

Calgary's dining scene comes of age

The restaurant offerings in booming Calgary today rival those of any great city—diverse, sophisticated, delicious and thoroughly up-to-date. Herewith, a brief tasting tour

Twenty years ago, Calgary's food "scene" consisted of steak, pizza, Chinese and western. The city's restaurant reviewers were convinced their jobs were destined to be short-lived. These days, they can't keep up with all the openings.

Little did anyone imagine, when the culinary scene first started to blossom back in the mid-1980s, that it would turn into a full-blown explosion of eating excitement to rival that of such cities as Toronto and Vancouver, which were, at the time, way ahead of Calgary.

And who would have guessed that Calgarians, raised on steak, pizza and beef-on-a-bun, would embrace all manner of contemporary and ethnic food and make it their own? But Calgary's business climate has attracted people from all over the world, so the people who live here know lots about food. We are voracious world travellers and have developed an enviable food sophistication in the last 20 years as we shrugged off our conservative "cowtown" image and joined the ranks of adventurous eaters.

It also helped that, in the beginning, a few daring chefs fearlessly plunked their contemporary cuisine squarely into the midst of the steak and pizza, and we gobbled it up. Calgary had joined the big leagues of restaurant dining.

With all the restaurant activity that's taken place, especially in the last few years, Toronto and Vancouver have even contributed some of their great chefs to the Calgary restaurant scene. Chef Michael Noble, for one, originally one of Vancouver's high-profile chefs (Diva at the Metropolitan Hotel), was snapped up by a local restaurant group to help put together **Catch**® (100 – 8th Ave. S.E., 403-206-0000), a snazzy, high-end seafood restaurant with a casual oyster bar that opened in downtown Calgary six or so years ago. It has flourished, and Noble is getting set to launch his own place in 2009.

Contemporary cuisine is where it's at on the dining scene. That means interesting, exciting food where chefs take the classics, with their well-grounded and solid techniques, out on a bit of a limb. One example is Giuseppe Di Gennaro's sumptuous, contemporary takes on Italian classics at his restaurant **Capo** (1420 – 9th Ave. S.E., 403-264-2276). In 2006, Capo was named number two among *enRoute* Magazine's best new Canadian restaurants. In the same issue, a new French-style restaurant, **Saint Germain**® (119 – 12th Ave.

S.W., 403-290-1322), was named number 10, and in 2007, *enRoute* designated **Blink Restaurant & Bar**® (111 – 8th Ave. S.W., 403-263-5330) number nine. This was official recognition that Calgary restaurants had come of age.

As if to continue that affirmation, *enRoute* last month named **Chef's Table**®, an intimate dining room at the Kensington Riverside Inn (1126 Memorial Drive N.W., 403-228-4442), number four among the best new Canadian restaurants of 2008. Congratulations to executive chef Theo Yeaman.

Another exciting, imaginative expression of Italian classics is at **Mercato**, a lively, noisy restaurant that used to house one of Calgary's oldest and most respected family-owned Italian grocery stores (2224 – 4th St. S.W., 403-263-5535). A long-time favourite for modern, market-driven Italian fare is **Teatro**® (200 – 8th Ave. S.E., 403-290-1012), in a gorgeous, old bank building with high ceilings and a lively noise level that no one seems to mind because the food is reliably excellent. Teatro also set a high standard for the thoughtful, well-conceived wine list and introduced the sommelier as an integral part of Calgary's restaurant dining.

Noisy and lively might be a trend, since two recent entrants to the scene offer high-energy dining: **Olives**® (1129 Olympic Way, S.E., 403-984-5000) and **Rush** (100, 207 – 9th Ave. S.W., 403-271-7874). While both places feature thoroughly modern décor, Olives is comfortably casual with a big, open kitchen while Rush is glitzy and glam. The food at both places is top notch.

The Tribune (118 – 8th Ave. S.W., 403-269-3160) is where chef Andrew Keen takes his French-influenced modern inspirations from what the restaurant calls "forgotten fare," or food that conjures the haute cuisine of an earlier, more elegant time, such as pressed duck and braised rabbit. Tribune also has one of the nicest lounges in the city, where guests sit and drink prosecco and yak with the bartender. Ditto **JARoblue** (1314 – 17th Ave. S.W., 403-237-5276), another charming upscale lounge with a great bar and inspired small-plate dining.

Part of the modern movement is to go local, regional and seasonal. One of the first proponents of this notion was **River Café**®, one of the city's all-time favourite restaurants, located downtown on Prince's Island on the Bow River

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