

## Roots cookin'

In Whistler, a first-nations-inspired menu is inspiring rave reviews

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"He's really mastered making that bannock," says Chief Janice George, of the Squamish Nation, her eyes mesmerized by the typical first nations bread-like staple reinvented with smoked salmon and lemon crème fraiche atop, and served on a plate punctuated with onion relish and seaweed salad.

Then an oyster adorned with salmon tartar arrives, and, as it effortlessly slips down, suddenly all speech is swept aside. "This," she eventually beams, "is a stunning moment."

The moment as a whole is a tasting of a new first nations inspired menu -- eight months in the making -- at the Four Seasons Resort in Whistler, and the "he" to which she refers is executive chef Scott Thomas Dolbee.

As the hotel chosen to run the catering for the nearby Squamish Lil'wat Cultural Centre (SLCC) which opens this July, the Four Seasons' bar and restaurant (Fifty Two 80) feature a number of the dishes on the menu, highlighted with a little Inukshuk symbol.

Joining George this lunchtime are Vera Edmonds, a Lil'wat elder and master cedar weaver, and her protégé Heather Andrew, all there to offer feedback.

"It was a big learning process," reveals Dolbee, the chef tasked with creating the recipes. "I'm from Southern California, you know, so I knew nothing. I've worked with a lot of different cuisines but never this one."

First on the resource list for Dolbee was contacting chef Andrew George, the culinary arts manager at the K'la-How-Eya Aboriginal Centre in Surrey.



CREDIT: Bonny Makarewicz/Special to The Vancouver Sun

Executive Chef Scott Thomas Dolbee of Four Seasons Resort Whistler gets some help from Chief Janice George of the Squamish Nation and Lil'wat elder Vera Edmonds.

Drawing on his experience talking with many community elders -- "around a camp fire" -- all across the nation as part of the Native Canadian Haute Cuisine Team in the World Culinary Olympics held in Germany in 1992, he advised on wrapping the recipes around the seasons and the four elements: the air, the water, the sea and the land.

"I'm excited by the collaboration," the chef from Wet'suwet'en nation, near Smithers (and no relation to Janice) tells me later. "One of my personal mandates -- I've been a chef for 23 years -- is bringing our cuisine to an international standard. I think by working with the Four Seasons we can achieve a lot of things. I am a strong believer in working together -- that's part of our culture."

"Chef Andy was great in the way of sharing and helping," Scott Taber, the Four Seasons' general manager, chips in. "It's a celebration of a culture and their food -- and so we've had no shortage of people telling us or wanting to help us along those lines and give us input. And they are really proud when you get it right and happy to give us some hints when we've needed to do it different."

Achieving approval for dishes was imperative, which is why Janice George's verbal -- and more importantly non-verbal -- reactions today are all the more sweet for Dolbee. He has cooked and tweaked his recipes repeatedly before today.

"It's really important that it is done right -- the whole thing just evolved," he says, referring to such dishes as bison carpaccio with pickled vegetables from Pemberton (the rich produce area, of course, is a magnet for discerning chefs) and a dash of Saskatoon berry (a typical Dolbee inspiration), wild boar prosciutto encasing spaghetti squash, or a Pacific specialty of braised sturgeon with wild boar bacon.

"Some are true to the [first nations] cooking," adds Dolbee, whose 18-year culinary career includes a stint as chef de cuisine at the opening of the famed Blvd Lounge at the Beverly Wilshire, "and some are sort of 'influenced' to make it palatable for average people so they wouldn't be too afraid."

It must be said that if cooking is the new

rock'n'roll, then groupies would fall heavily for the 'California cool' of Dolbee who fits the band as much as the kitchen with his edgy haircut and love of drums and motorcycles.

Do these types of tastings with the elders make him nervous? "Not at all," he says confidently. "It's fun. I enjoy being creative and putting my own twist on it all. I think simple's good; in my cooking I try to keep it to three ingredients and just do it well. It's important not to overplay it."

You'll see Dolbee's own inventive stamp everywhere: He'll take nori seaweed, for example, soak it with the bannock dough, roll it thinly and bake it like a cracker.

At the start, however, Taber was more cautious. He admits driving down to Vancouver to Gitksan cook Dolly Watt's now-defunct restaurant, Liliget Feast House, to specifically buy bannock to present at the first meeting to discuss the Four Seasons' possible collaboration with the SLCC.

"I was so worried and I wanted to ensure we did the bannock right," he explains. "They could not believe how good it was, so I did reveal our secret, but this really goes to show the spirit of the whole partnership, that we are learning the culture as we go along and that has been an incredible benefit, too."

Dolbee has fast learned that there is a preference among elders for cooked oysters ("I usually do them raw but now I roll them around the grill till they pop") and meat more well-done than rare.

With the popularity of the 100-mile diet and the locavore trend, Janice George sees "people are just catching on to" the first nations' traditional approach to seasonal gathering.

"We've always been conservationists," she explains. "When we catch our first salmon we have a ceremony so that more will come back -- it's part of the spirituality, part of the food for our bodies. It's all interconnected, so there are so many things to think about when you're eating."

She continues that celebrations usually involve feasting first "and then you do the work."

Now that's my kind of nation.

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