  
604-879-7119
- Bishop's Restaurant  
2183 West 4th Avenue,  
604-738-2025

### MIDPRICED

- 1. TABLEAU BAR BISTRO**  
1181 Melville Street.  
604-639-8692
- Fable  
1944 West 4th Avenue,  
604-732-1322
- Cactus Club Cafe  
Various locations

### BUDGET

- 1. WHITE SPOT**  
Various locations
- La Taqueria  
322 West Hastings Street,  
604-568-4406  
2549 Cambie Street,  
604-558-2549
- Save On Meats  
43 West Hastings Street,  
604-683-7761

### SERVICE

- 1. BISHOP'S RESTAURANT**  
2183 West 4th Avenue.  
604-738-2025
- Hawksworth Restaurant  
801 West Georgia Street,  
604-673-7000
- Tableau Bar Bistro (tie)  
1181 Melville Street,  
604-639-8692
- Fable (tie), 1944 West 4th Avenue,  
604-732-1322

### CHAIN

- 1. CACTUS CLUB CAFE**  
Various locations
- Earls Restaurant  
Various locations
- Joey Restaurants  
Various locations

## READERS' CHOICES OF BEST...

### CASINO FOR EATS

- 1. RIVER ROCK CASINO RESORT**  
8811 River Road, Richmond.  
604-247-8573
- Edgewater Casino  
311-750 Pacific Boulevard South,  
604-687-3343
- Grand Villa Casino  
4331 Dominion Street, Burnaby,  
604-436-2211

### VIEW

- 1. THE BOATHOUSE RESTAURANT**  
Various locations
- Seasons in the Park  
405 West 33rd Avenue  
(Queen Elizabeth Park)  
604-874-8008
- Cactus Club Cafe-English Bay  
1790 Beach Avenue,  
604-681-2582

### INTERIOR DESIGN

- 1. BLACK + BLUE**  
1032 Alberni Street.  
604-637-0777
- Hawksworth Restaurant  
801 West Georgia Street,  
604-673-7000
- Killjoy Barbers  
106-1120 Hamilton Street,  
604-669-4604

### ATMOSPHERE

- 1. TABLEAU BAR BISTRO (TIE)**  
1181 Melville Street.  
604-639-8692
- 1. CHAMBAR RESTAURANT (TIE)**  
562 Beatty Street,  
604-879-7119
- Cactus Club Cafe  
Various locations
- Clough Club (tie)  
212 Abbott Street,  
604-558-1581
- Fable (tie), 1944 West 4th Avenue,  
604-732-1322

### FOR A WORKING LUNCH

- 1. TABLEAU BAR BISTRO**  
1181 Melville Street.  
604-639-8692
- Cactus Club Cafe  
Various locations
- Meat & Bread, 370 Cambie Street,  
1033 West Pender Street

### PRETHEATRE RESTAURANT

- 1. CHAMBAR RESTAURANT**  
562 Beatty Street, 604-879-7119
- Siena, 1485 West 12th Avenue,  
604-558-1485
- Cibo Trattoria  
900 Seymour Street, 604-602-9570

### PATIO

- 1. DOCKSIDE RESTAURANT**  
1253 Johnston Street.  
604-685-7070
- Tap & Barrel Restaurant  
1 Athletes Way, 604-685-2223
- Cactus Club Cafe  
Various locations

### HANGOUT ON A RAINY DAY

- 1. BURGEOO**  
Various locations
- The Naam Restaurant  
2724 West 4th Avenue,  
604-738-7151
- Oakwood Canadian Bistro  
2741 West 4th Avenue,  
604-558-1965

### HANGOUT ON A SUNNY DAY

- 1. LOCAL PUBLIC EATERY**  
2210 Cornwall Avenue,  
604-734-3589
- The Boathouse Restaurant  
Various locations
- Dockside Restaurant (tie)  
1253 Johnston Street,  
604-685-7070
- Tap & Barrel Restaurant (tie)  
1 Athletes Way, 604-685-2223



## RESTAURANT INDUSTRY PICKS THE BEST...

CHEF	FRENCH	CHINESE	INDIAN	CHEAP EATS
<b>1. HAMID SALIMIAN</b> 2. Lee Cooper (tie) 2. Pino Posteraro (tie) 3. David Hawksworth (tie) 3. Quang Dang (tie)	<b>1. LE CROCODILE</b> 909 Burrard Street, 604-669-4298 2. Les Faux Bourgeois 663 East 15th Avenue, 604-873-9733 3. Tableau Bar Bistro 1181 Melville Street, 604-639-8692	<b>1. BAO BEI CHINESE BRASSERIE</b> 163 Keefer Street, 604-688-0876 2. Sun Sui Wah Seafood Restaurant 3888 Main Street, 604-872-8822 102 4940 No. 3 Road, Richmond, 604-273-8208 3. Kirin Restaurant Various locations	<b>1. VIJ'S</b> 1480 West 11th Avenue, 604-736-6664 2. Rangoli 1488 West 11th Avenue, 604-736-5711 3. Chutney Villa 147 East Broadway, 604-872-2228	<b>1. LA TAQUERIA (TIE)</b> 2549 Cambie Street, 604-558-2549, 322 West Hastings. 604-568-4406 <b>1. PEACEFUL RESTAURANT (TIE)</b> 532 West Broadway, 604-879-9879 2. Meat & Bread (tie) 370 Cambie Street 1033 West Pender 2. Phnom Penh (tie) 244 East Georgia Street, 604-682-5777 3. Red Wagon 2296 East Hastings Street, 604-568-4565
<b>NEW</b> <b>1. WILDEBEEST</b> 120 West Hastings Street, 604-687-6880 2. The Acorn 3995 Main Street, 604-566-9001 3. España, 1118 Denman Street, 604-558-4040	<b>ITALIAN</b> <b>1. LA QUERCIA</b> 3689 West 4th Avenue, 604-676-1007 2. Cioppino's Mediterranean Grill & Enoteca 1133 Hamilton Street, 604-688-7466 3. Campagnolo (tie) 1020 Main Street, 604-484-6018 3. Nook (tie), 781 Denman Street, 604-568-4554	<b>OTHER ASIAN</b> <b>1. MAENAM</b> 1938 West 4th Avenue, 604-730-5579 2. Phnom Penh 244 East Georgia Street, 604-682-5777 3. Banana Leaf (tie) Various locations 3. SalaThai Thai Restaurant on Burrard (tie) 102-888 Burrard Street, 604-683-7999 3. Sawasdee Thai Restaurant (tie) 4250 Main Street, 604-876-4030	<b>LATIN AMERICAN</b> <b>1. LA TAQUERIA</b> 2549 Cambie Street, 604-558-2549 322 West Hastings, 604-568-4406 2. Baru Latino (tie) 2535 Alma Street, 604-222-9171 2. Tacofino (tie), 2327 East Hastings Street, 604-253-8226 Robson Square Burrard and Dunsmuir streets 3. Lolita's South of the Border Cantina 1326 Davie Street, 604-696-9996	<b>UNDERRATED</b> <b>1. DIVA AT THE MET</b> 645 Howe Street, 604-602-7788 2. The Pear Tree 4120 East Hastings, Burnaby, 604-299-2772 3. Le Parisien (tie) 751 Denman Street, 604-687-1418 3. Lupo Restaurant and Vinoteca (tie), 869 Hamilton Street, 604-569-2535 3. Tableau Bar Bistro (tie) 1181 Melville Street, 604-639-8692
<b>WEST COAST</b> <b>1. RAINCITY GRILL</b> 1193 Denman Street, 604-685-7337 2. Bishop's Restaurant (tie) 2183 West 4th Avenue, 604-738-2025 2. Blue Water Cafe + Raw Bar (tie) 1095 Hamilton Street, 604-688-8078 2. L'Abattoir (tie) 217 Carrall Street, 604-568-1701 3. West, 2881 Granville Street, 604-738-8938	<b>JAPANESE</b> <b>1. TOJO'S (TIE)</b> 777 West Broadway, 604-876-8050 <b>1. HAPA IZAKAYA (TIE)</b> Various locations 2. Guu Izakaya, various locations 3. Toshi Sushi, 181 East 16th Avenue, 604-874-5173			